ALL THE DARKNESS HOLDS

by

John Lang

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—William Faulkner

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KEOKUK, IOWA

1900 – 1916

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The worlde is an apte frame of heuven and earthe, and all other naturall thinges contained in them.

The old place on Rural Route 7 was her father's land, just as it had been his own father's, and his grandfather's before that. It was the only world Clessie Bonaparte had ever known, the site of every lesson and violation she'd endured since she was old enough to remember. Because of this, Clessie had come to consider herself nothing more or less than a natural extension of the property, like the dirt, the weeds and the crops, the barn animals, the farm implements, the outbuildings and all the secret hiding places, just as she considered those things to be no different from—in fact organic integrants of—her own existence. To her, everything on the farm owed its presence to the unwearied work of her father's hands moving constantly and without compunction over the land for as long as she could remember, his calloused, hungry fingers groping, scrabbling, claiming the earth's elements along with everything that sprouted from it, including herself.

Nothing less than Paradise is your reward.

The first time her father raped her she was six-years-old. He took her out to the barn, to a stall long in disuse. "This is the site of your redemption," he said. He told her to take off her clothes and lie down on the horse blanket he'd thrown over the straw on the floor of the stall. "Remember, Clessie. God is watching."

She was shocked (it had happened so suddenly; he'd not told her to join in nor encouraged her in any way): the violence, the pain and the abruptness of the act, her mind

assailed by a fusillade of emotions: one moment in fierce connection to the process, able to feel every element, the next moment floating above it, untethered, looking down, watching, feeling nothing at all.

You can never satisfy the Lord, but you must never stop trying.

Her father's attention was undeniable. She was loved. It was everything. Until sometime later—she couldn't remember exactly when it was—he began to hurt her even more, and it seemed to her that he was doing it intentionally, so she began to struggle, whereupon he redoubled his efforts, thrusting himself into her savagely, squeezing her with his crooked, horny fingers, goading her, "You must do better," "You risk damnation," whenever it seemed to him her efforts were lacking in the necessary intensity and commitment. This had the opposite effect of what he'd intended. The more he demanded of her, the more she lost herself. Finally, in spite of all his attempts at coercion, she gave up and lay still, enduring his attacks until he was finished. She could not remember exactly when this shift took place. It would be years before she realized that at some point the violence, banality and repetition had closed a window on her heart. But at the time, she'd had no choice but to accept that this was how her life would be. How it was supposed to be. God was present, her father said, He blessed their acts. They were Sacred. Holy. To be suffered through if need be, but still, the necessary parts of a life of service. A new and purposeful life.

You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

Those words had been so consoling once, spoken with such devout conviction by the Pastor of their church at Sunday morning service, the syllables stitched together in a prayerful melody of exhortation, a *cri de cœur* resonating from the vaulted ceiling of the presbytery and throughout the nave, coming to rest on the bowed heads of the faithful, blessings bestowed by a munificent hand. How could those words mean something so completely different when her father spoke them out of sight of the cross?

Exhort the guilty and the perishing to believe and have life.

How many times had she faithfully repeated those words as if her lips were anointed with honey, her head bowed as she knelt in the pew, her heart full of the Pastor's rapture, her eyes staring through her tears at the cross hanging above the altar, at the *vivum cadaveribus pugnatur* (she'd put that together knowing it didn't quite make sense, but proud of herself nonetheless) nailed to the crossbeams by its flexed and bloody limbs; its crown of thorns, its monstrous rictus of forgiveness, its inward-looking eyes.

She was convinced he did not see her, because hers was a life of shadow. *Exhort the guilty and the perishing to believe and have life.* How many other times had those words meant something else, something terrible, foreboding?

More than once—too many times to count—she'd thought of taking her father's fleshing knife and cutting open her wrists, draining the poisonous mixed-race ancestry from her body. She would always be stung. Always be crucified. As long as non-white blood ran through her veins she would never be pure.

Clessie had grown up hearing the stories. Her mother had been either an Ojibwe or Pahodja Indian (Clessie had heard both names at different times in various tellings, but mostly Ojibwe, so she'd settled on that) and an "addle-brained alky." She'd shown up at Joseph Bonaparte's door one night, claiming that the baby she was holding was his (which in fact it was, a secret without grace that only Clessie would know). As Bonaparte, a ruddy-faced, blue-eyed Scotsman with a shock of red hair already gone to gray at the temples and a bushy red beard that hid the lower half of his face, stood on the front porch of his house, the vast Midwestern plains rolling out behind him, the woman wailed that because her baby was Métis, not purebred Ojibwe (or Pahodja) they'd been run out of their tribe's encampment in the hills to the west and ordered never to return. Bonaparte hadn't understood much of what she said, but according to the story, he, a God-fearing man who had never laid eyes, let alone his hands, on this woman or any other, took them in.

For a while, the story went, Bonaparte did what he could to keep them all together, but Clessie's mother, a difficult case even on a good day, disappeared one night, leaving her baby behind. The next morning, the Keokuk constabulary found what was left of her body scattered along the railroad tracks outside of town and determined that she'd stumbled in front of a train that had been heading east over the Mississippi River. The constables all agreed that alcohol had played a part in the unfortunate accident and let it go. "Another liquored up, dead Indian," one of the older policemen who'd witnessed more than his share of this sort of thing had shaken his head in disgust. But the tragic story had a happy ending in that Bonaparte, out of his inborn Christian kindness (again, according to the story), had kept the baby and raised her, as any decent member of the

Keokuk United Presbyterian Church—and certainly a Youth Pastor such as himself—would have.

There were other stories, too, ones that circulated amongst the white children that Clessie went to school with, of how Clessie's mother had not been a drunk, but had been pure of heart, so pure in fact that the devil had gone mad with jealousy and placed a spirit-ghost inside her womb, a dirty Métis, a half-breed: half white, half Indian, rendering the child and her mother worthless to both races and fair game for all cruelties. Her mother had called her *Oginiwaatig* for the thousand thorns that stabbed into her, threatening to tear her apart every time the unborn child kicked or moved inside her for all those months, until finally, much to Clessie's mother's dismay and the tribal leaders' horror, Clessie had appeared in the world blond-haired and blue-eyed with milk-white skin, the only detectable signs of her mixed ethnicity hovering around her eyes, her cheeks, and in the noble chin she'd inherited from her Ojibwe ancestors. According to this story, it had been Clessie who'd killed her mother. She would've killed her adopted father, too, it was said, had he not prayed so fervently to the Lord to protect him, and kept her under lock and key, allowing her to leave the house only to do her chores, attend church, and cross the cornfield to the schoolhouse each day.

It was shortly after Clessie's father allowed her to start attending the one-room school that she noticed a flimsy wooden bookcase pushed up against the wall beneath the window overlooking the schoolyard. The bookcase's three shelves sagged under the weight of a disorderly pile of dog-eared books, some of them missing their jackets, most with pages bent or missing. The exception to this was a tired-looking but relatively intact

set of Harvard Classics books on the bottom shelf. None of the other students had shown any interest in these books, but one by one Clessie plucked them from the shelf and read them all.

The teacher, a worn-out, hardnosed white woman named Mrs. Murphy, had noticed Clessie's interest and on days when the other students were especially cruel to her (by now everyone knew her shameful story) kept her in at recess and at lunchtimes and allowed her to read. Clessie liked all the stories, but she loved the Greek myths and legends most of all. Persephone, Daedalus, Icarus, Pandora, Ariadne. The characters in those stories had the most to lose and in the end usually lost everything they held dear.

Inspired by these tales, and determined to fare better than their protagonists, Clessie imagined herself an Indian goddess, *Oginiwaatig,* rising from the river, her white skin and blue eyes and blonde hair mighty shields against the other students' taunts and abuse, a ghost spirit made flesh that would one day destroy them all.

Among the students there had been a boy who was Métis, too. His name was Alfred. In another world, Alfred might have been born to royalty, such were his features, a hard sharp chin and nose, jet-black hair, olive skin and black piercing eyes, all signs his mother's tribe would have considered the markings of a warrior had his father not been white, a man who'd raped and beaten his mother and left her to die on a muddy embankment of the Mississippi River. But she didn't die, she was too strong, and nine months later Alfred had been born.

Despite his dark and handsome features, Alfred was a frail boy not given to

athleticism. He was a mark, a target who gave up easily, remaining still and taking his punishment whenever it was meted out. And while the students teased Clessie, knocking her books out of her arms, pulling her hair and taunting her, “Pale face! Pale face!” they were especially cruel to him. The other boys kicked and punched him, threw him to the ground and spat on him, chanting “Reddy Freddy! Reddy Freddy!” The girls made up songs, and danced around him singing “Woo woo, woo woo! Woo woo, woo woo!” performing their contemptuous version of an Indian war dance.

It wasn’t long before Clessie joined in. *Better him than me.*

One morning before school started, one of the boys, Martin was his name, an especially cruel boy in Clessie’s memory, had an inspirational idea. He and three friends grabbed Alfred outside the schoolhouse, stuffed a rag in his mouth so that no one could hear his cries, and carried him across the lot to a long-abandoned well that was concealed by a rusted shovel plow and an enclosure of weather turned hay bales. The boys egged each other on, chanting, “Dirty redskin! Dirty redskin!”

They raised Alfred up over their heads and hung him over the low stone wall of the well. Alfred bucked like he was possessed by a demon, surprising his captors with his strength and making them redouble their efforts to hold onto him as they dangled him over the abyss, one or the other letting go of an arm or a leg and laughing, pretending to let him fall. But Alfred fought hard, and in the end slipped from their grasp. It was an accident of course, but still, he was gone before they knew it. The boys listened as he fell, but were met with silence. One of them had the idea to lower the wooden bucket on its rope and pull him up, but the rope was rotted, and the bell on the roof of the schoolhouse

began to clang, rocking back and forth in its wooden belfry, signaling the start of the school day. They left him, pinky-swearing it would be their secret, and that they would never tell.

Alfred's mother was frantic, but because she was Sioux, the constables did not put as much effort into their search as they might have otherwise. Three weeks later, Alfred's body was found by a farmer who had stopped by the lot to reclaim his shovel plow and had smelled a bad odor.

Clessie was devastated. Without Alfred to pick on, the other students turned on her with a vengeance. "Caw! Caw! Dirty squaw!" was a favorite among both genders because everyone knew of its even worse perjorative, having heard it from their own fathers' mouths until their mothers silenced them with a reproving look or worse. This, even as Alfred, ever a stickler for exactness, had told her once that while their classmates were using *squaw* as a demeaning taunt, it was not as they insisted, snickering up their sleeves, another name for the worst of all words, *cunt*; rather just more half-baked received wisdom handed down from their ignorant white parents. With that, regardless of its true meaning or origin, the name's patina of illicitness, dirtiness, gave the students even more reason to use it against her. Because of this, Clessie knew that had it not been for the whiteness of her skin, her auburn hair, her bird's egg blue eyes, she surely would have met a fate similar to Alfred's. And as much as his disappearance had made her days even more intolerable, she took consolation in the fact that what they'd done, they'd done to him, not to her.

She didn't know anything about herself. At twelve years old, she bled for the first time and thought she was dying. Her father reassured her, telling her that while it was a sin, a part of what made her dirty, it was a good sign, too. He did not tell her why. He told her to boil some rags and use them to staunch the flow. That was the last time they talked about it, except for each month he would ask her if she'd been visited again.

Every month, for four years, her report was the same: "I've been visited again, Father." To which he would respond, "He has a plan, Clessie. In which all of us have a part."

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August 5, 1916.

She had just turned sixteen. She had been lying to him for three months. Her last visit had been in May. June had come and gone, then July, and now it was August with still no visitation. With the little she understood of this phenomenon (information gathered from cockeyed received wisdom and magical thinking passed around among the girls at the school), she chose to believe the most anodyne of the tales traded: her condition was normal; it had been caused by the changing weather; her menses was late and it was on its way.

But it wasn't. One morning she hurried down to the kitchen, went to the sink and threw up. She gasped, choking on the air heavy with ash and fumes from the old wood-burning

stove. She'd been trying to get her father to get rid of it for years, but he wouldn't. "There's not a damned thing wrong with it that can't be fixed by you cleaning it better."

She turned away from the sink and gagged again, her eyes fixed on the black streaks on the wall behind the stove left by the fingers of flame that had clawed up the plaster, the result of more than one fire, the worst one when the stove pipe had separated from its coupler and sent a shower of sparks across the room, threatening to ignite everything they landed on.

She lunged over the sink and threw up again. She spat, and wiped her mouth with the hem of her apron. She looked out the window above the sink at her father who was framed in the open doorway of the barn, his back to her. He was bent over, working on the hitch behind his tractor, the metal buttons on his overalls catching the sun as he turned, shooting sparks that made her close her eyes.

She jumped, startled by a movement behind her. She turned to find Maria, the old German woman with a shriveled left arm and fingers curled tight like a baby's fist who walked over the bridge from Germantown every Friday to scrub their kitchen floor and wash out the killing station behind the chicken coops. Maria looked back at her, an inscrutable expression on her lined face. Clessie wiped at her mouth and face with the hem of her apron again. She thought—hoped—that if this was what she thought it was, her secret would be safe with Maria if for no other reason than she rarely spoke, and when she did it was in a guttural, almost incomprehensible mix of German and English. Plus, more than once, Clessie had been startled to see the unfamiliar signs of what she'd recognized as kindness in her eyes. She started to cry.

"*Stark*." Maria raised her good hand and pointed a finger at her.

"Help me," Clessie begged her through her tears.

"Half Sky," Maria said, the words sounding like gibberish.

The next day, Maria found Clessie standing in the hallway outside her bedroom. With her good hand, she stuffed a folded slip of paper into the pocket of Clessie's apron and then continued down the hall. Startled, Clessie went back into her bedroom, closed the door and sat on the bed. She opened the folded piece of paper.

Dr. Belgium. He will tell you what to do.
Burn this.

Beneath that was written the address of a Dr. Belgium. Below that, as if the thought had just occurred to whomever had written this, were two almost indecipherable directions: Wisconsin, something, something, Milwaukee. Her eyes fixed on the place name. She'd heard of Milwaukee, a city upriver to the north, having been repeatedly warned about it by her father; a place where the devil himself did his work, lying in wait for young girls like her. She sat very still on the bed, listening for the slightest sound that might betray her condition to the world. An image flitted through her mind: a rabbit she'd seen at the north field fence-line at dusk; the animal still as ice, frozen with fear, innately knowing that at any minute it might be ripped to shreds by some other animal's teeth or claws; a cat, a dog, a raccoon, or some other fast-moving varmint. She could feel her hands trembling now, her fingers burning, the note in her hand bursting into flames. She closed her eyes. Where had Maria gotten this scrap of paper with the barely legible words scrawled on it? Who else knew of her condition? The stillness in the room, coupled with her own guarded quietness amplified the soft ticking of the curtain lace brushing against

the window sill. She willed her eyes open and stared at the curtains moving slowly in the breeze through the open window, letting her vision take her farther out, to the fields beyond. She looked down at the note again. She decided it would have had to be written by Luisa Braun, Maria's granddaughter, a young woman she'd met only once when she'd come to the house to help out when Maria was too ill to work. And now, this person she didn't know at all had given her information that no one in the world should ever have to ask for. *Dear God, if I'm caught.* She shuddered. Her father; he would kill her. *Even if he didn't mean to.* She was sure of that. Clessie looked again at the doctor's name, *Belgium*, written in the trembling calligraphy of a young woman's attempt to conquer a language that was not her own, in a world that was not hers either, the barely legible penmanship slashing through her efforts to communicate the gravest, most dangerous and important information; the scratchy, precious words lying on the page now like a silent rebuke ready to launch itself against her unholy being.

I have to do this. I have no choice.

She stood up, tucking the note back inside the pocket of her apron as she moved. She was suddenly lightheaded; she wobbled, then steadied herself. She breathed in, holding the oxygen in her lungs until she felt like they were going to burst, her last defense against the trip she knew she would have to take. Finally, she walked across the room and out, willing herself to seize this new and desperate purpose as if that alone would do the trick. She stopped for a moment on the landing, listening again, then touched the pocket of her apron and went downstairs to clean out the stove.

Who hasn't fate made kneel before it?

The following week, Clessie came into the kitchen to find Maria on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor, plunging her soapy chamois cloth into a tin bucket of gray water squatting next to her. Maria looked up to see Clessie standing there holding her granddaughter's note in her hand as particles of soot floated around her face like a shroud in the gray breeze moving through the room.

Maria stood. She raised her shriveled arm and motioned with her balled up fist at the cupboard by the kitchen door. Clessie went over and opened it. Maria nodded, not taking her eyes off the top shelf. Clessie reached in and began pushing bags of flour, baking soda and sugar to one side; she swiped her hand around the back of the shelf until she felt what Maria had wanted her to find. She took down a tin box. She opened the box and looked over at Maria, who had returned to her work, her good arm out, scrubbing away. Clessie scooped up the bills she found in the box and stuffed them into the pocket of her apron. She returned the box to its place on the shelf and replaced the bags of flour and sugar, all the while listening to the rhythmic sandpaper sound of the housekeeper scouring the floorboards, her body tipped to one side, her weight supported on her tiny fist.

Come and get your heartache.

"Girl! Come and get your barn rake!"

She froze, the dishrag clenched in her hand dripping soapsuds down her arm. It had only been one day since she'd taken the money. She was standing on the back porch washing the outside of the kitchen window, her father's voice a whipsaw across the yard as he exited the barn carrying an armload of hay, the words stinging like razors across her

face, shrinking the expanse of dirt between them. She could tell he was furious. The only possible reason for this was Maria had told him what she had done. Why would she do that? To curry favor? For money? Whatever the reason was, Clessie had learned that the best thing to do when he was in this state was to face whatever it was head on, take her punishment, and get it behind her.

"Come here now, girl!"

She dropped the rag and followed his voice out to the barn, trying to figure out what her best defense might be. She would plead innocent. Blame Maria. When she crossed into the shadow of the open barn doors he brushed by her, another load of hay in his arms, his silence and proximity as frightening as anything he might do. She entered the barn and saw immediately what it was: rats again. They'd burrowed into the mound of straw she'd pushed up against the back wall that morning to await its distribution into the horse stalls. Their droppings were everywhere. She cursed herself for not thinking that they would seize every opportunity to find a cool, dark place to have their babies. Clessie picked up her rake and began moving the hay, relieved that while she was once again the source of her father's fury, it was not because of her theft. She plunged the rake deeper into the mound of straw, relieved also to discover the rats had already abandoned their quarters.

She'd been raking for a while when it dawned on her that her father hadn't come back to punish her for the rat infestation. Had he been distracted by something somewhere else on the property that needed his attention? She'd expected him to see this mess as further proof of her laziness, her negligence, another good reason to use the Neatsfoot-oiled strap

he was so fond of. What would he call it this time, lost in his maddened exaltation, shouting it out, a different name each time? She remembered every one of them. “God’s spur;” “the Lord’s lash.” “The Devil’s scourge;” “Christ’s crop;” or “the pagan’s something?” And if one of the names had slipped away, she had only to look at the filaments on her back and legs for it to reappear: “the pagan’s blacksnake.”

For a moment she let herself think the unthinkable: that Maria had told him about her condition and he had opened his heart and understood her pain. She would not have to go north after all. She shuddered, knowing full well neither of these thoughts was true. She propped the rake against the wall and looked at her handiwork. The floor by the wall was empty, raked clean. She looked out through the open doors of the barn at the sunlit yard beyond. Where was he?

Be still, girl. God is watching.

But he never came. That night she lay in bed, waiting; the house was silent except for the sound of his constricted snores coming from his room and the ticking of the clock downstairs. She knew that when he found out, he would consider this her second escape. He never failed to remind her of her disappearance when she was twelve-years-old, and how it had been engineered by her alone to repay his selfless kindness. She had been gone over a week that time, no word, no sign. In spite of the word of the Texas Ranger who’d brought her back relatively unharmed, unspoiled (because no one would ever believe what her father had done to her for so long), Bonaparte had remained convinced that his daughter had run away on her own. The Lord’s penance was still due.

He’d called it “God’s goad” that time.

But this trip would be of her own doing, and in accordance with Luisa's letter and its precise instructions, the journey would take her north by train ferry up the Mississippi River to Davenport and then on to Milwaukee, a city anchored on the shore of a great lake, a picture of which she'd seen once in a book, its yawning watery vistas conjuring memories of that other journey she'd taken when she was twelve, the nights she'd spent in the marshlands outside Galveston on the Gulf of Mexico shackled to a dozen other girls by the white slavers who'd snatched her, thinking she was white, from her father's cornfield.

She left that night, her father's tortured fits and snorts her only clue of how far down the well of sleep he'd fallen for the night.

The moon overhead was full. On the four-mile walk into town she didn't see another soul. There was a ferry leaving at midnight. Some confusion at the harbor; questions about her age, her destination, what a sixteen-year-old girl like her might be doing out at all hours of the night. She pleaded family illness, that she'd been sent for by her aunt and it was urgent. In the end, the nighthawk on duty charged her double and let her go, no more questions asked.

She found an empty seat below the main deck but gave it up to an exhausted-looking nun in the company of three unruly wards. She felt the piece of paper with the directions on it in her coat pocket. *He will tell you what to do. Burn this.* What had Maria's granddaughter meant by that? The *Burn this* was clear. But *What to do*. Something

ticked, then scurried across the surface of her memory, its tiny feet rustling like the lace curtains on the sill of her bedroom window. *Maribelle.* That girl who was there until she wasn't anymore. So long ago. Clessie could see the dirt playground out behind the schoolhouse, an officious-looking white girl holding court, a group of other white girls standing in a semicircle listening raptly as she told her story with all the gusto and self-satisfaction of a practiced public orator. Curious, still new to the school, still willing to risk yet another public ostracization or worse, Clessie had crept closer, remaining far enough away so the other girls would see only a stupid half-breed girl kicking at the dirt and staring at the sky. "She terminated it," she'd heard the speaker say in a tone that brooked no argument. *Who's "she?"* "What's 'terminated?" one of the girls in the semicircle had blurted out in a high-pitched voice, causing the others to burst out laughing. The talking girl stopped, her rage at having been interrupted flashing in her eyes, then gone. "Killed it," she spit the words out in disdain for the ignorant girl's stupidity, then drew her index finger across her own throat. *Killed it? Killed what? Mirabelle.* The image of the girl that the officious one was talking about appeared in Clessie's mind's eye now. Heavyset, homely, a spray of acne across her forehead. She'd not attended the school for very long. Had kept to herself, not clever enough, not acceptable enough to do or be anything else. Clessie remembered that while no one knew her everyone had decided they didn't like her and then she was gone. *Maribelle.* Clessie had seen her doubled over outside the school house one day, one hand pressed against the wall, vomiting onto the ground, tiny puffs of dust rising up as she retched. It was shortly after that that she'd *become ill* (news from the officious girl again) and stopped attending the school. The other students had taken note, but no one really cared what had happened

to her, beyond using her illness and disappearance as fodder for more self-aggrandizing rumors.

A week had gone by when the news ran through the school, again carried on the lips of the white girl orator: “I was told Maribelle died of an infection caused by the unsanitary conditions of the termination of her pregnancy.” She’d spoken the words in a rush, but without affect, as if she were repeating a sentence in an unfamiliar language, which she was, having overheard her mother talking to her father the night before, the unwieldy words tumbling out one after the other, the report ladened with the mother’s judgment and disgust, and her father’s reaction, “The whore,” making the sentence—the news!—worthy of reporting and repeating to anyone who would listen. *She terminated it. And then she was dead, too.* A shocking, horrible story; a story so awful Clessie had put it out of her mind, only to have it come rushing back now as she stood gripping the railing of the ferry, compulsively turning the parts of Maribelle’s story over and over in her mind. *No. I can’t do that.* Her thoughts swerved. *If I don’t, what will happen to it?* She stared down at the dark water of the river churning by, then looked up ahead to where the prow of the boat disappeared into the darkness, one tiny running light barely visible through the fog. *Could I?* She felt lightheaded. The running light blinked, swallowed by the fog. Clessie gripped the railing harder, and looked around for a place to sit. The topside benches were all full. In six hours the train ferry would dock at Davenport where she would take the train to Milwaukee, find the doctor and do whatever it was she would be required to do from there.

The next morning, as she exited the Milwaukee train station, Clessie turned around to take in the depot's façade, its massive stone archways and clock tower. *It's world famous! The tallest clock tower in the world! You've never seen anything like it!* she'd heard someone say on the train. They were right; she'd certainly never seen anything like it, its 140-foot high peak disappearing into the soupy fog rolling in from the great lake. As if on cue, the tower's bells began to toll, slowly, distinctly, allowing her to count along, until the echo of the eleventh ring disappeared into the mist as well. The urgency and purpose of her trip overtook her again; it was already late morning and she wanted to get to the doctor's office before noon when he went out for lunch. This was something she'd overheard a member of the congregation saying after church one Sunday: *City folks always go out for lunch*.

She shifted her small bag to her other arm, turned right (per Luisa's letter) and started down Wisconsin Avenue, a busy thoroughfare that traversed the city between the Milwaukee River and the Third Ward district. She was astonished, frightened even, by the noise and chaos that met her—the shouts and imprecations of shopkeepers or their hirelings standing in front of their stores trying to entice passersby to come in and buy something; the pushy, chattering crowds of people who, like herself she imagined, had come from faraway places to get whatever help they needed for their particular ailments or to buy goods or services; the shouts of construction crews; the backfire and engine roar of motorized wagons and cars; and the din of overburdened heavy machinery all combined to ignite her sense of dislocation.

As far as Clessie could see, the street was only one of many in transition, one block choked with mud and potholes, crosshatched with deep wagon wheel troughs; the next block gleaming in its new asphalt apron. Clessie stepped with caution, looking where she was going, her attention split between where she stepped, the address numbers stenciled on the windows of the stores she passed, and the eye-arresting newly constructed commercial buildings she imagined had been inspired by the builders' desire to create something modern for the new century. These stood in sharp contrast to the timeworn structures built well before the end of the last centenary that were hunkered next to their shiny new neighbors like tired eyesores.

After she'd navigated a half dozen blocks, Clessie stopped in front of a two-story building that belonged to that latter group. The number "17" and the name "Belgium Dry Goods" were stenciled on the front window of the store at street level. According to Luisa's letter, this was the place. Clessie looked over at a flight of rickety stairs that was anchored to the outside of the structure and a small sign affixed to the wall at the bottom of the stairs, the numbers and letters as worn as those stenciled on the dry goods' window: "17 ½—Dr. Belgium, M.D." Clessie tested the wobbly railing and headed up.

"May I help you?" the words came out muffled by a bristling moustache, softening their true intention, which by the look of the short, disheveled white man who'd appeared before her like a stiff-backed toddler, craning his neck upward to get a good look at her, was decidedly unwelcoming. Dr. Belgium had kept her waiting in the tiny, windowless room for at least forty minutes. When he'd finally appeared through a narrow doorway it was obvious to Clessie that the reason he was late was not because he'd had another

appointment. She could see into the room behind him that no one else was there. Besides, an odor had followed him in, lingering, suspect, like he'd just finished eating something spicy. He offered her no identifying information—no card, nametag, proof of any institutional affiliation; not even a white coat—figuring, Clessie could only assume, that the barely legible sign at the bottom of the stairs outside would have been enough to allay any uncertainty on the part of a new patient, or to warn them off, at least the ones who might cause trouble later.

"I was told to come see you," she said, clutching her bag closer to herself as a protection against whatever was coming next.

"By whom and what for," the man was still craning, his eyes blinking myopically behind the smudged lenses of his glasses as he kept glancing about like he was expecting someone to barge in on them. His tone had shifted to something even more mechanical, like that of someone who'd been doing this for so long he'd finally dropped all pretense of politeness in the interest of not wasting anyone's time, especially his own.

Clessie imagined his tardiness, rudeness and abruptness were all designed to leave no doubt in his patients' minds that after so many years of service to such a compromised constituency his capacity for empathy had all but abandoned him, leaving him with the only conclusion he could make any sense of, that these patients and their self-inflicted problems were simply beneath his station.

Still, Clessie wanted to believe that at one time this Dr. Belgium must have considered himself a loyal servant of the people, a decent man devoted to the continuing health and wellbeing of a population in need.

She rummaged in her bag and held out her note from Maria's granddaughter.

He asked her again without taking it, “Who gave you my name?”

“Luisa Braun.”

He continued to study her from under two bushy eyebrows, his breath coming in fetid waves. Clessie held her own breath. It was a standoff. Finally, with a petulant scowl he took the note. He lowered his eyes to the page, his lips moving along under his moustache, his coffee stained teeth winking like tombstones at her as he read the words.

Clessie felt lightheaded. She took a step back. Her eyes wandered around the tiny room, landing (as they had when she’d first come in, and again as he’d kept her waiting) on what by now she imagined had been the doctor’s supremely misguided attempt to comfort the waiting patient. Hanging crookedly on one wall was a Currier & Ives lithograph of a tabby cat curled up on a pillow, its large eyes staring dolefully at the viewer. The representation wouldn’t have been half bad, except that either Mr. Currier or Mr. Ives had chosen for reasons beyond Clessie’s comprehension to paint the tabby with its mouth slightly open, revealing the tip of a pink tongue and squared off, humanlike teeth bared in what could only be described as a debauched leer, the very last expression Clessie reckoned any real doctor would have chosen to display in a place of healing. The picture neither served as a beacon of tranquility, nor, Clessie imagined, would it give any comfort to a patient who’d come a long way in the hope of being cured of whatever illness they’d contracted.

She swooned, still at the mercy of the little man—who along with all of his other disqualifications was a slow reader—not to mention all the other detriments of the facility: the tiny, airless room, which was even more stifling than it had been when she’d arrived; the doctor himself who’d not offered her a chair to sit on (never mind there

wasn't one; he'd made it clear he wasn't inclined to go and fetch one); nor any other sort of courtesy—water, toilet facilities (if either of those even existed in this place)—preferring she supposed, to keep her standing there off balance, hoping if he put enough impediments between her and whatever it was she'd come to accomplish she would give up and go away.

As if he'd read her mind, the doctor glanced up from the piece of paper, his eyes stopping on the dirty smudges on her face, evidence enough of what she'd been willing to endure to get there: the one-hundred-mile haul up the Mississippi River by train ferry, most of her time spent clinging to the rusted starboard railing on the main deck, choked and begrimed by coal dust every time the wind shifted. The second leg had been no better. After she'd disembarked in Davenport and boarded the train to the Everett Street Depot in Milwaukee, she'd spent the two-hundred-mile trip shoehorned into a cramped Ann Arbor Railroad third class carriage sitting across from an ancient couple, the whole time trying not to stare as the old man attempted to dislodge some kind of viscous matter from his throat, nor listen to the woman clucking madly at the crate of squawking, squabbling chickens on her lap. By the time they'd pulled into the Milwaukee Depot, the old man had succeeded in coughing up what looked like a small organ; the chickens had lost all sight of any future and had set upon one another (one had already pecked out the eye of another); bird shit and sputum everywhere, including a spattering down the front of Clessie's dress.

Her eyes did not stay long on the cat picture. She'd seen everything she'd never wanted to see in that grotesque image hanging in its crooked frame on the wall. Once again she was overwhelmed by the smell she'd been met with when she came in, a

permeating mix of body odor, bad breath, spoilage, and something else she could only identify as all the fear and panic so many others like her had brought with them and left there on their way back out to the world to meet whatever judgment awaited them.

"This letter is a fabrication," the doctor handed Luisa's note back to her. "I don't know any Luisa Braun."

Clessie had sworn to herself she would not cry. It had been stupid of her to come here in the first place. Her eyes flooded with tears. She put Luisa's note back in her bag and turned to go.

The doctor puffed himself up like he was getting ready to deliver an important speech. He exhaled, emitting a high-pitched whistling, flatulent sound, like that of air being released from a balloon. "I didn't say you should leave."

He'd demanded payment—half of what she'd had left after she'd bought her roundtrip train ticket—before he allowed her into his examination room. He told her to get undressed and put on a gown. When he turned to leave the room, she imagined herself bolting past him, out the door, down the stairs and back to the station. He closed the door behind him.

The examination table was freezing cold. Its parts, including a pressed stiff sheet, felt like they'd been stored in an icebox, waiting to be rolled out to remind the patient of her folly. She got undressed.

The doctor knocked once on the door before he came in. Clessie was sitting on the

examination table, shivering in the stiff gown, still ready to flee at the slightest impropriety. “Lie back,” when he spoke, the words were barely audible, as if it were all he could do to muster the energy to have this conversation, so determined was he to save his stale breath for a discussion that might actually be of some benefit to him.

He sat down on a low, wheeled metal stool and raised his arms. The tatty white doctor’s coat he’d put on while he was out of the room looked to Clessie like it was going to split out at the armpits. He shuffled his feet, propelling himself forward, his pant legs swishing against each other. Clessie lay back as she’d been told to do, but only partway, supporting herself on her forearms and elbows so she could keep an eye on him. He glanced up at her perfunctorily, his moustache still bristling like that of a villain in one of those silent movies she’d heard about. Now she could smell what she thought was alcohol on his breath. “You’re most likely suffering from what we call ‘female hysteria.’” He spoke the phrase like he was clearing a piece of unmasticated food from his gullet.

She knew what he was saying was that most likely she was making it all up, that it was all in her simpleminded head, but she also knew that if she had any hope of solving her dilemma she needed him, or someone like him, so she didn’t argue his misbegotten point.

“Raise your knees.”

She did as she was told. When he examined her, with bare hands, his fingers (and heart too she suspected) were so stiff and cold she felt like she was being pierced by icicles. She tried to focus on the top of the doctor’s head, hypnotized for a moment by the mosaic of mottled, fissured skin poking through the few strands of hair he’d combed over in an attempt to hide an unsightly eruption. She thought again of the cat in the picture

hanging on the wall in the waiting room.

When he'd finished his examination, he said in that same monotone, "You're pregnant," as if it were some big discovery he'd just made without which she wouldn't have known a thing about it.

The room tilted. Clessie closed her legs and let her knees slide down. Knowing it was one thing. But hearing it said aloud by a stranger, especially this—this *homunculus—Paracelsus—those books in the schoolhouse*—her thoughts spiraled, unable to hold onto the confirmation she'd just been given. She shut her eyes and leaned all the way back, letting her head touch the table. She waited for him to say something else—*Didn't his confirmation deserve something more than a disinterested three-syllable answer?* She opened her eyes and stared at the copper ceiling tiles swimming above her, their patinas and arabesques buried under thick, slapdash layers of paint.

The doctor scooted backwards on the stool, shuffling his feet on the floor again. Finally, mistaking Clessie's silence for her not having heard him, he spoke again: "Indeed. One wouldn't know it by looking at you, but you're pregnant."

Indeed. Clessie still didn't answer. She raised her head. The room came back into focus. She watched as the doctor plucked a rag from the surgical bench and wiped his hands.

He looked at her then, the pointed expression on his face signaling to Clessie that they'd arrived at the most important part of the conversation; the part where she had to make a decision. "So what do you want to do?" He appended this to the look as if it needed any explanation.

Clessie stared at the doctor's hands still moving in the rag.

His next words punctured the silence. “Most patients want to terminate—.”

Terminate. “No!” Clessie surprised herself with the ferocity of her response. “I’m sorry. No,” she lowered her voice.

The doctor fixed her with a look of impatience, but this time, to her surprise—and maybe to his, too, she thought—she’d detected something else. “Well,” he dropped the rag onto the surgical bench. “There are others who feel as you do. They don’t want to terminate—."

The word shocked her again. *Maribelle.* The face of the dead homely girl swam up in front of her.

“They would rather have the child, but without the knowledge—*the interference* —of friends, or church or family.”

It seemed to Clessie he was starting another conversation.

“So,” he went on in the face of Clessie’s silence, “if your intention—that is, if you want to keep this child—.” He gave her a warning look. “If it comes to term—.”

There it was again. But only part of it this time. *Term. Terminated.* “What do you mean?” she spoke, too loudly now.

“I mean in situations like this, without proper care or treatment, most of these pregnancies end in death for either the mother or the baby,” he paused, then went on, “Many times both.”

This. This was too much. “I, I can’t terminate—,” it was all she could do to say it.

“All right then,” his tone one of dismissal. “That is all I have to offer you. You should get dressed.”

She raised herself up onto her elbows again, “You said—there are others—.”

"How old are you?" This out of nowhere again.

She hesitated. "Nineteen," she dropped the word, hoping that would put an end to the doctors discursions. *Inquisition*. The word popped into her head, then burst like a bubble. Her mind spiraled again. *The Classics.* Something about the Spanish and their murderous persecution of the Jews and the Muslims. She remembered thinking when she'd read that, *I'm not alone*. The thought gave her no comfort now.

"Nineteen." He studied her, pursed his lips and let out another flatulent whistle. "Well. It's my experience that people believe what they want to believe," he spoke in a voice that was marginally less mechanical than before. When Clessie didn't argue, he continued, "So what is it you want to do?"

After Clessie made it clear she would not end her pregnancy, the doctor, oddly enough, seemed to let his guard down. "I'm from the Southwest originally,"—yet another incongruous statement seemingly out of nowhere. He went on, "There are places"—he threw her a glance to make sure she understood, then changed tack again—"I've been told this by others of course"—he paused, the look on his face betraying his doubt that he should go any further. "Flagstaff, I think is one; Denver, Albuquerque—towns on the main route to the Western States." Clessie held his gaze. He went on, his tone dictatorial again. "Pick one. Go, and have your baby, and decide what to do with it from there." He stopped, determined to finish the thought. "From there, you could return home, with no one the wiser."

"How would I—."

He raised a hand impatiently. "There's a mission in Flagstaff," the last of this

information coming out in a rush. “Florence Crittenton—I’ve been told,” the look again. “A decent hotel, too, if one can afford it. The Weatherford, I think.”

“But how do I –.”

The look on the doctor’s face was a door slammed shut. It was done. “You should go.” He got up, turned abruptly and left the room.

After she got dressed, she looked around the room. For the first time she noticed a small sink and mirror mounted against the wall. It dawned on her that she hadn’t seen him wash his hands before or after her examination. She picked up her bag with Luisa’s letter in it, went over to the sink and looked at herself in the mirror. Suddenly, she was consumed by a feeling of gratitude for Dr. Belgium. She looked down. The sink was spotless, but there was no bar of soap. She turned to go.

When she stepped into the waiting room, no one was there. *I bet he’s gone out for lunch.* She thought of the spicy smell that had accompanied him into the waiting room earlier. *No.*

4

On her way back to the Milwaukee train station, Clessie was once again assailed by the discordant din of demolition and construction that defined the city. Everywhere she looked people were pushing and shoving up against each other in a brusque ballet of busyness, each person intimately familiar with the reason why they themselves were there, but no one familiarly connected to anyone else as they scrambled to get ahead of or

around or through whatever or whoever was in their way, a few stopping to look at the various store fronts, others suddenly changing course as if something had piqued their interest, then rejoining the hurly burly and moving on.

Clessie stopped at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and Tenth Street, her mind backtracking to her experience at Dr. Belgium's office and his confirmation of her worst fear and what that meant to her now. *A baby.* She looked across the street; a man had stepped off the curb, his eyes up, crossing with intention. Her father's shadow shimmered, startling her. As the man approached, he stepped around her, continuing on his way.

Her heart racing, Clessie tried to copy the man's gaze, her eyes up, until they stopped on a tall wrought iron archway that marked the northwest corner of the intersection, its welded iron letters spelling MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY. She looked through the archway, her eyes following a path of wide, recently laid pavers to a multistoried red brick building built in the Gothic Revival style, the raised Greek letters on its pediment announcing JOHNSTON HALL. A bank of large mahogany and glass doors sat atop a cement landing many steps up from the sidewalk where she stood. The doors swung wide as young men and women entered and exited, ascending and descending the stairs, their arms full of books, talking easily with one another or hurrying along alone. She stepped through the archway, allowing her feet to follow the pavers and climb the stairs. When she got to the landing, she swung open the heavy door and stepped inside. She stared upwards at the blazing pendants hanging from heavy brass chains that disappeared into the darkness of the coffered ceiling high above her, the globes' golden

light illuminating the hall's vast armory of book stacks.

"Are you lost?" A young woman dressed in slacks and wearing a waistcoat and cravat appeared in front of her, startling her.

Clessie stared at her mutely. She pulled her bag closer to herself again, as much a habit now as a desire for protection.

The woman fixed her with an inquisitive but friendly look. "I said, 'You look lost.'"

"No. I'm not—."

"Well then. It's your lucky day," she went on as if she hadn't heard her. She stuck out her hand. "My name's Cassandra."

"The prophetess," this flew out of Clessie's mouth, surprising them both. Cassandra let her hand drop and grinned. Clessie charged ahead, "Cursed to utter true prophecies—."

Cassandra kept looking at her nonplussed. "But alas—," she smiled again.

"—Never to be believed," Clessie finished for her.

Cassandra continued to study her, sizing her up. She waited for Clessie to say something else, but Clessie cut her eyes away and began fiddling with the strap on her bag.

"Smart," Cassandra pushed ahead, content to be the one to keep the conversation going.

"What's smart?"

Cassandra made a plucking motion with two fingers the air between them. "The way you plucked the old gal right out of the ether. Not everybody gets that. Even

the ones who think they do. What did you say your name was?"

Clessie had not even told the wretched Dr. Belgium her name. It had been a conscious choice. Never mind he hadn't asked. She scrambled to deflect the question. "What's the point of being a prophetess if no one believes you?"

"Exactly," Cassandra sighed dramatically. "You can put that on my tombstone: 'Here lies Cassandra. A crank and a scold." She laughed again, the warm, bell-like sound holding them still in the vast high-ceilinged hall.

Suddenly, another voice joined them, "Good afternoon, Professor Elgin."

Cassandra and Clessie turned to see a bespectacled young man in a corduroy coat making his way towards them on his way to the front doors of the hall.

"Good day, Charles," Cassandra acknowledged him as he passed, not slowing down. "Don't forget," she called after him. "Papers due Friday."

"Yes, Professor Elgin," the young man spoke over his shoulder as he pushed through the heavy glass door with the heel of his hand.

"Smartest kid in the class," she looked after him, "Otherwise, a complete idiot." Cassandra returned her attention to Clessie, who looked shocked at her profanity and was staring at her now. She grinned. "Ha. Got your attention now, didn't I?"

Clessie cut her off, "You're a teacher?"

"Professor of Western Civilization."

Clessie blushed at the sudden seriousness in Cassandra's voice, its previous tone suddenly replaced by something tougher.

"Greeks or Romans?" once again the words flew out of Clessie's mouth, this time a bit too loud. A few heads turned in their direction. Clessie blushed. She allowed the

image of the bookcase in the schoolhouse to pop to the surface of her mind, its buckled shelves sagging under the weight of the tattered volumes with their busted spines, along with the set of Harvard Classics she'd devoured.

Cassandra laughed again, this time a surprising, boisterous, openhearted sound. "The Greeks! Of course!" She tried again: "And your name is?"

"Clessie." She gripped the strap on her bag harder. This professor was reminding her of someone she knew. A face appeared in her mind's eye, wiping away the image of the bookcase. Clessie's face. Her self. At least a version of herself she had always tried to imagine, but had remained out of reach. *But now*, she looked around the great hall at the book stacks, at the young men and women, their noses buried in books, reading and studying, or conversing quietly with one another. *I'm here.* She blinked; touched her stomach. *We're here.*

"Clessie," Cassandra's voice interrupted her reverie. "That's an unusual name. With an unusual history I imagine." Cassandra fixed her with that beguiling, friendly look again. "Or maybe it's a made-up name with no history at all." She kept watching her, then squared her mouth, "With a name like that you could do anything." She held up the book she was holding in her hand: *Oedipus the King.* "You know Sophocles?"

Alfred's face appeared in Clessie's mind now, displacing her own. She thought of the long days she'd spent after he'd died reading the stories in the Classics books about gods and goddesses, kings and queens. "'Oblivion. What a blessing for the mind to dwell a world away from pain,'" tumbled out of her mouth.

Cassandra's face broke into a grin. "Well. Look at you—."

"But Euripedes—," Clessie hurried on, "—and Aeschylus—they're the ones. And

Medea. Clytemnestra—."

"Whoa! A true classicist," Cassandra laughed again. "And she likes the bad girls!"

Cassandra offered to give her a tour of the hall. When Clessie demurred, Casandra asked her if she was a teacher, and Clessie hesitated. When she finally answered, "No," she quickly added, "But some day."

Cassandra bowed low at the waist, like a Dame before her queen. "Well then, Clessie who's going to be a teacher someday, allow me to be your Virgil." She tilted her head to one side and grinned at her. When Clessie hesitated, Cassandra corrected herself, "Or maybe Beatrice is better?" She laughed, the bell-like sound, disarming Clessie again.

"Come on. Keep up with the group." Cassandra had stopped short in front of the raised landing of a marble staircase. She'd been giving Clessie a tour of the main floor for the past half hour, Clessie following along, slowly falling behind as she drank in the dazzling elegance of the room, embarrassed at what she could only imagine she looked like: a dumbstruck farm girl from the cornfields of Iowa, stopping to bask in the butter yellow light of the reading lamps, daring to stroke the arm of a leather reading chair, timidly following her guide down the darkening passages between the tall, neatly kept library stacks, and trying not to stare too long at the clothes and faces and mannerisms of the myriad students sitting at long glossy tables in various postures of studying or repose, their faces shoved in books or whispering quietly to one another. Cassandra stopped and took her gently by the arm. "I want to show you something."

As they started up the stairs, Clessie studied her guide from behind. Her hair was short, and worn without any attention to style or detail. She looked almost like a man, but didn't have the predatory eyes or the supercilious tone. She asked questions; she seemed interested in Clessie's mind.

"Go ahead. Let go, Clessie," she spoke theatrically when they reached the gallery on the second floor.

Clessie leaned over the railing to look down at the main floor below them.

"Give yourself to the rapture."

For one jarring moment the words eerily echoed something her father had said, co-opted from one of the Pastor's sermons. For the second time since she'd left his office, she thought about the doctor and the information he'd given her. Information she already knew. She pulled back from the railing, suddenly lightheaded again, her hand on her stomach again.

"You all right?" Cassandra looked at her appraisingly.

"I'm fine." Clessie dropped her hand.

"Come on," Cassandra was already walking away. "I'll show you where I work my Greco-Roman magic."

They continued up two more flights of stairs. They didn't see anyone else along the way, and when they reached the top floor their footsteps echoed hollowly down a long empty hallway. Clessie began to feel uneasy again. As busy and crowded as the main floor had been, all she could hear now besides their footsteps was the sound of steam pipes buried somewhere behind the walls as they pushed their heated air to the rooms on the upper floors. They stopped in front of a closed door. Cassandra fixed

Clessie with a sly look, succeeding only in making Clessie feel even more alarmed. “This is where I corral the muses before I trot them over to the lecture hall and slay the innocents.” She opened the door, reached around and flicked a light switch, illuminating a tiny room that looked more like a storage closet than an office where someone would work. The only visible piece of furniture was a desk, or more precisely a corner of a desk, the rest of its surface buried under teetering towers of literature, poetry and history books. Cassandra stepped to one side. She bowed again and swept out her arm, ushering Clessie inside. Hesitantly Clessie stepped over the threshold. Cassandra quickly squeezed by her. She scooped up a stack of books next to the desk, revealing a chair, and set the stack down outside in the hallway. With a flourish, she offered Clessie a seat, then hedged around the other side of the desk and swept away another pile of books, revealing another chair. The books crashed to the floor, making Clessie jump. A small card fluttered to the floor, disturbed by Cassandra’s rearrangement. “Easy there, Phobos,” Cassandra followed that with her open-hearted laugh again. Even with two places to sit, there was barely enough room for the two of them. Cassandra had left the door open, for which Clessie was grateful. She’d never seen—been engulfed by—so many books. Some of the titles were in foreign languages, some not; others had unpronounceable names and unrecognizable titles; others appeared like old friends dressed in different clothes with names she knew or had heard of, if not quite read; still others were devoted to drawings and photographs of places Clessie dared imagine she might live long enough to see. All of this, including the young woman sitting across the desk watching her now with a beatific expression on her face, was so beyond anything she could have imagined, she was transported, convinced if only for a moment that she’d been allowed entrance to no

less a place than the kingdom of the gods.

Later, as they made their way back down to the main floor, Clessie could feel something had changed. Cassandra's mood was different. The voice that had rung in her head for so long came rushing back with a vengeance. *Who do you think you are, girl? This life doesn't belong to you. Shit comes from shit. You do what the Lord tells you to do. You do what I tell you to do.* It was clear to her now that however well spent their short time together had been, however much of a gift it was, it was nothing more than another unreasonable fantasy that did not belong to her and was already fading away.

When they reached the landing at the bottom of the stairs, the reading lights blinked twice, signaling the library was closing. Students were already rising from their chairs, gathering their things and heading to the bank of glass doors. "Well, Clessie the girl who can do whatever she wants, it was a pleasure meeting you," Cassandra was looking past her now at an attractive young woman with blond hair who was approaching. The woman was looking back at Cassandra and smiling. Cassandra returned her smile, even more distracted now, her words capturing Clessie again. She punctuated the finality of her dismissal with the same formal bow she'd offered at their introduction. Clessie opened her mouth. She stood still, her hands gripping the strap of her shoulder bag, watching in silence as Cassandra turned away to meet her friend.

As Clessie came out of the building and descended the cement stairs she did not look back, afraid that Cassandra and the attractive young woman would be looking at her. She crossed over the pavers and passed under the wrought iron arch and came out onto

Wisconsin Avenue. She looked up at the leaden sky. Her face burned and she was mortified to find she was crying. A great shame engulfed her, a terrible humiliation for everything she'd done in her life, every selfish act of ingratitude, every consequence she'd singlehandedly brought on herself. Her face stung in the frigid wind blowing off the great lake at the edge of this lost city she'd found herself in.

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her coat. Her fingers touched the business card she'd seen flutter to the floor in Cassandra's office and picked up when the professor wasn't looking. Her last act (or so she told herself) of contrition. The blame for all would be hers now, and hers alone.

It was on the train ferry back to Keokuk that she saw the advertisement in a newspaper someone had left on the seat where she sat down: "Come West! Teachers Urgently Needed!" Below that, a list of towns. The last one: Flagstaff, Arizona. *Maybe God sees me after all.*

5

She'd been gone only two days and two nights, but it had felt like a lifetime. However much she might have taken solace in the familiarity of the farm, or been governed by her life there against all rational will, those feelings smashed up against something else now: the remains of their inviolable agreement, shattered like the door to a stall busted down by a beast confined too long against its will, the splintered pieces filling the air, the animal broken loose, plunged into the night and the moonlit freedom of the larger world.

The most unreasonable thought went through her head: no matter how hard or often her father beat her now she would not break. She had to save her baby now. Another thought smashed up against that one. How could she?

"Was it slavers again?" He was waiting for her at the front gate when she returned home.

"No, father."

"Where were you? Tell me, girl!" his rage barely contained, having chafed against his every thought since he'd found her gone, leaving him to imagine the worst, that she'd gone to the authorities and told them what he'd done to her, and now the constables were on their way out to arrest him and throw him into the hoosegow. He also knew that when push came to shove they wouldn't believe a word she said, and even if they did they would side with him, the God fearing white savior of this worthless, undeserving half-breed girl.

"I lost something," she said, motioning to the tree line beyond the corn field. "I couldn't find it," knowing what he would do with that.

"For two nights?" he was incredulous. "Liar! Where did you go?" He pressed harder.

When it became clear to him that she was not going to tell him where she'd gone beyond changing her story to "I went to look for Alfred," he looked at her uncomprehendingly, then threatened to beat her again using the same worn Neatsfoot-oiled strap he'd used on her ever since she could remember. What would he call his whip this time? The names rang in her head. She would try to protect the baby as much as she could.

The horse stall had been given over long ago to the storage of tack and tools. Clessie was no stranger to its transformation. What they would do here they'd done so many times there was no need for words. She fixed her mind on her baby and that was all. She stripped off her shirtwaist and offered him her back, the skin faintly crosshatched from the work he'd done before. He reached for the Neatsfoot-oiled strap but it wasn't hanging from its nail on the wall where it should have been. "What did you do with it," the words curdled in the air. She didn't know.

He stared at the wall in the dim light as if the strap might be conjured by fury alone. He looked down at the floor, kicked the straw, then glanced back at the empty nail. Next to it was another nail, from which hung a length of hobble-chain, which her father used to keep Pinkie, the old bay horse they'd had forever, or any one of the other animals on the farm from wandering off the property and into his neighbors' fields. He took the hobble-chain off the nail; the metal links rattled as he raised his arm.

The tear was only a few inches long, but by the time Bonaparte had drawn his arm back again it had already begun to fill with blood. He could see that the damage would be much greater than anything the strap could have done.

Undeterred, he raised his arm again. *My baby.* Clessie slipped her hands around her stomach and closed her eyes. She heard the muffled sound of a flock of birds as they burst from the roof overhead, making the ceiling sing. He kept on. *My baby.* She didn't scream. By the time he'd started ranting *Thy servant's batter!* she didn't hear a word he said.

She didn't remember him carrying her out of the barn, across the yard and into the house. Nor did she recall him carrying her up the stairs and laying her on her bed.

She was no stranger to the afflictions of recovery. But this would be her longest one. It would be two weeks before she could make her way downstairs and resume her chores. She was determined to dedicate this time towards the baby and their journey.

As soon as she was able, she got out of bed and went to the mirror to look at her back. She dropped her night shirt and looked over her shoulder, at the field of open creases that looked as if a tractor had churned its tilling blades across her back, leaving furrows where nothing but scar tissue would grow, the flesh raised in links as if the hobble-chain had somehow breached the wounds, slipped under the skin, and become a living, breathing part of her.

Clessie stared at this revelation. In that moment, her back looked like a piece of marquetry an artist had cut and scored to describe a secret history. *Look,* it whispered, *That life is buried now. Your child is your compass to a new world.*

She spat onto the floor, then slipped her night shirt back on, promising herself she would not look at it again for a long time.

At night she could hear the animals in the barn bawling to be fed and watered, their hay racks neglected, their troughs dry. *Where was he? For God's sakes, where was Maria?* She would ask him, as soon as she had the strength again.

Two weeks passed. The wounds were closing. Her father would appear in the doorway to her room, wordless, cowed by the extent of the damage he'd done, but also in awe of the unreasonable ferocity of youth; its refusal to give up or give in to the worst assaults on a person's body and soul. Clessie would close her eyes, willing him out of the doorway. When she opened them he would be gone.

One morning, Clessie made her way downstairs to the kitchen. She looked out the window over the sink where she could see him in the north field, moving like a wraith amongst the head-high stalks. Slowly, she began to pick up her chores again, mostly cooking at first, although she still could not lift the iron skillet nor bend to plunge her hands into the sink and wash the dishes for more than few minutes at a time. She made herself sweep and mop the floors, then collapse into a chair, only to rise again and will herself back to work. In the evening, she saw him again; he was at the well, stripped of his overalls, scrubbing himself with a barn brush like a man possessed, intent on stripping off his own skin.

As Clessie grew stronger—when she could lift the skillet—she would no longer sit to rest. Her father would appear at the kitchen door with an armload of firewood, watching her as he would a wounded, healing animal whose behavior warranted caution, until one day she beat him to it and he saw the telltale thread of smoke coming from the stove's chimney before he'd crossed the yard from the woodpile.

He hadn't pressed her regarding the money in the tin box. Had he not looked? Did he not

know it was gone? She was surprised: she no longer cared.

But she did care about Maria so when she didn't show up for work Clessie asked and her father said in an uncharacteristic moment of revelation, "I ran her off." He went on to say that when he'd discovered the money missing and confronted her, Maria had neither acknowledged the theft nor said one word in her own defense. Even when he'd threatened to summon the constables and have her arrested, she wouldn't budge. Finally, as much as he'd needed her help during Clessie's absence and then her recovery, he'd refused to reclaim her after he'd sent her back over the river to Germantown "where Perdition will surely find her."

Clessie wondered if maybe her father wanted things to return to the way they were before all this happened. "All this happened" is how he'd referred to it as if it were all her fault again. Maybe their conversation had caused him to rethink his decision to let "the old Hessian" go. At any rate, a week later he sent word across the river for Maria to come back. When she heard that Clessie was back home she sent word that she would come the following week.

Clessie thought again of the doctor in Milwaukee. The choices he'd given her. She had to prepare. She focused on the one thought replaying itself over and over in her mind: *Patience, little one. You are my compass. We'll go as soon as we can.*

For many more days, despite the applications of lard Clessie gouged from the tin can on

the counter by the kitchen sink and applied to the site, the lacerations on her back were so painful that she could barely tolerate the weight of a nightshirt. And yet: Her baby's determination was a miracle; its resiliency in the face of such affliction. It was amazing. She could feel it growing inside her, like an obdurate root. She had no idea of its condition, and yet she did. Was this faith?

Once again, she thought of Dr. Belgium; how she hadn't done the right thing for either of them after all. *Pride and arrogance. Who am I to bring a child into this world?*

She would awaken in the middle of the night, greeted by the liminal outline of her father as he watched her from the top of the stairs, his shadow rushing down the steps behind him to make sure she hadn't run off again.

They would wait. She had no choice.

One night she opened her eyes to find her door open, her father not there. The stairs and the landing beyond were cloaked in darkness. She lay still, listening to the troubled rhythm of his snoring as it shuddered through the house below. The muffled ticking of the clock. The creaking of the ancient stove.

She lifted the covers and swung her legs out of the bed. Her bare feet touched the cool wood floor. She waited, listening again to her father's snoring, and to the sound of the stove joints expanding in the ancient potbelly in the kitchen. If he caught her leaving the house this time he would make sure she never had another chance. She winced, reached under the bed and pulled her shoulder bag out.

It was now or never.

Their escape was a waking dream:

The four-mile trek to the train station under a waning moon, the cornfields running out on either side of the road, two glistening, quicksilver seas of gold. Her fear of being seen, caught and returned, haunting her like a jealous ghost, determined to trick her into coming home.

Looking up at the night sky and recognizing a constellation high up in the ether blooming brighter than the others—the only one she knew because Alfred had pointed it out to her once—the beauty Cassiopeia, expelled from Olympus and doomed to wheel her stars around the universe forever, casting her light on Clessie's and her baby's dash to freedom.

What was left of the money she'd taken from the cupboard for her trip to Milwaukee would be enough for the train and a week of lodging somewhere, if she were lucky.

Boarding the westbound train under a pale dawn sky, the sun a rusted reddish yellow orb rising up beyond the hills.

The closeness and discomfort of the second-class car.

The endless waves of wilderness and barren, sand-filled plains and deserts: unnamed planets whizzing by outside the window of the train both day and night.

Bits of food she'd hurried out to buy or picked out of the trash to feed the spirit growing inside her when the train made its stops to refuel. She craved fresh fruit most of all. She dreamed of apples, oranges, apricots. An orange for every worldly thing she owned. But she would settle for hard tack, boiled beans and tapioca until they crossed the mountains.

The arduous climb up the eastern side of The Rocky Mountains as the train slowed to a chuffing, belabored crawl. The terrifying drop down the other side of the continent's Herculean tectonic shift.

The few times she willed herself released from all the irreversible things she'd done—the crimes committed, the choices made—and fell into a delirious sleep.

Awakened by the conductor's announcement that they'd crossed into Arizona, and not knowing where she was.

The thousand times she stroked her belly, her fear and excitement waxing and waning, keeping her charge close company.

The great dark mountain ranges rising in the north.

"Next stop: Flagstaff, Arizona," the conductor swaying through the carriage, brandishing his report.

This is my history now, she thought. *Our history, little one, as far as we can go.* She pulled her bag closer and looked out the window at the pine trees flashing by. *Flagstaff. The Mission he called it. How will I find it? Who will find us?*

"Where is she!"

The bedroom door slammed hard against the wall behind her, startling Maria and making her jump. Since he'd dismissed her, and with Clessie still healing, the house had suffered. The stove especially was in need of cleaning. He'd sent word for her to come back, not knowing that it would be the day his daughter disappeared again.

Maria had been standing in front of Bonaparte's bureau with her back to him. Bonaparte—distraught, furious, his eyes wheeling around the room—didn't see the top drawer of the bureau ajar, nor did he see Maria stuff something into the pocket of her apron. She turned around and held up a pair of his socks, "*Ich habe deine Socken gewaschen, Herr*."

"Damn your soul, woman! Where is she! *Wo ist sie!"*

"*Ich stecke deine Socken weg*," she put the socks back in the drawer and closed it.

"I know you know!"

"*Ich weib es nicht*." Maria looked helplessly at him. "I don't know, *Herr*."

He looked around once more and stalked out of the room.

Later that day, having had no luck in his search for Clessie nor in extracting any

more information or a confession from Maria, he finally sent the old German housekeeper back across the river for good.

II

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

1916

6

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

The names "Riordan" and "Babbitt" were the two most recognizable family names in the southwestern territories. Eleanor Babbitt had been the only daughter of Daniel Riordan, a textile magnate who'd made his fortune manufacturing and selling dry goods to the rapidly expanding population that was migrating west before the turn of the century.

The first time Charlie Babbitt had laid eyes on Eleanor—almost twenty years ago— he'd been smitten (*smitten*—a word that anyone who knew Babbitt could not imagine him ever using—was the word he'd used) by her patrician bearing, her high cheekbones, and the curious, unguarded look in her hazel eyes that had made him fidget as they stood on the front steps of Trinity Cathedral, the local Episcopalian church, one Sunday. Babbitt wasn't used to being studied like a bug under a microscope. He was the one who studied others to the point of making them uncomfortable; questioning, poking and prodding until he got what he wanted, whether it was land, livestock, or political power. But Eleanor had out-studied him. Taken his measure fully that day on the steps outside the church. Once she'd gotten going on what interested her—*And it damn sure wasn't land, livestock or politics* he'd groused to Gunnar Thude, another rancher whose name was well known in the area—he could barely get a word in edgewise. When he finally did, he'd quickly discovered that nothing he said could impress her or bend her to his will. *By God, she's got my number,* he thought, watching her make her way down the steps to the street after their conversation, his eyes fixed on the cobalt blue ribbon that

held back her dark brown hair. For the next month he'd found himself scrambling to restore order (his words) to the world he'd once ruled. A week after that he'd asked her to marry him.

And she had said yes.

Both the Riordan and the Babbitt families were over the moon. Their original plan had been for Eleanor and Charlie Babbitt to create a dynasty together, their sure-to-be brilliant, robust children ruling over the burgeoning, unruly population of misfits and dreamers flooding unabated into the hills and valleys of the northern part of the state, and shape it into a community of God-fearing, law-abiding citizens of similar wealth and power.

It was not to be. No matter what Eleanor and Charlie did, nor however long they devoted themselves to the joyful task of procreation, Eleanor and Charlie Babbitt could not have children. But they would not give up. "The Lord is testing us," Eleanor said. "And we will not disappoint Him."

For years—five, ten, fifteen—they had tried, but to no avail. Finally, neither one could say when exactly, they'd settled into a devoted companionship based on their undiminished love for each other, their shared disappointment in not having been able to bring a child into the world, and their continued hope for a long life together. At least Charlie had. Eleanor had never really been able to accept their new life completely and continued to search for something else to fill the unfillable void.

With that, to her credit, and in spite of having been forced to face the fact that she would

never bear a child, Eleanor was well aware of how fortunate she was, of all the ways in which the Lord had blessed her with his munificence. Her husband owned The Aztec Land and Cattle Company (known throughout the Southwest as “The Hashknife,” for the distinctive shape of its brand), its holdings stretching over a million acres, its tens of thousands of head of cattle grazing freely over the vast open ranges of three states. He was as devoted a husband as he would have been a father. Eleanor was comfortable in her life. More than comfortable.

And still, their loss was a constantly abrading wound. For some years, usually in the middle of the night and despite Eleanor’s best efforts, the imaginary child she still dreamed of would awaken her, churning like a bloody-minded ghost inside her belly, causing her to stroke her abdomen and whisper, “There, there, child. It’s all right,” followed by “Come to your senses, you fool!” cursing both herself and the Lord for choosing her to be His empty vessel. She would round out these bouts of self-flagellation by begging Him for forgiveness and swearing again that she would harbor no ill will towards Him, nor towards any of the fortunate young mothers whom she encountered.

These conversations continued, unchanged, until one moonlit night she’d found herself balanced on the gap-toothed rungs of a rope bridge swaying high above the West Fork of Oak Creek, staring down at the snowmelt-swollen torrent rushing below her as she contemplated its boulder-strewn course. She had no memory of how she’d gotten there. She sought advice from her friend and doctor, Ennis Fronske. “The mind plays tricks, especially on those who have suffered deeply,” Doctor Fronske said. “I believe it was a fugue, nothing more. It didn’t really happen.” But she knew it had.

It wasn't until years later, when she allowed for that memory to pop to the surface of her unconscious, that she considered herself fortunate for having received a sign that night, a biblical bolt of lightning she liked to say, that momentarily lit up the forest all around, revealing the world in stark relief, which she took to be the infant apparition's voiceless intention to remind her of how wondrous the world was and to signal that the only reason for its nocturnal visits was to help her heal. Eleanor knew that someone else might think her embrace of a nonexistent baby, along with her constantly roving eye for young men and women who by her lights were in desperate need of hope and companionship (*A young man and woman perfectly suited to each other, like Charlie and myself* she would say) would cause the pain she carried to become even more unbearable. But from that night forward—and given flight by fervent prayer—she'd discovered that revelations like that actually served, however incompletely, to mitigate her suffering, and for this she would be eternally grateful.

Over time, Eleanor saw herself as both a survivor and a seasoned judge of character, especially her own. She was sure now there was a reason for everything; she would no longer try to hold back this blessed, recurring misery any more than she would try to capture the machinations of her own unwieldy mind. "It's in the Lord's hands now," she told her friend Claire Cavanaugh the next morning after she'd found her way home from the bridge. "He has a plan. His will be done."

And Eleanor would be His instrument. That night on the bridge, she'd made a pact with herself that she would not blame anyone, even herself, for her condition. It was the Lord's way. Her belief in Him would not waver. Instead, she would rededicate herself

to a life of service, taking a renewed pride in her participation in the events of Trinity Cathedral and even more in pursuit of her latest and most worthy aspiration: matchmaking.

As the years passed, Eleanor found herself wandering down the upstairs hallway of the big house she shared with her husband, and catching sight of herself in the gold leaf framed mirror on the wall, assessing for a moment what she saw: the deepening lines in her face; the same unguarded look in her hazel eyes, unchanged by time; and her hair, while no longer lustrous, in fact gone to gray, still held back with a cobalt blue ribbon, the last totem of her youth.

Any cowboy who worked the southwest territories knew the name Old Charlie Babbitt. Despite his short stature, McKinley memorial haircut and pot belly, Old Charlie (the name everyone had always called him, even when he was still a kid in short pants) was a force of nature whom most men knew enough to either follow or steer clear of.

Invariably, the few men who'd been foolhardy enough to challenge him had come away with a decidedly different set of plans than the ones they'd shown up with. Whatever the gist of these confrontations, Old Charlie was proud to say he'd been responsible for changing many men's lives. Some for the better—giving them a leg up or helping to promote them to government positions (usually to further his own interests, but still); others for the worse, depending on what they'd done to cross him (perceived or not); a few had even found themselves languishing for a stretch in the Arizona State Penitentiary. "A force of nature. You're damned straight," he'd say, fixing whoever it

was he was talking to with his pale, sunstruck eyes.

The exception to this was Eleanor. Due in part to his own guilt and grief at having been unable to provide his wife with a child (*or whatever the hell the goddamned reason was*, he would also say) Old Charlie supported Eleanor's matchmaking plan, not so much because he thought it was a sound idea as it *keeps the devil from the door* (his words), and gave his easily agitated wife an anchor, something to hold on to and fill her time.

"I'm doing the Lord's work," she would say, interrupting him at his livestock ledger. "It's simply the Christian thing to do." Old Charlie would look over the top of his reading glasses and say, "I'm sure it is. You've a good heart, Eleanor, and I'm a lucky man."

And a busy man. Running a million acres and tens of thousands of head of cattle was no small undertaking. "Another deuced cow to tail," he'd say, staring down the barrel of the latest stumper that required his attention. Some of the tasks he faced were harder to solve than others, and half the time even the others seemed downright impossible, but Old Charlie never gave up. He always found a way. Which was why, he liked to think, the men who worked for him called him *El Patrón*, and why The Hashknife ruled the west.

One morning in the spring of 1916, Old Charlie was exiting the bank on Aspen Street when he was confronted by a young reporter for The Flagstaff Sentinel who was looking for a story. The reporter asked him what had been the most difficult thing he'd encountered as the owner of the biggest ranch in the Southwest. Maybe it was the fact that the incident had just happened and the wound was still fresh or maybe it was

something else, but the usually taciturn Babbitt stopped and fixed the young reporter with an impatient look. “Losing my foreman, Ray Eppers.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir.” The reporter was already looking past Old Charlie at an attractive young woman who was crossing the street. She met his gaze and smiled, twirling her parasol over her shoulder.

Old Charlie cocked his ear at the reporter’s tone. He recognized it: the voice of a man who’s suddenly spied something he finds more interesting than the thing he already has.

The young woman closed her parasol and disappeared inside the doorway of a store across the street.

“Can you tell me how it happened, sir?” The reporter dropped his eyes to the notepad that had appeared in his hand while he was watching her. He flipped it open and touched the stub of his pencil with his tongue.

“No. I got better things to do than stand around jawing with a half-in half-out gadfly. I’ve got work to do.” He sidestepped him and strode off down the sidewalk.

“So do I, sir,” the reporter glanced once more at the storefront across the street and took off after him. He caught up to him, matching his stride. “So you lost your foreman. Can you tell me what happened?”

Old Charlie stopped and fixed him with a look. “Act like you want to hear it and maybe I will.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I just—I do want to hear it, sir, and I think our readers would want to hear it, too.”

Old Charlie took in the young man, who the more he looked at him the more he

looked like what he was: a jug-eared kid, his pomaded crew cut bristling like a shiny picket fence, his Adam's apple bobbing away a mile a minute above his starched collar. "All right then," he kept walking as he glanced over at the reporter's stub of a pencil still hovering over the pad. "Quit looking at the ladies and pay attention."

It had been one month since Old Charlie had lost Ray Eppers, the Hashknife's foreman of six years.

Eppers and the other Hashknife hands had just brought the herd back up to Flagstaff from the winter grazing pastures in Litchfield Park, west of Phoenix. The drive north had been arduous; lightning strikes had bedeviled the herd as they passed through Black Canyon, and the wells at Cordes Junction were low, their surfaces flowering with algae. The cows were skittish, and an ornery few kept drifting off after the herd completed the Verde Valley stretch and started the steep climb up to the Mogollon Rim. Eppers had sent two line riders out to retrieve the recalcitrant strays, and the hands spent a long day and a half in the Kaibab forest rounding them in, after which they reported to Eppers that they were all accounted for. Rollins, the tally man, wasn't so sure, so Eppers had ordered another full head count. By the time they arrived at the Babbitt ranch it was clear six beefs were still missing. It was already late in the afternoon and the men were exhausted, but it was a source of pride to Eppers that at the end of any drive, his tallies were always straight. Besides, he knew Old Charlie would have his head if they weren't. He had a pretty good idea where the cows might be.

Eppers turned the herd over to Darryl Scoggins, his second in command, with orders to finish dispersing the cows into the north paddocks before the sun went down.

He turned his horse around and rode back out to the Kaibab the way they'd come. Halfway to the Rim, "Eppers felt the spirit moving him—that's what he called it when he had to take a leak," Babbitt always laughed at this part of what was otherwise a tragic story. The foreman had dismounted his horse and was relieving himself when a grizzly appeared from behind a downed tree, its jaws dripping with blood, clearly angry that it had been disturbed in the middle of tearing apart its first kill after a winter of hibernation. Before Eppers could grab his rifle the bear charged and disemboweled him where he stood.

The next day, when he still hadn't heard from his foreman, Old Charlie sent Scoggins out to find him. When Scoggins did find him, it was Eppers's horse he saw first, grazing quietly in a copse of Ponderosa pines, and then Eppers himself, kneeling on a bed of pine needles, his head slumped forward "Like he was praying to the pile of guts on the ground in front of him," was the way Scoggins described it to Old Charlie when he got back to the ranch. Scoggins had spotted the beefs, too (including the one, or what was left of it, that the grizzly had been working on when he was interrupted by Eppers), moving in and out amongst the trees, grazing quietly, not far away. "No sign of the bear, boss," he'd told Old Charlie. "Reckon he hightailed it to greener pastures."

The young reporter, his pencil still hovering over his pad, looked at Old Charlie as he struggled to take in the story he'd asked for but not expected. He quickly got hold of himself. "And the best thing you've encountered, sir?"

Old Charlie threw him a sideways look. "I guess it would have to be the same thing."

The reporter looked confused. “How’s that, Mr. Babbitt?”

Suddenly Old Charlie grinned. “I got McCaslin.”

“McCaslin,” the reporter scribbled on his pad. “And who’s—"

“*Patrón*,” a dray pulled up next to them and stopped. The leather-faced Basque holding the reins nodded to his boss, then looked down at the reporter impassively. The horses tossed their heads, sending flecks of foamy sweat into the air.

Old Charlie looked up at the driver. “Where the hell you been, Xavier?” He grabbed the handhold and swung up onto the seat.

“Mr. Babbitt! Who’s—!” the reporter dropped his pad. He stepped off the curb, squatting to retrieve it. His shoulder brushed the side slats of the wagon as he bent down.

“*Vámonos,”* Old Charlie directed this to the driver.

“*Si, Patron.”* The driver snapped the reins across the horses’ quivering flanks and they moved off at a trot.

“Mr. Babbitt!” The reporter jumped out of the way. “Who’s McCaslin!”

Old Charlie had been devastated when he lost Eppers. He’d grown fond of the foreman over the years, not to mention grateful beyond measure for all he’d done for The Hashknife during his tenure. But his mind did not stay long on reflection. He needed to find a cowboy who could pick up the reins and he needed to do it fast.

7

Isaac McCaslin prided himself on the fact that in twenty-four years of living, he’d not

once looked back with regret on anything he'd done. Ruddy-faced and rail-thin, with the uneven, rolling gait of a cowboy who'd been thrown by more than his share of broncos during the course of his career, McCaslin was not unlike a lot of other young men who'd come to the far west to make a living or to disappear. For him the choice to head west had been an easy one. Raised in the barrens of Oklahoma Territory, he'd learned early on that wherever he was, whatever he'd done to get himself there, and however many mistakes he'd made along the way, none of that would be forgiven and was therefore of no use to him as he contemplated the future. "The past is past," he'd say as he swung up into the saddle, wincing slightly, favoring the hip with the hairline fracture that had never knitted properly. "Leave the sumbitch alone." To Isaac McCaslin, the future would always be a bright, beckoning star. The past? An empty grave that would be filled soon enough and needed no further inspection.

McCaslin owned the 7-Anchor brand, a small outfit consisting of about five hundred head of cattle stationed on the Bellemont Range between Flagstaff and Williams. Isaac had held the Bellemont lease for four years, with the intention of buying the land outright one day. For four years it had proven itself, by hook or by crook, able to support the herd year-round.

While big ranchers like Charlie Babbitt and Gunnar Thude had the crews and the money to drive their cattle south every year to the lush winter grazing pastures and mild weather of Litchfield Park, Isaac did not. Due to his own financial constrictions he'd been forced to spend the last three winters on the Bellemont, cracking the black ice on the surfaces of

the wells with a shovel so the cows could drink, and keeping the herd sheltered on the leeward side of the hills where ragged forage still showed through the icy mantle.

For three winters he'd moved the herd from section to section, keeping his eye on the ground cover that was peeking through the snow in what the bespectacled young man at the Conservation office had once referred to as Isaac's "fidelity to the land," to which Isaac had snorted, "You got a better idea?" whereupon the youthful desk jockey had expanded on his comment, "You're what we called at the university a steward, sir."

Isaac dismissed all this as hifalutin hogwash. As far as he was concerned, he was doing the only thing he could do if he was going to keep his cows from starving and give the grass a chance to grow back so he could use the various sections again the following year.

"Yes, sir. What you're doing is good land management. One of the few I've seen doing it," the young man wasn't finished, so pleased was he with his own assessment of Isaac's plan. "You're in it for the long term, I expect."

Fancy college talk aside, Isaac took no credit for any of this; he'd known other small ranchers who'd been doing the same thing for five or six years. Some with good results; some without.

This would be his fourth winter on the Bellemont. Every year he'd promised himself that both his luck and the cattle market would hold steady and he could take the herd south the following winter. And each winter he'd had to stay put and let his capital grow.

The Lord willing and the creek don't rise.

The old saw pinballed around in his head as he lay on his cornhusk mattress in the dirt-floored cabin he'd built in the middle of the vast twilit darkness of the northern Arizona range. Each night he spent listening to the muffled sound of snowfall and the howling wind as it bowed the walls of the little cabin until he fell off to sleep, dreaming of fair weather and lush Litchfield pastures. At some point—he didn't know when—the phrase had turned itself into *These walls willing and the drifts don't rise,* which he repeated over and over in his head, swearing when the next winter found him he would be in Black Canyon driving five hundred head of cattle south.

Old Charlie appreciated Isaac's ingenuity and stick-to-itiveness. Besides the little bit of personal information the two men had traded during Babbitt's drop-ins on his way home from Bright Angel, he and McCaslin had done some business together: Isaac had bought his first breeding bull—a Hereford called Enoch—from him. Later on, they'd done some horse-trading, and some buying and selling of cattle.

Old Charlie's sense of Isaac was that he was a sober, reliable cowboy who, like him, had pulled himself up by his bootstraps and knew cattle as well as anyone and better than most.

Babbitt had kept his eye on Isaac and how he used and protected the range he'd been constrained to use year-round. No stranger to the problems of overgrazing and its repercussions himself, he was curious. It accounted for something that over the course of three winters Isaac had been able to keep his stock alive as well as regenerate the pasturage using this unproclaimed practice.

As it turned out, Isaac kept the promise he'd made to himself, just not in the way he'd planned. His fourth winter on the Bellemont, the winter the citizens and ranchers of northern Arizona would always refer to as "The Blizzard of 1916," descended without mercy, burying the land in barn-high snowdrifts, snuffing out shelter, forage and water with one swipe of its icy paw.

As winter turned to spring, the snow melted and the extent of the damage was revealed: along the leeward sides of the hills cowhides flapped stiffly in the frigid air; the peeling skulls and skeletons of what was once a robust 7-Anchor herd lay scattered across the terrain; shoots of blue stem and fescue pushed up between the empty ribcages of the fallen, many of which lay collapsed against each other in one last ditch effort to find warmth. The winter had been a cow skinner, and the die up was total.

Isaac would never forgive himself for what he'd done, his back to the wall or not. He'd gotten cocky. Thought he could pull it off one more time. But he couldn't. He thought of his old army buddy George Luhrs, how a telegram George had sent to him back in December had sat at the Western Union office in town all winter: *"Come down and see me.* Stop. *Put you to work.* Stop. *Hostelry.* Stop. *Pay's good. Need some help."*

Maybe get out of the cattle game, Isaac thought. Try something else. Something he wouldn't mismanage as badly as he had his lifelong dream.

As fate would have it, on the first summer-warm day of spring Old Charlie ran into Isaac at the General Land Office on Beaver Street where Isaac was tendering his Closure of

Business papers. The news of Isaac's epic winter catastrophe had already made its way through the ranching community. Some high-handed ranchers, like Gunnar Thude, offered their condolences but were secretly pleased; others, chastened by the news, stayed mute, forced to take a second look at their own risky propositions. The only stark truth that everyone agreed on was simple: it could happen to anyone.

As he strode into the land office, Old Charlie thought about this and decided he fell somewhere between the two poles. He didn't wish any of his fellow ranchers ill, but only a fool would not take advantage of someone's else's hard luck if it landed in their lap. He looked around and saw Isaac at the counter, papers in hand. Other than the two of them, the office was empty. "Sorry for your troubles, McCaslin. Bad business," he spoke without preamble.

"Yeah." Isaac looked down at the forms he held in his hand and then back at Babbitt. "You, too. I heard about Eppers."

"Yeah. Terrible shame." He chucked his chin at the papers in Isaac's hand. "So you're doing this."

Isaac looked down at the forms again. "Yeah. I'll figure it out."

"I don't doubt it." Babbitt studied him for a moment. A smile winked across his face. "Say. I'm looking for a foreman. You know anyone?"

"No—." Isaac looked up at him, at that smile still winking. *What the hell's he saying? After what I just did?* "Well, I—."

"Hell, we've all lost beefs," Babbitt cut him off. "Part of the price of doing business." He went on, warming to the topic, "Any cowman who can't admit that ain't worth talking to."

Isaac stood there, caught in Old Charlie's tractor beam.

"You took a hell of a chance," he continued. "And plenty of knotheads might of said you didn't have a lick of sense between your ears. But as far as I can see you saw your options, took your chances, and you lost." He paused again. "I'd've done the same myself."

Isaac kept looking at him, speechless at what he was hearing: *El Patron*—this cattle boss—unburdening himself—agreeing with him, Isaac McCaslin, a knothead who'd just lost everything he'd worked for due to his own hubris and stupidity. He looked around. Still nobody behind the counter.

"Hell, McCaslin, you don't think I've been stopping by your place in the middle of hell's half acre because I need a new friend do you?"

Still silence from Isaac. The wheels were turning but the cogs still weren't quite lining up. "What're you saying?"

Babbitt fixed him with a look, the wink still in place. "Maybe you got something I want."

"What's that?" Isaac would play along; he was still not fully convinced of what Old Charlie was saying, or of what he thought he was saying. It just didn't make sense to him that he would have something Old Charlie Babbitt wanted that he didn't already have himself.

"Old Eppers was a hell of a fine foreman," Babbitt seemed to suddenly change the subject.

"Amen," Isaac agreed.

"But." The wink was gone now. "Like most of 'em, at least the older ones—," he

cleared his throat, "—myself included I suppose—he didn't know deuce-all about managing grazing land. You've seen those fields I've got north and east, the ones I've been leasing to Chavez and the Bar D boys for their winter herds. Hell, come spring you couldn't grow a cow pie out there. Grass chewed down to the roots, groundcover gone, dirt blowing every which way. I saw what you did out there on the Bellemont—three winters no less." He turned and spat into the cuspidor by the counter. "Shit. If you want my opinion you should be wrote up in one of them cattlemen's journals for what you did. You can be proud of that, son." He looked away, then gave him the look again. "I reckon I could use someone who can straighten out what I got going up here." He paused. "Down south, too."

"I appreciate your consideration, Mr. Babbitt," Isaac looked embarrassed. He stepped up to the counter and laid his quit papers down. He knocked once on the wood surface to see if that might roust somebody who was at the back of the store. "But I'm thinking of getting into another kind of business."

"What's that?"

"I've got a buddy who—."

"Who's that?"

Isaac was starting to feel like his was in the crosshairs of a sharpshooter. "George Luhrs."

"Luhrs Hotel? Down in Phoenix?"

"He offered me a job. Hostelry, he calls it—."

"Hostelry? What the hell is that? Chasing Indians?"

"Hospitality—."

"Like a waiter?"

"Management."

"What the hell do you know about hotel management?"

"Not a damned thing," he grinned sheepishly. "Guess he figures he'll train me up."

"What do you know about him?"

"We were in the service together."

Babbitt looked at him blankly. "Service? Army?"

"Yeah."

"You never told me that."

"You never asked."

"When was this?"

" '98. Cuba."

"What the hell made you do that?"

Isaac shrugged. "Luhrs said he was going, so I signed up, too."

Babbitt looked at him seriously now. "Jesus. I knew some boys who went down there. Most of 'em didn't come back."

"Yeah."

"Pretty bad, huh."

"Yeah, well. We made it home in one piece."

Both men were quiet for a moment.

Isaac continued, "Anyway, he got the bank to give him a loan. Got a big opportunity—."

"Damn, son," he cut him off again. "I don't care about that." He made an impatient sound in his throat. "You ain't makin' this any easier on me."

"Sorry, Mr. Babbitt. It's just—this scrambling—hustlin' beefs and horseflesh, comin' up short—."

"What about Darryl Scoggins?" Old Charlie switched it up again.

Isaac frowned. "What about him?"

"Think he'd make a good foreman?"

"Well. Yeah—."

"I think so, too. He's savvy as hell, knows his livestock. But he don't know a thing about taking care of the land so I can get more use out of it." He looked at Isaac's papers on the counter, releasing him from his tractor beam stare, hoping something of what he was saying might steer him over.

"Nothin' he can't learn," Isaac said simply. He could see Babbitt was in a jam, but this last misadventure had kicked him in the gut, knocked the wind out of him, not just financially but in his head, too. He knocked again on the counter. *Where the hell was everybody?*

Babbitt didn't answer. Suddenly he looked at Isaac like he'd just had the best idea in the world. "Say, what if you signed on as my foreman for a year, teach old Scoggins how to manage a pasture, then hand over the reins to him and be on your way."

Old Charlie had Isaac's attention now. They studied each other for a moment.

"A year?"

"One year. That's all."

"I gotta get down to Phoenix—."

"I'll get you down to Phoenix. Hell, I'll even put you in management."

Isaac looked confused.

"But not in hostile-ry, whatever the hell that is."

Isaac didn't know what to say. He was officially lost in this conversation.

Old Charlie could see he'd set the carrot just where he'd wanted it. "Those Litchfield pastures need protecting—you and me both know it. It's a fulltime job, plus, I could use a go-between, another set of eyes and ears that can see and hear what the hell's coming down the pike when I'm not there. Someone to ride herd on those politicians over at the Capitol who keep trying to change the land-use rules on me all the time. Those sumbitches need a hard bit in their mouth."

"Can I help you?" a government-looking man with a sunburned face and a handlebar moustache finally appeared behind the counter.

"Yes, sir," Isaac stepped up, pushing his papers forward. He looked once more at Babbitt. "One year?"

"One year."

"Lemme think about it."

"Don't think too long."

8

A week later Isaac took the job. He was the youngest foreman in the long and storied history of "The Hashknife," even if it was only for a year. It had been a peach of an offer and he was proud Babbitt had thought of him considering all that had happened. Maybe

the future could balance the past. One thing he knew for sure was whatever difficulties lay ahead, anything would be better than spending another winter on the Bellemont, his cows dying up and not a nickel in his pocket.

Old Charlie was no dummy. Before he'd offered the foreman's job to Isaac, he'd run the idea by Eleanor. "Always do," he said. "She's my ace in the hole. Hasn't steered me wrong yet."

Eleanor always wondered if what he meant by that was he expected that she would indeed let him down sometime in the future, but she put that thought in the column under "In God's Hands," and left it at that.

Eleanor had told Charlie to invite Isaac over for dinner. At the end of the evening, after Isaac had left, she gave her blessing, "He seems like a fine and decent fellow." She paused for effect. "Easy on the eyes, too," she smiled at Old Charlie, who after long experience already knew where she was going.

Isaac fit Eleanor's bill exactly as a young man worth her time. All that was left was to find his *paramour-propre*, a teasingly inappropriate term to be sure, but one she couldn't resist, having discovered it in *Marquise de Montalembert,* a decidedly atheistic book she'd found in a box in a flea market next door to the Salvation Army soup kitchen where she volunteered ("Who in the world could have left such a thing here?" she'd wondered as she paid the bookseller a nickel and squirrelled it away in her purse). It was a tawdry tale, and for that reason alone worth an occasional look-see, so she kept it hidden in the

drawer of her bedside table.

By the time Isaac came along, Eleanor had had enough experience in her newfound craft to feel confident that her skills as a matchmaker would not only serve her in her quest for spiritual healing, but would do the same for Isaac and whomever she found for him as well. Old Charlie just figured what was good for the goose was good for the gander and climbed aboard the train of his wife's well-intentioned scheming.

Eleanor gave herself until the following spring ("An angel told Mary in one year she would be blessed," she told Claire Cavanaugh) to find a match for Isaac, her cut-off date the annual tea dance the Babbitts hosted at their ranch after the spring drive each year.

Eleanor and Old Charlie had decided that the following year's tea dance would take place on the twelfth of May, in honor of that date in 254 A.D. when Stephen I, a phlegmatic man of the cloth whom Eleanor had taken a liking to in the course of her Bible studies, had succeeded Lucius I as Catholic Pope.

In the past, the event (the tea dance, not the canonization of Stephen I) had been blazoned by the kind of regional newspaper coverage that was usually reserved for a senatorial race, its boldface attributes appearing in the local broadsheets late in the spring shortly after the Hashknife had finished its calving roundups in March and April. The dance was the highlight of Flagstaff's social calendar. In fact, the only other events the self-proud, doctrinaire leaders of the newly minted Flagstaff Rotary Club even considered worth mentioning were the rebuilding of the Flagstaff Public Library, which had burned

down the year before; the state fair cattle auction; and the Christmas tree lighting ceremony that took place each year in front of the Weatherford Hotel on Leroux Street.

Only *the most devout and respectable young men and women* (the ecclesiastical Eleanor's words) would be invited to attend the tea dance, even though Eleanor knew there would be the usual handful of batty old crones and broken down cowpokes of disputatious record making a big show of dressing up and appearing at the Babbitts' front gate on the night of, their shabby outfits flapping in the frigid night air. These characters, in accordance with Eleanor's almsgiving disposition, would be handed a cup of warm tea through the gaps between the iron posts of the gate by whatever cowhand Old Charlie had stationed there (and who would most likely have been surreptitiously sipping something stronger from a tin cup or a dented hip flask), and then sent on their way, their scrofulous forms vanishing into the engulfing, forested darkness.

Eleanor knew that the next day one or another of these eccentrics might be seen standing on a street corner in one of the *towns with the hair on* (Old Charlie again) scattered along National Old Trails Highway, admiring their wavering reflections in the plate glass window of a bar or dry goods store, noting loudly to both themselves and whomever they were sharing the sidewalk with that the swimming images, splendiferous in their rippling tea dance raiment, still held up in the light of day, the eccentrics' bobbing faces creased by ecstatic, lunatic smiles, their eyes sparkling with joyful madness at the nonsensical words spilling out of their mouths as they summed up all the beautiful people they'd met, the music they'd danced to and the food they'd devoured on their grand tour of "Missus Eleanor's Spring Tea Dance!"

The dim, gas-lit towns to which these characters returned to make their reports

were equally grotty, with names like Why, Nothing, and Jackass Junction—shady unincorporated townships stretching east all the way to the Painted Desert.

Determined to do his part to keep the party-crashing to a minimum, Old Charlie would double-check the guest list for "only the finest young women of unimpeachable character," along with those cowboys (first in line, the Hashknife hands, but others, too, according to their station as long as they weren't "part of that plug-ugly crew over at Gunnar Thude's place") who "showed real promise, not just a bald lick of sense," and who "knew their manners," let alone how to hold a book "right side up when he's looking at it, even if he can't read."

But that was still a year off. The summer came and went as Eleanor went about her daily chores and other responsibilities with renewed vigor. As the weeks rolled by she kept Isaac in her mind and her eyes peeled for suitable prospects.

September, 1916.

Clessie Bonaparte arrived in Flagstaff "like a travel-weary queen appearing amongst her heralds," according to Eleanor, her arrival coinciding with the annual autumnal flood of copper and gold released from the aspens and soapberry trees that lined the streets in town and covered the mountains surrounding the city limits. She was four-and-a-half months pregnant but still not showing ("Some do. Some don't," Dr. Belgium had said with a shrug). She'd felt her baby moving inside her on the train as they'd crossed into Arizona, signaling to her, she wanted to think, letting her know it was there,

but there was still no outward sign of its imminent arrival in the world. It was just as well. The world would be aware of its presence soon enough. In the meantime, the less anyone knew the better. The rollercoaster of pride and fear that had been careening around in her chest for having answered the ad she'd found on the seat next to her on the train ride back from Milwaukee had slowed. Joining it now was an oceanic wave of relief at having escaped her father, as well as having survived the uncomfortable weeklong journey on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe line in one of the last seats left in third class. She was seventeen years old, but had told the few people on the train who'd asked that she was nineteen, having already lived a life that few others could imagine.

As the train pulled into the station, Clessie checked around her seat for anything she might have left and exited the rear of the car. She stood on the narrow, corrugated platform and put one hand on the handrail that was bolted to it, swaying gently in place as the train slowed, its slackened couplings jolting and clashing from car to car. It shuddered to a stop, its protesting brakes set with a gasp. She let go of the railing, picked up her bag and stepped down onto the wide wood-planked station platform.

As it happened, Eleanor Babbitt was standing directly in front of her ("Was it purely coincidence, or the Lord's will?" she would worry this thought around in her head for months after), and although her presence on the station platform was for an entirely different reason—she'd come to collect a package from the AT&SF mail car—that mission flew right out of her head as she made room for this young woman, pleased as always to have spotted what might possibly turn out to be her next perfect candidate. As Clessie stepped around her with nary a nod or consideration, so absorbed was she in

making sure she'd held onto her travel bag as she touched down in such uncharted territory, Eleanor's unburdened judgment of her ("By our heavenly Father's grace, she looked like a rose in bloom!" she was heard to say to Claire the following Sunday as she described her sighting) held firm, allowing her to feel an imperfect, sweet release.

Each tessellation of Eleanor's enchantment—initially the most obvious, overlapping elements of Clessie's appearance: the high color in her cheeks, her reddish gold hair, her full lips, ("Luscious, like a ripe peach!" she'd blushed in the telling), the brittle bursts of light in the irises of her eyes, and (blushing again) her "full feminine breasts"—took on a meaning to Eleanor so powerful that she found herself stricken in its presence, unable to tear her eyes away, her feet anchored to the spot where she stood. As she turned to watch her, Clessie reached up with one hand and straightened the bent brim of her Edwardian Traveler, which she'd bought for herself in a moment of self-indulgence after she'd left Casandra at the university in Milwaukee. She did not look back but kept her eyes forward, drawn to the sounds of the noisy street on the other side of the platform, assailed by the grunting, rough-voiced men shouting at one another as they off-loaded barrel hoops, produce and sheets of tin from commercial trucks and wagons; the women with their baskets of produce slung over one arm, running the gauntlet as they went about their errands; and the backfiring of the trucks and the snorting of the work horses stamping in their traces.

When she reached the stairs leading down to the street she shifted her bag to her other shoulder. She placed one hand at the small of her back and stood still for a moment.

The mail car forgotten now, Eleanor was free to take in this independent gesture, her mind recalibrating, allowing her to observe the minute quirks and inconsistencies of

the parts she'd recorded: Clessie's slightly asymmetrical upturned chin; her widened, pale eyes—the brittle bursts of light now dimmed by the dilation of their flat black pupils; her hair, its eye-catching strawberry blond luster disheveled from the trip, hastily pulled back, one strand dangling free, its wispy end brushing the top of her creased shirt collar. Yes, Eleanor could see it all clearly now: the bottom button of her tunic was missing, her skirt rolled at the waist from her attempts (Eleanor assumed) to find a comfortable position in her narrow third-class seat during her long journey.

Clessie let her hand drop. As she descended the steps, the wind came up, and with it a vortex of gritty, swirling dust. She closed her eyes as it scoured the boards beneath her feet, erasing her footsteps as they fell. When she touched down on the curb she looked both ways and then crossed the street, stopping in front of the Riordan Mercantile Company building. She dropped her bag on the dusty ground next to the store's hitching post. Up went her hand again, this time to tuck the loose strand of her hair into place, and then down to rest, palm flat, on her stomach. As she turned in profile, someone of a less generous nature might have remarked how she looked heavier than she had at first glance, that her center of gravity was a bit off-kilter, and her footsteps, in spite of their grace, landed somewhat heavily. In truth, if that person had taken the time to really see what they were looking at, they would have realized that Clessie had a much greater concern on her mind than how she looked or if she were clumsy or not.

Whatever else was ahead of her, the life she'd lived before was gone. Ancient history, her Virgil—her Beatrice—would have said. *A name with no history*—what had Cassandra meant by that? Had it been that obvious to her, the unformed shape of

Clessie's life, its features so flat, so lifeless as to not even be worth noting, no more capable of reflecting the progression of a person's journey than the remains of those ancient Roman statues Cassandra had told her about in her office that day, their heads and limbs severed by a catastrophic event of nature—the eruption of Mount Vesuvius—and ground to dust for two or more millennia, their torsos hovering in stasis on the second terrace of Purgatory, waiting to take on whatever renascent, transmutable shape the gods decreed? Clessie smiled, cringing at her own audacity—*Look at you! A Metis!—fresh from Marquette!*—inserting herself in the hallowed History of Western Civilization.

But she had not waited for the gods. She had seized her life, made her escape, and landed here. The rollercoaster had been rolling on its track for quite some time. But she was no longer an unwilling passenger. She was driving now, determined to find her way.

Eleanor mastered her feet and moved to the edge of the platform, watching unseen as Clessie raised her hand once more, this time to flag down a dray that was speeding down the street at an alarming clip.

When the driver, a white man in dirty rolled-up sleeves, the stub of a cigar between his lips, saw her he pulled back hard on the reins and the wagon came to a shuddering stop in front of her. The driver looked down at her impatiently as Clessie said something to him that Eleanor couldn't hear. When he responded, Clessie tossed her bag up onto the seat and climbed up the rungs and sat next to him, keeping the bag between them. She looped her left arm through its strap. It was then that Eleanor heard Clessie's voice for the first time, its husky timbre surprisingly loud, "Yes. The Weatherford Hotel."

As Eleanor watched the wagon pull away, her eyes followed this vision sitting

straight-backed on the seat next to the driver, her felt brimmed hat planted slightly askew on her lustrous head, her shape and figure growing smaller as it headed into town.

For all of her infatuation that day at the train station, and despite the fact that she could think of little else for weeks afterward, Eleanor would see Clessie only once more before the spring. She wouldn't allow herself to go over to the hotel and poke around—"That would be infelicitous" (Eleanor's word of the week)—only women of a certain type did that sort of thing and she certainly wasn't one of them. She would remain discreet.

"But the good Lord gave me His blessing to see her again," she would tell her friend Claire. "And I know He recognizes my intentions and sees they are good."

Her second sighting was still some months off and it would be fortuitous, but not by design. In the meantime, Clessie and Isaac were never far from her thoughts, their individual attributes bumping up against each other until she was convinced that Isaac and the young woman she'd seen at the station, if she ever saw her again, would make a fine match indeed.

"Son of a bitch!"

Clessie jumped, startled by the dray driver's sudden outburst. She gripped the handhold of the seat as he pulled up hard on the reins and threw his arm out in front of her. He raised one leg, stomping down hard on the handle of the hand brake with his foot. The wagon came to another shuddering halt as a small boy in ragged clothes appeared in front of them. When the boy looked up he locked eyes with Clessie, scowling, his berry-brown face split in a grimace of blame, as if his narrowly avoided injury or impending

doom were all her fault. He quickly vanished down an alley between two buildings across the street.

"Dirty half-breed Injuns!" the driver exclaimed, quickly lowering his arm. "They oughta string 'em all up." He released the brake with one hand. "You all right, Miss?"

"Yes," Clessie whispered. The driver's profane outburst dissipated in the air, weightless of its curse. He spat, then looked at Clessie again and past her at the handhold she was still clutching with one hand. "You sure, Miss? You got a grip on that handle like you're choking a chicken."

Clessie looked over at the handhold, at her hand, which was bone white except for the knuckles, taut in a fist, the skin shiny and bright like she'd just punched a wall.

"I'm fine," she said, keeping her face forward, her eyes pointing straight ahead. *Injuns.* She'd never felt so much rage in her life. *White pig.* It surprised her, and surprised her again when she realized she'd never even considered it, let alone acted on that sentiment.

When the driver pulled the dray up in front of the Weatherford, Clessie jumped down without thanks or a civil word. The driver slapped the reins, hissed and drove off, leaving her to imagine how close he'd come to a furious tongue-lashing, let alone a nose-bloodying punch in his face. *With a name like that, you could do anything.*

Later on, after she'd checked into her room at the Weatherford and unpacked the few things she'd brought with her, it dawned on her that she had indeed felt that disordered, bughouse rage more times in her young life than she cared to admit, but her mind, always on guard, had quickly shut it down for the terrible results that would surely follow.

The next morning when Clessie woke up she was disoriented, engulfed by the familiar surge of panic that met her upon awakening each day. She looked across the tiny room at the window, its shade still up, and tried to focus on the sunlight that was slowly filling the aperture. *My baby.* Her father's shape hovered near the edge of the frame. She started. Would it always be this way, the image of her baby, whatever that looked like—a smudge, a roundish, featureless thing floating inside her—interrupted abruptly by her father's, his stooped Ichabod Crane form emerging from the barn on a wet winter's day, the long train of his poncho, slick with rain, flapping behind him like bat wings? Would they always be together—her father and her child—the two of them inseparable, joined by her, the one misused by the elder only to carry the unborn into a life of degradation? She thought back over the long train ride, her arrival, the trip in the wagon to the hotel, the Indian boy, the cursing driver of the dray, and everything that had happened before. She breathed unsteadily until she closed her eyes and fell back into a fitful sleep, her dreams those of a history that refused to be forgotten.

Predators. That's what the Texas Ranger had called them, although her father and other members of the congregation had referred to them as white slavers. She'd heard stories about them, but they sounded more like made up characters in cautionary tales – ghosts and goblins – than real men. But they were real, and they had taken her from her father's cornfield. She had just turned twelve-years-old. They'd run her down, covered her head with a burlap bag, and thrown her into the back of a wagon. Later, she'd been transferred to a truck. She couldn't tell how many other girls were there. There were no

boys as far as she could tell. Some of the girls cried, others moaned softly; most were silent.

By the time the Rangers caught up to them, the slavers had made it all the way to Galveston on the Gulf of Mexico. She couldn't see anything for the burlap bag covering her head, but she heard the men talking, and then the birds, their strange shrieking cries—seagulls, she heard one of the slavers say, Goddamned seagulls, like to git my hands on one of them, stick 'im on a spit, another one had said. The sound of water, surging and retreating, the clanging of iron bells and rigging, the smells of salt and fish and sewage in the air. The slavers had not touched her in the way she thought they would although she'd expected them to; she knew what they wanted, she was used to that by now, if one could ever get used to such a thing; but the closest they'd come to hurting or violating her was when they'd dragged her on or off the vehicles, or when one of them reached under the burlap bag and stuffed his grubby fingers into her mouth, pressing something warm and rotten smelling to her lips, some kind of meat, but not like any she'd ever tasted. She hadn't eaten in days and she was hungry so she'd gobbled it down. The man's fingers smelled putrid, like they'd been in places where death thrived. He'd had no hygiene, she thought.

She remembered the crackle of the flames and the warmth of the fire as she sat cross-legged in the dirt night after night, and then the sound of rifles firing, the air dense with bullets whizzing by her, and those men, those predators, white slavers, jumping up, surprised, in disarray. The hooves of horses and the shouts of men, Drop your weapons! Texas Rangers! Put up your hands!

When the Ranger pulled the bag off of her head, she was startled to see that he

was little more than a boy, with pale blue eyes and a shock of dirty blond hair, a metal star pinned to the breast pocket of his shirt. She could see the fear in his eyes; the adrenalin and determination, too. He was the one who had said it. "They're dirty rotten predators, Miss, but don't you worry, you're safe now. We're gonna take you home." She was overwhelmed with relief and gratitude, a feeling that faded when she thought if he knew her ancestry he might not have been so kind, and most likely would have treated her the same way these other men had. She looked around and saw the bodies of the men lying prone by the firelight. One of them had fallen into the fire; a rank smell filled the smoky air. Other men, still sitting down or propped upright, the surprise and fear frozen in their lifeless eyes. She looked at the young Ranger and shuddered, assailed again by the voices she'd heard growing up, the ones that told shadow stories about these Texas Rangers and their predations against the Comanche and Sioux who'd refused to abandon their lands and accept the uninhabitable territories that had been forced on them by the whites. So many of them raped and murdered; so many others sold into slavery. She thought again how lucky she was she didn't look like them.

How can I bring this child into the world? What will they do to him?

9

She woke with a start in her room at the Weatherford. By now sunlight filled the aperture of the open window. She threw back the covers, got up and went to the sink. She washed herself with a damp washcloth, running its cool coarseness over her arms, careful to

avoid looking at her image in the mirror above the sink, and patted herself dry.

Afterwards, she got dressed and walked down the two flights of stairs to the high tin-ceilinged lobby of the hotel. When she entered the spacious foyer, she was surprised to see how crowded it was. People in groups, or in pairs or by themselves moved through the room, talking softly or loudly, plopping themselves down or getting up from deep cushioned leather club chairs. Others approached or peeled away from the front desk. Her attention was broken by the muffled sound of a baby crying. She scanned the room, landing on a perambulator that was being wheeled through the arched doorway of the dining room by a young white woman, her face a mask of exhaustion. Clessie looked beyond them; they were alone. There was no man. Where was he? The woman pressed forward, not slowing down, and bumped the front of the perambulator against the lip of the front desk, causing the man behind it to look up with an impatient frown. He spoke to the young woman, but the baby screamed, an aggrieved, ear-shattering sound, drowning out the words but not the dismissive look that Clessie could see on his face.

Clessie raised her hand, as if she were going to signal to the woman or adjust her hat. She stopped short, wiping at her face underneath her eyes. She turned abruptly and crossed the room to the double glass doors at the hotel's entrance and pushed through. As she stepped outside onto the raised portico, the door handle slipped from her grasp and the door slammed hard behind her, propelled by the late autumn winds blowing off the mountain peaks to the north. She'd heard someone in the hotel refer to those mountains as the San Francisco Peaks. She clapped her hand on the brim of her hat and looked north up Leroux Street and beyond, over the treetops at the crest of the hill, where she could see the crown of the largest peak—*Mount Humphreys* it was marked on a

surveyor's map that had been framed and was hanging in the foyer of the hotel—just visible through a leaden bank of misting clouds. She dropped her eyes, taking in a two-story stone building that was anchored at the top of the hill, its entrance on the street invisible behind a hedge of flaming red pyracantha. She shivered, and pulled her scarf tighter around her neck against the wind that was gusting unabated down the street now, carrying with it the murmur of faint cold rain and bending the tops of the aspens that lined the thoroughfare on either side. The aspens' leaves, freed from their petioles, danced and spun in the hard sharp air, adding their yellow ocher to the surrounding forest's transfiguration.

Behind her the door to the hotel swung open. A man appeared next to her. He glanced at her and gave her a short cordial smile. "Miss," he touched the brim of his hat with two fingers and started down the steps, brushing by her on his way to the street. She watched him: the back of his lined neck and burly head, his shoulders squared against the wind, the kaleidoscopic leaves swirling around his feet. She closed her eyes, still frightened by his sudden appearance, and by the frantic beating of her heart. She dragged her attention back to the formidable gray stone building at the top of the hill, the bending treetops, and the mist-shrouded peaks beyond. A thought pushed its way in. *Alfred. What kind of man had his father been? A man like the one who'd just brushed by her, with a lined neck and a burly head, shoulders squared against the wind, secure in his life, in who and what he was? Or had he been a man like her father: ravenous, corrupt, a false prophet?*

Clessie breathed in, feeling her body shudder as her heartbeat slowed and the various

pieces of her hallucinogenic waking life realigned. She tugged once at her gloves and went down the front steps of the hotel to the sidewalk and turned left. She focused on what was ahead, on walking the three blocks to The Normal School where she was not due to report until later that day, thinking it would make a better impression if she arrived early.

A small metal sign planted on the narrow front lawn of an unprepossessing red brick building proclaimed: “The Northern Arizona Normal School.”

Clessie made her way up the short sidewalk and took the three cement steps to the entrance and stopped, out of breath from her walk from the hotel, remembering again what she’d learned in school about the altitude in northern Arizona, how it was much higher, the air thinner than that of the plains around Keokuk, Iowa. When she’d caught her breath she opened the front door and went inside. She made her way down a short hallway and stopped in front of an open doorway. A sign affixed to the wall next to it announced the purpose of the room beyond: “Admissions.” The room seemed empty. She was about to turn away when suddenly a man appeared in a doorway on the far side of the room; white, narrow-faced and whippet-thin, he was carrying a stack of books in his arms. He stopped and smiled at her, shifting the books from one gangly arm to the other, then pressing them against his chest. He raised one hand in a welcoming gesture. “Hello!”

Her heart started up again. Had he gotten her letter?

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you in reference to your advertisement in the Keokuk Gazette requesting teachers at the Northern Arizona Normal

School. I have been recommended by Professor Cassandra Elgin, an instructor of "Great Books" in the English department at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Illinois. By now I trust that you have received Professor Elgin's reference letter regarding my qualifications for the job.

As to my teaching certificate, I regret to inform you there was a fire at the Keokuk City Courthouse recently in which many records were destroyed, including the original copy of my certificate. The courthouse clerk has assured me that all the teaching certificates and other legal documents that were destroyed will be replaced. He will forward my certificate on to you as soon as he gets it.

Yours truly,
Mrs. Clessie Bonaparte

The man in the doorway set the pile of books down on the desk behind him. He came forward, one arm outstretched, offering his hand. "Samuel Page. Headmaster of this institution." He smiled self-deprecatingly, evidently pleased with his choice of the word *institution* to describe the modest building in which they stood.

"I am Mrs. Bonaparte." Clessie looked at his hand, then shook it and let it go.

"Yes, yes! Mrs. Bonaparte! I just got your letter! Welcome!" He waved his arms around to give her a sense of where she'd landed.

Clessie didn't answer, so busy was she taking him in: short in stature, narrow as a fence rail, Brilliantined hair, bright, inquisitive eyes, a hint of fustiness mixed with an air of academia that made her think of Cassandra.

"We're a bit shorthanded right now. Just lost two of our teachers to the new high school down in Phoenix. But come," he waved a hand again, "You can meet the ones who haven't forsaken us!"

As the headmaster led Clessie down a hallway into the interior of the school, the mid-morning stillness was broken by the invisible sound of youthful voices and the echo of

shoe leather on the pine planks underfoot. Clessie noticed the doors to the classrooms were open and the rooms were empty, and as if he'd read her mind the headmaster spoke, "It's mid-morning break so the students are heading outside to the playground." He stopped and turned to retrace his steps. "I'll tell you what. Let's pop into the break room and see who's there." He headed back down the hallway in the direction they'd just come and Clessie followed. When they got to the end of the hall they turned left. The first door on the right was open, and Clessie could hear voices issuing from within.

As they entered the room, four women who were sitting around a table looked up as one, their faces betraying various expressions of curiosity and caution. Headmaster Page announced in the same official, self-deprecating voice he'd used before, "My fellow academics, I would like to introduce to you our newest colleague whom I told you we'd be expecting. Miss—." He looked at Clessie.

"Mrs." Clessie said quickly.

"Yes. Mrs. Bonaparte, from Keokuk, Iowa, I present to you—," he walked around the table, stopping briefly next to each woman to give her name and course of instruction, "Mrs. Corbett, Math; Mrs. Bellows, Geography; Mrs. Fife, History; and Miss Roy, Science."

One by one, the women nodded, their watchful eyes lingering, *taking my measure,* Clessie thought. *Can they see who I am?* Two of them, Mrs. Corbett and Mrs. Bellows—Clessie was grateful she could call up the just-introduced names in her head—turned their attention to each other and started a conversation about Clessie without including her.

"What do you say, Mrs. Bellows? Does she look fit for the job?"

"Well, Mrs. Corbett, she looks awfully young."

"Well, she'll just have to keep up! We've a smart mob here, haven't we, Mrs. Bellows!"

"Indeed, Mrs. Corbett. She'll just have to keep up!"

Clessie was about to add her own voice to the conversation, when one of the other two teachers interrupted her colleagues' show of rudeness in a high, lilting voice, "What does your husband do, Mrs. Bonaparte?"

It had been on her trip west, after the train had crossed into Arizona, that Clessie had overheard someone in the dining car talking about a train wreck that had occurred the week before in which two people had been killed, twelve persons had been seriously injured, and thirty-nine others hurt and bruised. Southern Pacific No. 4, formerly known as the Golden State Limited, had been wrecked three miles west of Flagstaff at 4:01 o'clock in the early morning hours. Clessie had memorized each one of the dining car passenger's words precisely. The most seriously injured had been transferred in a hospital train to St. Mary's Hospital in Flagstaff.

Clessie looked at the woman. *Mrs. Fife. History.* She spoke the words she'd practiced. "He died."

The room was still.

"Oh, dear—." Mrs Fife cut her eyes to Mrs. Corbett and Mrs. Bellows.

"I'm so sorry—." Miss Roy, the fourth instructor at the table blushed and made a face, the corners of her mouth pinched downward in sudden sympathy.

"He was a bookkeeper at the Burroughs Corporation in San Francisco," Clessie hurried on, the words rushing out now. "He'd taken the train to meet me here, but it—."

"Oh, Good Lord, dear—." Mrs. Fife again.

"The Golden State Limited," Mrs. Corbett cut her off and looked over at Mrs. Bellows, eager to offer her wisdom to the conversation.

"The Southern Pacific," Mrs. Bellows corrected her colleague. "Reported as such in The Sentinel," the tone was gone now, her words this time in the service of offering details to Clessie to help her make sense of what had happened, if that were even possible, than just another statement of fact that would embellish her own status in the group.

"Oh dear!" Mrs. Roy. "That was just last week."

"Oh, Mrs. Bonaparte," the headmaster, suddenly overwhelmed by this news, leaned over and touched Clessie's elbow. "We are so terribly sorry. We had no idea—."

Clessie flinched but went on. "They haven't been able to recover the body yet," she whispered, tears starting in her eyes, shocked and exhilarated at how skillful and fraudulent her part in the group's display of grief and sorrow was.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," Mrs. Fife repeated as she rose from her chair and came around the table, fluttering her hands in front of herself. Somewhere down the hall, a door creaked on its hinges; another door's latch closed. Once again, the invisible sounds of voices and laughter could be heard as students returned to the building from the playground.

Clessie allowed Mrs. Fife to take her hands, which she did as if it were her birthright. She turned to the others, raising Clessie's and her clasped hands as proof of their solidarity, "We've a Christian duty to offer Mrs. Bonaparte fellowship and guidance while she heals from this tragedy and gets back on her feet again."

"Yes! Circle the wagons I say!" Page announced, a bit too loudly, acting as best

he could on his urgency to find some answer to this tragedy.

Mrs. Corbett and Mrs. Bellows blustered around the table and descended on Clessie from either side like two hens, any know-it-all attitude gone now, replaced by a formal heartfelt show of support and sympathy.

"You've got friends here, Missus!"

"We're all God's children!"

"Praise the Lord!"

Clessie bowed her head, her liars' catechism complete. The noise down the hall rose on peals of laughter and the muffled sound of scraping chairs. Miss Roy joined the other teachers who were all standing now, pressing then letting go of Clessie's hands in turn, murmuring consolations, then turning away, one by one, each drawn by her duty to return to her wards, and filing out of the room. Clessie kept her head down lest anyone detect a crack in her masquerade.

So many lies.

Are they all so different, so much more monstrous than the ones I've been told? Do two wrongs really not make a right, as her father was so fond of saying? It had been a theme with him, wheeled out again and again on its creaking axle, as if repetition alone would make it true. *But didn't it depend on one's intentions? If one were being selfish or selfless?* Wasn't she trying to do the right thing? *To save a life? A precious human life?* Then what of her father, whose only wish had been to save her? *"The scripture must not be broken,"* he'd said. *"If it is, the soul is lost."* But he'd lied. *"I can save you,"* he'd said. *"With these hands I wash your body clean of all its sins."* But they hadn't. They'd

only crippled it beyond her recognition. Only now was she discovering what this new life could possibly be.

When Clessie looked up, the room, bereft now of all but two of its occupants, suddenly felt dingy. The headmaster was straightening the chairs around the table; he reached across to pick up and fold a coffee-stained napkin, then seized an empty water glass and took it over to the sink. His lips were slightly parted, and he was humming a repetitive, tuneless riff, filling up the silence as best he could. She could hear the sound of the teachers' footsteps growing softer as each one made her way back to her classroom. Finally, Mr. Page spoke in almost a whisper, "I'm truly, truly sorry for your loss, Mrs. Bonaparte." He stopped, momentarily without direction as to what to say next. "I want to say again how pleased we are that you are here," he followed, the sentiment bumping against his consolation. He looked around the room again. "Well, I'd best get back to putting those books away." He hesitated again, unsure of what else he should say or do to lessen the weight of the young woman's grief. Finally, all he could think of was to repeat, "I'm truly, truly sorry for your loss," followed by another well-meaning if equally clumsy transition, "Your class room has the most light of any room in the building." He ventured a timorous smile, "I'm afraid all of the other teachers are jealous." Then, off Clessie's look, "It's three doors down on the right. Feel free to pop in and take a look around." He went on, emboldened further by her attention, "And wander around outside if you like. Oh, and I'll be in the library at the end of the hall if you need me." He bowed out of the room before she could answer. Clessie looked after him, then over at the sink, her attention drawn by the sudden movement of the coffee-stained napkin he'd folded and

left on the edge of the sink as it dropped to the floor.

She could hear the invisible, clacking sound of chalk on a blackboard. The muffled voice of Mrs. Bellows. Suddenly she was glad she'd told them her husband's body had not been found amongst the burned-out wreckage. *"Or maybe it's a made-up name with no history at all. With a name like Clessie, I bet you can do anything you want."* The room grew brighter. She felt weightless. They'd believed the story she'd told them. It had changed their opinion of her, of who she was. She felt herself shrink, as if she were a small child on her first day at school, or even smaller, a tiny speck, buffeted by all the parts of her existence, but with the freedom now to move across great distances, unimpeded by the rules of truth and love and human suffering.

A bell-like ringing in her ears brought her back to where she was. She stepped out of the room and looked down the hallway in time to catch a glimpse of Mr. Page's narrow back before he disappeared through the doorway of the room where they'd met.

She started down the hall, counting each closed door as she passed: One. Two. Three. She stopped in front of the third door, opened it and stepped inside. She smiled. It was a bright, orderly space, lit by the northern Arizona sunlight slanting through the open windows on the far side of the room and pooling around the bowed, wrought iron legs of a platoon of desks laid out in four straight rows of five. The classroom was not so different from the classroom in the schoolhouse in Keokuk, yet – and maybe it was because this would be her first real job, however dishonestly she'd come by it – it felt original, perfect, as if it had been designed specifically for her: a quiet holding place, a womb, where she and her baby could feel safe, protected, and equal to the work that lay ahead.

"Yes, it seems to me with a name like Clessie you could do anything you want." There it was again, Cassandra's voice, so clear now. *No one ever told me that before,* she thought. A dark wave swept over this thought, drowning its accompanying feeling of relief and plunging her back into the lightless depths of the impossible decision she would have to make. She put her hand on her belly, *my baby*, and closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the sun still on her face, then opened them, blinking, her wavering, narrowed field of vision searching the translucent, mote-filled sunbeams that fizzed along the surfaces of the desks, and then beyond, to the dark purple leaves moving in the open windows across the room.

"I see you found it," the headmaster's voice from the doorway startled her. He looked abashed. "Oh, forgive me—."

She turned, her eyes wide and clear now, her lips still pressed into a thin smile.

"I just thought I'd check on you," Mr. Page cast about, trying to find the right tone. "Make sure you—."

"I'd like to start tomorrow if that's all right with you."

The Headmaster looked surprised at this sudden announcement. "Of course." He turned to leave, then paused. "Oh, I almost forgot," he brushed the side of his nose with his thumb. "I know you explained all of this in your letter, but were you able to get a copy of your teaching certificate before you left?"

Clessie looked over at the window as if she expected to see the certificate hanging like one of the leaves on the tree branch outside. She looked at the headmaster again. "The clerk at the Keokuk courthouse told me they were still cleaning up the mess the fire left."

"Yes, of course," The headmaster paused again. "Oh, and—," here he hesitated again. "As I said, I got your letter, but I never got the letter from Miss Elgin at Marquette."

"I don't understand," Clessie looked stricken. "She told me she would write to you."

The headmaster took this in, an irresolute look on his face.

People believe what they want to believe.

"Wait." Clessie rummaged in her purse and took out a card. "Here is Miss Elgin's card. She gave it to me to give to you." She proffered it, hoping he wouldn't see the tremor in her outstretched hand. "Her letter must have gotten lost. I know she'd be happy to speak with you."

The headmaster took the card and looked at it for a moment. He looked at Clessie and smiled. "Well then, Mrs. Clessie Bonaparte," he pocketed the card and stuck out his hand again. "Welcome again to our humble institution. We are fortunate to have you."

10

For some time, Eleanor had been on the lookout for something called "Valerian root," an herb she'd read about in The Old Farmer's Almanac. According to the Almanac, Valerian root cured all kinds of ailments, from hammer toe to sadness, but it was mostly used to make a certain kind of tea, its calming effects renown throughout the Orient and even in San Francisco. While Eleanor had found all those points interesting, it was the last part of the description—mentioned almost as an afterthought—that she had seized on: *Valerian*

root has also been known to work its magic in matchmaking.

And so it was on a hot Indian summer day in late September that Eleanor found herself standing on the sidewalk in front of the Beaver Street Market, breathing in an unfamiliar yet not altogether unpleasant smell issuing from the market's open doors and settling on the fresh-vegetables boxes that had been set out on the sidewalk by the owner. The smell reminded her of something medicinal, but of something else, too, a smell she couldn't quite name, so she settled on "mystery," as good a word as any she supposed to describe something undefinable, and the one that was most suited to the reason why she was there. She had just come from the grocery store over on Aspen Street where she usually did her shopping and where the grocer had made a face that signaled he knew what Valerian root was but had no truck with its spurious claims, and had told her to try the Beaver Street market instead. "We don't carry that oddball stuff," he said. "Try the market on Beaver Street. Avery—the big nut who owns the place—he might."

It was there that Eleanor saw Clessie again.

When Eleanor entered the Beaver Street Market the store seemed empty. She could hear a low humming sound coming from a generator or transformer somewhere but that was all. She started over to the checkout counter, her eyes scanning the interior of the store for any sign of life. Suddenly her eye caught the figure of a young woman standing in the produce section, her head cocked to one side like a bird's; she was holding up a bunch of red grapes, slowly turning it in the palm of her hand, studying its glistening permutations like it was a talisman. Eleanor stopped. It was the young woman she'd seen

getting off the train two months before. Eleanor started over to get a closer look.

"Can I help you?" An enormous, hirsute man in a white apron appeared in front of her, blocking her view. She looked up, startled, her face inches from the stained white wall of his apron, a tuft of chest hair sprouting from its bib.

"Oh!" she said, staring at the gargantuan bearded face looming over her. "Why, yes—Valerian root—," she craned her neck, trying to look around him at her miraculous sighting.

"Valerian! Yes!" the grocer's eyes lit up like those of the *Come-to-Jesus* proselytes Eleanor had seen exiting the old two-story red brick building next door to the train station that had been repurposed as a Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. She had only a moment to take this in before the grocer launched into an effusive commentary regarding the Valerian root's beneficial effects, as well as his pleasure at having found a "fellow traveler in the alchemistic arts," someone "Who's not afraid to cast their net wide in pursuit of good health." For her part in all of this, Eleanor found herself not so much a "fellow traveler" as a museum visitor who'd been rudely interrupted while in solitary contemplation of a masterpiece. But try as she might, she could not see past the white wall of the grocer's apron. Every time she tried to look around him, the grocer would shift his stance or position to match her own, like a clumsy dancer determined to follow his partner's lead. Finally, unable to withstand the breathless, well-intentioned toutings of this mountain of a person, she'd said, "Fine. I'll take two roots then, thank you," whereupon the grocer turned to go get them, affording Eleanor an unobstructed view of what she thought would be the young woman she'd seen. But Clessie was gone.

"Here you go, ma'am," the grocer reappeared in front of her again. *How does this*

giant of a person keep appearing out of nowhere like a genie? "That will be a quarter, ma'am." Eleanor rummaged in her bag and took out a small coin purse. She plucked a quarter from it and gave it to the grocer. As he started in on the second part of his alchemical pontification—all the various ways in which Valerian root should be prepared and administered depending on the mental condition of the person who will be using it and the desired result—she glanced once more in the direction of her vanished prospect, then exited the store, the two Valerian roots snug in a paper bag clutched in her fist.

Unbeknownst to Eleanor, Clessie had not left the store, but had disappeared around the end of the sundries aisle where she could eavesdrop on their conversation without detection. After Eleanor left, she circled back around to the produce section, returning the bunch of grapes she had balanced in one hand to its display and taking a root for herself from the small dirt-caked box over by the beets.

A few days later, armed with her tea dance invitation, Eleanor returned to the market to ask the grocer if he knew anything about the young woman. When he saw her his eyes lit up again and he started right in about a particular astral plane on which she should have landed after ingesting the Valerian tea.

"There are various levels, ma'am," he nodded sagely. "The nonphysical realm of the traveler's experience of paranormal phenomena—."

"Does the young lady who was here yesterday come in often?"

"Often enough I suppose. But here's the thing. If you boil the root—."

"Do you know her name?"

"I believe it's Mrs. Bonaparte, ma'am. Clessie Bonaparte." He leaned in closer

and lowered his voice, whispering conspiratorially, “My sense is she’s another believer, like yourself, in the benefits of Valerian root, though I haven’t spoken to her about it directly. You know, it’s said—,” he took a deep breath, readying himself for another learned soliloquy, and let out a blubbery, rubbery-lipped *Brrrr*, his massive girth quivering beneath his apron. When he opened his mouth to continue, Eleanor found herself staring at the toothless black hole that had appeared between his moustache and beard. “It’s all about the rhizome, ma’am. The fungus of the Jupiter’s beard breaks down—.”

“The next time you see her, would you give her this?” Eleanor cut in quickly. She handed him a small envelope with raised lettering on the flap.

“Oh,” the grocer stopped. He took it automatically in one giant hairy hand. “If I see her I will,” he said, a look of disappointment on his face at having been cut off in the middle of his instruction. “But you’ll want to know about the Valerian dreams—.”

But Eleanor was already out the door.

And as much as she found herself wanting to return to the Beaver Street Market again to meet this Clessie Bonaparte for herself, to introduce herself and explain her intentions to her, Eleanor did not. She held firm in her promise to the Lord, that she would do only His will, and have faith that He would be the best judge of her actions. The mystery of how her scheme would turn out remained tantalizing, enthralling even. She would do His bidding and stay the course.

Clessie had stuck to her own plan, too, that of keeping everyone at The Normal School on

their toes to distract them from noticing any change in her appearance, her *condition* as the doctor in Milwaukee had called it. As she had informed Mr. Page after she'd met all the teachers, she reported to her new classroom the following day, a week earlier than anyone else had expected. She needn't have worried. She did not show. She could feel the baby growing inside her, but other than a kick or a punch once in a while, even it seemed to know that the best thing for it would be to stay quiet, keep hidden.

One morning, awakened by the baby's kicking, she had a queer feeling that something was wrong with her face. Panicked, she touched it with her hand, feeling its unfamiliar contours. She got up and went to the mirror and saw she was smiling. She laughed out loud, a strangled, unprecedented sound she'd not heard since she could remember.

For the rest of the day, she would be embarrassed by the silly grin she imagined everyone could see plastered on her face, and found herself working twice as hard as she normally would to distract *her colleagues,* as Headmaster Page had referred to them, from suspecting what her condition really was. She'd even gone to the bathroom during a recess break to look at herself in the mirror. *You silly fool* she thought. But the evidence was undeniable: she had never felt so… happy. So alive. *Truth be told, I can't remember ever feeling alive at all. Maybe that day at Marquette with Casandra.* Still, the evidence was irrefutable: she was slipping into the shape of her new life.

For the next four months Clessie would exist, with few exceptions, in three places: her room at the Weatherford, the dining room off the lobby where she took her meals, and her classroom at The Normal School. The exceptions to this were the daily walks she

took after overhearing a woman in the hotel dining room enthusing over the benefits of exercise for a woman who is pregnant, and short trips to the grocery market on Beaver Street to shop for sundries.

And as intimidating as it had been to begin teaching a room full of students, Clessie was a natural at it. She was surprised and pleased at how comfortable it felt. At how easily she could manage and inspire the students. In addition, after recognizing the ease with which she seemed to settle into her new job, not to mention her competence and professionalism in dealing with her students and the other teachers, the headmaster, distracted by his ongoing need to fill the gap left by the teachers who'd decamped to Phoenix over the summer, did not ask for her nonexistent teaching certificate again.

The days flew by. The terrible dreams that had plagued her for so long had retreated, hidden now behind a screen of busyness and newfound purpose, at least it seemed that way. She'd not been visited by the image of her father for some weeks now; it was as if he'd given up, been pushed aside by God himself in the interest of Clessie's newfound well-being.

Soon it would be October. As the leafless final days of autumn gave way to the first early snowfall of winter, a dusting that melted away as soon as it touched down, Clessie continued her walks up Leroux Street after work, stopping in front of the gray, forbidding building at the top of the hill, its entrance partially hidden by the evergreen pyracantha bushes. She looked up at the weathered stone façade, at the small cross-paned windows and the letters engraved above the tall wooden double doors, "Florence

Crittenton Mission," and felt the fetus moving around inside of her with more urgency, *Not yet, little one. Not yet* its tiny kicks and punches answering, bent on announcing its imminent appearance. She told herself she would not go into the Mission until she had to, and satisfied that the moment was still some months off, continued on her way, walking north one more block and then over to Aspen, then back to her room at the hotel.

More and more on these walks she would find herself stopping to look north at the San Francisco Peaks, their summits obscured by a crown of dark clouds. She would count how many of the peaks she could see that day, then rest her hand on her stomach and whisper, "I can't see you, but I feel you. I'm here little one. I'm here." She knew her system as she called it might inspire a memory to pass the time, although she knew she had to be careful too of what she might see, like the day she'd discovered a litter of kittens in the horse stall at the back of the barn, its use given over long ago to the storage of tack and tools. She was eight-years-old, and the unguarded sweetness of that moment had made her cry, then laugh out loud delightedly. Later, upon hearing the bereft mewing of the mother, Clessie had returned to the stall to find the kittens gone. Even later, when she'd asked her father about their disappearance, he'd told her he'd drowned them. "We've got enough ratters around here," he'd said. "We don't need more."

Now, as the baby moved in answer to Clessie's reassurance, she shuddered, a twin frisson of buoyancy and horror passing through her like a colliding wave.

One morning in early November she stepped out of the hotel to discover that a second snowfall had left a thin layer of ice on the landing and a ruffled white carpet covered with

twigs and pine needles on the sidewalk below.

A week later she found herself trudging through a deluge of great gossamer flakes that settled on the shoulders of her woolen coat and eddied along the granite foundations of the buildings and the trunks of the trees. He—when had it become a *he*?—shifted inside her. He—there it was again—was kicking more often now, making conversation. *I'm not alone. We. Are not alone.* Another gust of wind off the peaks. She told herself the changes of season were not so different from those she remembered in Keokuk, a place, if he were lucky, he would never have to see.

By the time November had taken its stutter-step into December, which would soon give way to January, Clessie had settled into a cycle of teaching, grading, disciplining and encouraging her charges. The students were intelligent, inquisitive and challenging. Their questions and demands filled her days, their assignments papering her room at the hotel as she struggled and sailed with decreasing stamina through the first academic semester and the beginning of the second, knowing now that time was growing short.

Christmas came and went. There was no time for it now. *Another time,* she thought. *Now* was everything. Her father's face intruded again, leaving its mark on the days she spent alone, the days the students stayed home with their families.

It was odd: she wished she could say she thought about her baby all the time. But she didn't, sometimes, it seemed, for days at a time. It gave her no trouble, keeping to itself as much as she did. When she looked at herself in the small mirror in her room or

caught her full reflection in the plate glass window of a building she was passing, she could see little change in her appearance. A small bump, that was all. Easily kept hidden. Seven months now. Was it healthy? Her breasts hurt, but other than that it had given no sign. It would be here before she knew it.

III

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZONA

1917

11

One morning in early January she was starting to get dressed when she sat down on the edge of her bed, her mind entranced, her eyes following the mortises between the boot-scarred floorboards beneath her feet. She thought about the doctor in Milwaukee and how without the information he'd given her she would not have been able to make the trip. She wondered about Maria; about the money she herself had taken from the tin box in the cupboard; about her classmates at school, how they'd teased her and told her she'd been a ghost the devil had put into her mother's belly. Was this child a ghost, too? A crafty trickster, hiding out, lying low, until it was too late to do anything else but welcome him into this world? *Him?* It surprised her again. When exactly had *it* become *him*? She didn't know. She just knew. The baby kicked again in silent agreement.

She didn't leave her room that day. The old thoughts, the memories all came back with a ferocity that blindsided her. She felt pulled in every direction; each one of them leading back to her baby.

At the time, sitting there on her bed, lost in reverie, it had seemed like it was only a moment, but when she looked up, it was dark in the room. Night had fallen. She became aware of the snow batting against the window pane and the wind from the Peaks whistling through the trees along the block outside. She had to go out.

She got dressed, went downstairs and out through the lobby. The double glass doors at the entrance rattled on their hinges as wind-driven wads of snow pummeled the glass. She pressed on the door latch and pushed through. The door slammed hard behind

her. *Snow-blind.* That's what they called it in Keokuk when the snow fell so hard you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. She raised her hand. *So it was here, too.* She took the three steps down to the icy sidewalk, slipped, caught herself, and headed up the street, determined to outdistance the darkness that had held her captive all day. She walked methodically, counting her steps as she went, careful to put her feet down in an orderly fashion so she wouldn't fall. She decided she would keep her mind on the gray building at the top of the hill, The Mission, its blurred shape winking in and out of the falling snow. Yes, she would walk to the Mission and back. That was all. Another fierce gust of wind sent flurries spinning off in every direction, shape-shifting the storefronts she passed, dissolving the electric light atop the lamp post stationed up ahead at the corner. Suddenly, the wind stopped. Out of the silence, the light from the lamp post reappeared, along with a figure standing in its cone of light. Now the figure was coming towards her, and as it drew closer she could tell it was a man, his head bowed, his face obscured. There was something familiar—Clessie felt her heart, and then her baby's beating hard against the wall of her diaphragm. The figure looked up. It was her father. He raised one arm as he opened his mouth to say something. Clessie opened her mouth, too, her scream strangled in her throat. She fell back against the bricks of the storefront of the building where she stood, bedeviled by the thought that her father had found them and would take her baby. She closed her eyes. The wind howled again.

When she opened her eyes her father was gone. She doubled over and gagged. Straightened. In the half-light of the storm, the electric light atop the lamp post had dissolved again. *Where is he?* It was as if he'd never been.

Against all reason, she continued up the street to the street lamp, not to the

Mission as she'd promised. When she got there she turned around and retraced her steps back down Leroux to the hotel, following the hallucination that had frightened her witless back to its place in memory where she could no longer trust it would stay for long.

Later, as she sat on her bed in her room in the Weatherford, redrawing the mortises on the floorboards over and over again with her bare feet, it was clear. She would not sleep. Not on this night. Nothing was safe, nothing would ever be, she knew that. Her baby kicked again. Finally, she could feel him move. He was pure. He was innocent. *She would not let the world take him. Of that she was sure.*

On a snowy day in early February she was awakened by a sudden jagged pain below her diaphragm. It subsided as soon as it appeared, then started up again only to disappear again. She stayed in bed all that morning, then got up, dressed carefully and went out.

When she got to the school, she told the headmaster she'd received a telegram from San Francisco informing her that the AT&SF passenger manifest had been incomplete. It was possible her husband had never gotten on the train. Possible that he was still alive. She had to go to San Francisco to find out.

"Oh?" The headmaster blanched, his usually pacific bearing displaced by an expression of incredulity. He waited for her to say something else, to clarify or retract her statement. Behind him, a telephone rang. "Excuse me, will you?" He picked up the receiver. "Hello?" his eyes still on her as she turned to go.

People believe what they will. Until they don't.

Clessie returned to her room at the hotel. She thought about the headmaster, how kind

and accepting he'd been of her, of her lack of credentials and of her stories until now. She lay down on the bed. She closed her eyes. She would rest. She would need all her energy for what was ahead.

The pain did not revisit her for two days.

When it did (this time it was more a series of pokes than a stab) Clessie packed her few things and checked out of the Weatherford Hotel. She walked slowly up Leroux carrying her travel bag, switching hands occasionally, and stopped in front of the Mission's doors. Her baby was moving around now more than ever. *Hush hush, little one. We're together. I promise I will not leave you.* She looked behind herself, expectant, on guard once more, then put her hand on the latch and let herself in.

She would not recall the sudden, violent revisitation of the spasm in her abdomen, the excruciatingly jagged pain, nor fainting dead away in the foyer of the Mission. Nor did she remember that she'd only been stopped from hitting her head on the stone floor by the quick reflexes of a nurse who had leapt forward and caught her in her large, rough hands, her speedy reaction belying her stolid, starched mien. Nor did she remember the ether they administered to her once they'd moved her to a bed, and then, as soon as a doctor had examined her, to a delivery table.

He entered the world a bloody, red-faced, squalling thing, whose sole determination, as far as Clessie could tell when she finally saw him, was to hold fast to what she could only imagine was her most impermeable gift to him: a sense of deep sadness, originally telegraphed by electrical impulse in the womb, then reflected in the milky vision of his

mother's eyes, an image she imagined would become the engine of his life.

But now she was at the bottom of a well, struggling to pull herself out of the inky, tarlike matter that had taken hold of her, causing her to sink deeper each time she moved. "I –." Her eyes opened. Slowly the ether released its grip on her. She floated slowly to the surface of the well. "Where –."

A nurse—she wore a nurse's cap and the white apron of a nurse—came into focus: she was laying the still crying baby down on the surgical bench. Clessie watched, not sure at first of what she was looking at, his little brown body a blur, a shadow as the nurse cut the umbilical cord and tied it. She picked him up, brought him over, and laid him on Clessie's chest. "Here he is."

Clessie raised her arms slowly, sluggishly, still pushing through the ether as if she were lifting a great weight, and enfolded him in her arms. His crying wound down then, as if a switch had been thrown. She looked at him, at the top of his head matted in wet, jet-black hair, at his blood-streaked little body cradled in her arms. Suddenly it dawned on her that someone had taken her clothes off of her and replaced them with a gown. *They saw them.* Her face burned. *The scars.* She felt sick. *They know what I am. What he is. What they will do.*

She pressed him against herself and suddenly she was crying, her chest rising and falling in shuddering heaves as she struggled again against everything that had happened and all that still remained to be done and would never be finished, determined to hold on to this piece of herself, this precious wonder. His breath fluttered softly against her chest. She stroked his tiny back as if her hands possessed some magical power, until finally, in

spite of her greatest efforts to stay awake, to protect him however she could against the advancing evil, she fell off to sleep again.

When she woke up, the baby was gone; a blade of light shimmered across the bed, refracting the darkness of the room. Frantically, in slow motion, she ran her hands along the top of the covers. *Where are you? Where did you go? My baby.* She lifted her head, craning around so she could follow the source of the light.

It was coming from the doorway to the hall. She saw him clearly now: her father, standing there, his gaunt profile shivering like a candle flame, a ghost—a *wiindigoo*—cradling her baby in his arms. His lips moved, whispering to him. *Don't listen!* Clessie lunged up, slid off the bed and collapsed on the floor. She tried to speak, tried to reach out, but they'd vanished—the doorway was empty now—down the hall and gone. Her eyes closed again.

"Miss? Can you hear me?"

When she opened her eyes, she was lying in the bed again. Another woman, this one wearing a white coat, was looking down at her, a look of concern creased across her face.

"Where's my baby?" Clessie's voice, frantic, rang out across the room.

"Doctor?" a nurse's face appeared behind the woman in the white coat. She was holding the baby now.

"Your baby's right here," the doctor said.

Doctor? Clessie stared at the face looking down at her, the eyes bright,

inquisitive, crinkling at the corners as she smiled. She was white, neither young nor old; plain nor pretty. Her face was soft, but time had left its signature across her forehead and around her mouth. *A woman doctor? Is it possible?*

The nurse handed the baby to the doctor now. The doctor laid him on Clessie's chest again. "There, there," she said. "We took him to clean him up a bit and get his weight. He's doing just fine." She looked down at her, then nodded to the nurse, who turned and left the room.

Clessie moved her arms from under the sheet and pressed her hands against his tiny back. *I'm right here, sweet boy. No monsters now. I'm right here.* She lifted her head and smelled his raven-black hair, still damp from his delivery, then touched her tongue to the reddish ocher of his forehead, her attention fixed on his newly-opened obsidian eyes. *I am in you,* she whispered*, and you are in me. Forever*. Her teeth chattered. She looked up at the doctor. "So cold. A blanket—."

The doctor glanced around the room. She hesitated, then, "All right. I'll be right back." She looked at Clessie and her baby once more, then turned and disappeared through the lighted aperture of the doorway.

They were alone in the room now. Mother and child; just the two of them. She would hold onto him forever. A familiar shadow occluded her vision of what her place – their place – in the world would be. She felt herself sinking into that same old muddy sea of despair, its amorphous grasp pulling her under; holding her captive.

But she would not let it do its work this time. She would not leave him. He was innocent. Unprotected. *Except by me. My baby.*

You're saved, Clessie. From a benighted life. An irradiated spirit. Purity and innocence will out. Her father had said these words with such conviction. *No. He was hers. She would never let them drag him through the dirt. Never allow them to raise him up above their shoulders like a king and then plunge him into the abyss. She would make sure that that would never happen. He would be saved.*

The stall at the back of the barn. *No.*

The white slavers who would've done the same, or sold her to someone else who would. *No.*

The taunting, murderous children at the school. *No.*

Her father's hands. *No. No. No.*

She would do the only thing she could to protect his tiny, unguarded soul against the white man's world.

Saved.

She pressed her arms more firmly against his body then; mother and child, enfolded now in their shared, maternal silence, unsevered by birth. Her arms encircled him, pressing harder now, anchoring and sure. *If this is ecstasy, then surely death is near, and then rebirth, in the image of the eternal.*

She marveled: she felt him moving, fiercely, then not, against her arms. No. He hadn't struggled. It was as if he'd known all along. *Shhh.* She could feel her own singular heartbeat now. Of course he knew. They both knew. He'd lived inside her for nine months. She'd held onto him as tightly as she could, with all her love, holding him against herself before the monsters came. *Saved.* It hadn't taken much. And everything. Only he would understand. She would not expect anyone else to, ever. His tiny body, so

willing, so beautiful. *I'm here little one. Right here. No one will hurt you anymore.* "You're saved," she spoke the words out loud and began to cry. He was too little, had been too newly born to bring the fight that would be needed. She kissed his head and closed her eyes. *In another life. If only there is one.* She pressed her lips to the wet black crown of his head. *If only.* He lay still.

"Here we are," the doctor was standing over her again, the outline of her shape emerging from the twilit darkness of the room. She held a folded blanket in one hand. "How are we doing now, Clessie?"

Here is the doctor woman. "Fine," she breathed out. She cleaved to the infant as if it were an appendage, determined not to lose this most important part of herself. *Was this transcendence?*

"Let's have a look," The doctor set the blanket down, then took him gently, then firmly from his mother's unwilling arms. A look of irresolution passed behind her eyes. "Nurse!" She looked down at Clessie again, at the lost, exhausted look on her face.

"He's saved," Clessie said. *My baby. You're safe.*

"Nurse! Come now!" the doctor quickly set the baby down on the surgical bench next to the delivery table, her hands already engaged in the irremediable process of recovering the lost.

That night, the nurses discovered Clessie missing from her room. One of them found her wandering through the open-bay nursery, stopping to peer into each bassinette. After they returned her to her bed, the doctor on duty gave them strict orders to keep an eye on her

lest she wander again or try to hurt herself. But the nurse on the graveyard shift fell asleep.

Clessie found the clothes she'd arrived in folded neatly underneath the bed and put them on. She'd sat on the bed with one ear cocked and listened to the sounds coming from the nursery until she couldn't any longer, then slipped out the front door of the Mission and wandered back down to the Weatherford where she went to the front desk and asked for a key to Room 76. The night manager informed her that she no longer had a room there, that she'd checked out two days before. She told him she had no money. He suggested the Salvation Army shelter over on Elden Street. She pounded the top of the desk with her fist and kicked at the baseboard like a furious child until the manager came around the end of the desk to chase her off. She pulled away and ran—doubling over with every step—back to the front doors and into the night. The manager looked out through the glass to make sure she didn't come back, listening to her grief-stricken howls, the sound fading, sucked up by the wind, until he was satisfied she was gone.

She stayed at the shelter for a week, maybe longer, she didn't remember. "Where are you?" She would wake in the middle of the night, if she slept at all, and ask, "What have I done?" staring incandescently at the other figures in their cots. "What have you done with my baby?" Some of the others, unable to sleep, were already sitting up, staring back at her, fellow travelers bewitched by the sound of an ancient voice repeating over and over again one word: "Saved."

In the meal line she asked for food for two then refused to eat, throwing her tin

plate across the room.

In the end, the Sergeant at Arms told her she would have to leave. “Your erratic behavior is frightening the other visitors. They’re afraid of what you might do.”

She left the shelter and made her way to the train station, where she was run off by the stationmaster. She wandered down the tracks until she came upon an itinerants’ encampment where she was given something to eat by a benefactor who seized her by her arm and tried to make her sit in his lap. She managed to fend off her assailant and flee into the trees beyond the clearing.

Hallucinatory days and nights, rolling into weeks.

Drifting up and down the aisles of the grocery market on Beaver Street. Caught stuffing an apple into the pocket of her dress by the gargantuan hirsute clerk. Confronted, then recognized in spite of her distressed condition and allowed to keep the apple, along with a bag of week-old pumpernickel rolls and a rind of hard cheese which he presses into her arms, and two other items he slips into the pocket of her coat—a small envelope with delicate raised lettering and a short twisted root, clods of dirt still clinging to its threads—both of which she ignores in her haste to devour the victuals. At the far end of an aisle, a woman with a wicker basket bursting with the leafy tops of vegetables watches this exchange. If either Clessie or the grocer had seen her before they would have recognized the woman as Eleanor’s friend, Claire, who on her friend’s advice had stopped by the market to judge the quality of its produce, and who by the look on her face knows

immediately from Eleanor's effusive descriptions that the person the grocer is engaged with, even in her debilitated state, is the young lady her friend is so enamored of.

Returning to the forest. Wandering, shivering in the thin coat she'd taken with her from the Mission. Snow falling, vanishing as quickly as it touches her shoulders.

A hunter's blind. The floor littered with empty whisky bottles and shards of glass. Matches hidden in a floorboard. A fire of wet wood in a small rusted wood stove. Whispering into the smoking flames, "Where are you, my baby? Are you saved?"

The next day: wandering amongst the trees again. Sipping water from puddles she finds collected in fallen leaves. Night falling. Cold. Another blind. This one marginally better than the first one. A place where she can rest.

Gathering sticks to make a small fire. Searching her pockets for matches, discovering the small envelope and the Valerian root the grocer had put there. Opening the envelope. Looking at Eleanor's invitation by firelight. Throwing it and the Valerian root into the fire, its glow hollowing out the dark. Falling asleep exhausted.

Awakened by the sound of hunters approaching. The ugly sound of their laughter, then glass shattering against a rock. Fleeing ahead of their drunken recognition and transparent offers to help.

Stealing a heavy coat from the SA refuge store. Admiring the beautiful second-hand dresses, a crinoline one with white filigreed lace, and the pairs of worn fancy shoes on the racks.

Returning to the forest and another hunter's blind, this one no better than the others, but somehow more suitable, all she deserves; "You're safe now, Alfred." A place where she can wait for him to return. Surely he will come back when she tells him all is safe.

Digging through a trash dump on the outskirts of town to find something to eat. Returning to the Salvation Army Refuge Center one more time. Fed, then recognized and turned away.

The weeks of exile had left their mark. Like Niobe, she'd been turned to stone, doomed to never be reunited with her precious child again. Not a day passed that she did not think of him, wish and pray and beseech the Lord (whatever, whoever that was. She was less and less inclined to believe anything now) to bring him back, each prayer answered by the echo of her heart breaking, until it became a barely beating, constantly abraded thing. She should never have been done what she did. She should never have tried to save him. The voices, brutal, savaging, filling up the void she'd made. She would have given anything to be empty. Then she would be free.

March.

It had been almost a year of sobriety for Isaac McCaslin. He had not drunk a drop of whiskey since that woozy, foot-stomping night of celebration shortly after he'd accepted Old Charlie Babbitt's offer. That night he'd lost both his hat and his Colt 45 revolver. Although he'd eventually found them (one of the cooks had stashed them at the back of a shelf in the bunkhouse), he'd sworn off the "coffin varnish," determined to stay the course of this self-imposed contract so as to never again bear the weight of the excruciating shame of his stupidity. This abstinence had actually been easier than he'd imagined, but the hole it had left was big enough that sometimes he thought his heart would fall right through it.

He remembered that day in the fall when Eleanor had come out to the stockyard and told him she'd found someone she wanted him to meet in the spring. He remembered he hadn't felt anything at the time, but later, on the drive south, he'd become aware of a loosening in his chest, from what exactly he didn't know, but for just a moment his heart was still, able to hold everything the world showed him.

"How'm I doin', boss?" Darryl Scoggins pulled his horse up next to Isaac's at the Litchfield paddock fence line. Beyond, a sea of new winter grass rippled in the cold dry wind coming up from Mexico. The horses stamped and shook their heads, their breath coming out of their nostrils in steaming chuffs. Isaac looked up at the gray sky, at the army of swollen black thunder clouds moving across its face. *Boom!* Thunder, then a jagged bolt of lightning flashed, zig-zagging along the horizon beyond the pasture's

farthest reach. Isaac considered himself lucky, for while the winter weather in the southern part of the state could be unpredictable, it couldn't hold a candle to what the small ranchers up north had to contend with.

"You're doin' fine," Isaac's tone that of a parent talking to an over-excited, underachieving child.

"*Fine*?" Scoggins got a worried look on his face.

"That east paddock still needs some work—."

"Hell, grass grows slow, boss."

"Well, well," the parental tone again. "Looks like somebody's finally paying attention. What else?"

"You gotta keep the beefs moving—," Scoggins sing-songed.

"And?"

"Give the grass a chance to grow."

"What else?"

"If you don't, they'll chew it all up and trample it down and then you got nuthin'. I know. I know."

"Then you know," Isaac grinned at him. "Hell, son. You're no fool. You seen the proof. You did good over at Munds Park."

"There was water over there. You just didn't let me use it. I don't see the sense of drummin' my noggin with all that—."

"Mr. Babbitt said train you up," Isaac put his eyes on him. "If your noggin ain't up to it, let me know."

"It is," the worried look returned to Scoggins' face. "It is, I reckon'."

Isaac leaned over his horse and spat into the dirt. “Well then. Keep it up.”

The two men were silent, the wind whipping at their faces as they looked off to the west where the sun was sinking. “Those Nogales pastures gotta be a bitch right now,” Isaac said, referring to Gunnar Thude’s winter paddocks farther south, closer to Organ Pipe and the Mexican border, the higher altitude making them prime targets for the south-easters coming up from Chihuahua.

“Yeah. Glad we’re not monkeyin’ with that,” Scoggins agreed.

They sat quietly then, each man settled in the moment. It had been five and a half months since they’d driven the herd south from Flagstaff. Another four to six weeks and they’d be heading home for the summer months. The previous fall, Scoggins had done a good job with the Munds Park paddocks as well as the Teacup pastures just east of the ranch. He’d gotten the rhythm of moving the cows every few weeks or so, depending on how sparse the ground cover looked. Isaac was pleased to see his new foreman was developing a good eye for what needed to be done.

“Well. What the hell then.” Scoggins shifted in his saddle trying to fill up the silence. “Whadaya say we get cleaned up, get a drink and you can tell me some more about your land-savin’ tricks, boss.”

“I’m gonna take a hot bath, eat some dinner, and get some shut eye. Had enough of schoolin’ you for one day. All work no fun—.”

“—You’re right about that,” Scoggins interrupted him. “You’re no fun, boss. That’s for danged sure.”

“Never said I was.”

As they made their way back to the bunkhouses, Isaac looked once more at the green fields dotted with cows as far as the eye could see, and allowed himself to think about his future. *This time next month we'll be in Black Canyon on our way home, I'll hand over the reins to Scoggins, then come back down here to run the Litchfield show.* He smiled. *Old Charlie wants me politicizing, too.* He felt his heart pick up again. *Vamonos. El pasado es pasado. Yes, sir. The past is past. Andale el futuro!*

Scoggins came up beside him and smacked his horse across the rump. "Hey, you hear what I'm sayin', boss?"

Don't get ahead of yourself. Isaac looked over at his charge, "What's that?"

"I said, Yeah, it looks like old Gunnar's gonna have a hell of a time." He pointed south to the horizon where lightning was striking every few seconds now.

"He'll figure it out."

"Sumbitch always does."

They rode on in silence. Scoggins was fidgety by nature; he was watching Isaac out of the corner of his eye. "You all right, boss?"

Isaac breathed in, smelling the moisture in the air. He thought about Eleanor and her news again. "Right as rain I reckon."

April.

It had been almost two months since Eleanor's friend Claire had told her she'd seen a young woman who fit Clessie's description at the market on Beaver Street. To Eleanor's delight, Claire had described her as being "just as pretty" as Eleanor had described her. What she'd wanted to say but hadn't was that she'd looked "peculiar,"

"unkempt ("half mad," she thought, but didn't say this either)," but still "just as pretty" as Eleanor had described her.

"Hallelujah!" Eleanor had exclaimed, clapping her hands together like a school girl. "It's a sign, Claire. Surely it's a sign." Then she'd dropped her voice, repeating to herself, "The Lord willing, the Lord willing," like a mantra.

And in spite of Old Charlie's gentle prodding to *stop sticking her nose in* (his words), Eleanor remained determined to do what she could to ensure Clessie and Isaac's meeting. Wasn't she taking her husband's advice? Didn't the young woman (*Clessie!*) deserve her privacy? And didn't Eleanor's stopping short of actually meeting her make the idea of the invitation even more tantalizing, not knowing until the night of whether or not it would be accepted? "It's in the Lord's hands now," she told Claire, who responded the way any good friend would have: "Amen."

It was late. Almost eleven p.m. The cowboy stationed at the front gate of the Babbitts' ranch house had been at his post since shortly after dinner. The temperature was dropping, the contents of his hip flask were gone and he was getting cold.

When the figure first appeared from the tree line he assumed it was another loony come to drink the tea. The tea was long gone, the pot emptied and refilled a half dozen times already.

"Party's over!" the cowboy hollered into the darkness as the shadow began to take shape. But it kept coming, weaving from side to side like it was being buffeted by a high wind.

"I had an invitation!" it croaked, coming closer.

"Sorry, Ma'am!" He could tell it was a woman now. "Time to go home!"

"I'm here to see Eleanor!" The figure stopped, then started forward again. "And someone else!"

"You and me both, sister!" The cowboy wasn't buying it. "Go on! Git!"

The shadow stopped, its face floating at the edges of the light from the lantern hanging on the gatepost. The ranch hand was able to take her in for the first time, her pale blue eyes lit like the close, fierce stars overhead. He looked behind her at the conifered wilderness that had just released her, its needly branches still. Something wasn't right. The figure was dressed quite elegantly, although he could see from where he stood that the hem of her long crinoline skirt was caked with mud, her buttoned shoes clotted with the same. Her face, compelling even through its rictus of anguish, pressed against the cowboy's sense of duty. "I told you: the party's over. Another step and I'm gonna have to run you out of here—."

"Wait!"

The cowboy turned around.

It was Eleanor, approaching fast from the lights of the house, her eyes on the woman on the other side of the gate. "Let her pass, Francis."

"Yes, ma'am," the cowboy touched the brim of his hat. "I was just telling this one –."

"It's all right. Open the gate."

"Yes, Ma'am." The hand gave the apparition another suspicious look; he threw the deadbolt on the gate and swung it open. The figure stayed put, her arms raised to

protect herself.

"Clessie," Eleanor stepped forward and took her outstretched hands in her own. She could see by the lantern's light her fingers were filthy, the nails chipped and black. "For heaven's sake." The sleeves on her white tunic were covered with twigs and needles. "What's happened to you?"

"We were walking." Clessie said, as if that would answer Eleanor's question.

"Where?" Eleanor stared at her, horrified and thrilled, the two feelings colliding inside her.

"In the cornfield," Clessie mumbled, looking behind herself. "But I—I lost him." She raised her head then, her face streaked with dirt and tears, her pale blue eyes scoured like icy stars, fixed on something else behind them.

"Missus Babbitt."

Startled, Eleanor turned back to the house. She recognized the familiar gait of the shadow, then the face of the Babbitts' foreman, appearing in the lantern's light.

"Oh, Isaac," her voice freighted with all the weight of her bewildering discovery as she gestured with her free hand. "This is Clessie Bonaparte. The young woman I told you about."

It was possible that it could have all ended right there, but Isaac held fast, taking in this wild thing that was fixing him with a look he'd never seen before but which he could not take his eyes away from. He addressed Eleanor, "Mr. Babbitt sent me out to find you. He wanted to make sure you were all right." He could not stop looking at her. Her beauty, even in her unhinged state, and as masked by grime and dirt and a palpable sense of

madness as it was, remained undiminished. There was a radiant obduracy to it; a refusal to bow to whatever terrible judgment had been passed.

"Let's take her up to the house, Isaac. Give her something hot to drink, and Missus Claire and I will clean her up. We'll have Doctor Fronske take a look at her."

"Yes, ma'am." He hesitated. "Old Doc'll know what to do." He spoke as if he were reciting a benediction, a signal of faith; *Thunder and lightning be damned.* He'd said this, too, but not out loud.

13

"She's asleep now."

They were standing in the hallway upstairs in the Babbitts' house: Doctor Fronske, Eleanor and Isaac. Isaac was glad to hear Doctor Fronske's report, that he'd looked Clessie over carefully, but had found nothing critically wrong with her. She was delirious and muttering, fading in and out of a sleep brought on by exhaustion, but that would have been appropriate given her condition. There were a few bruises, which he assumed she'd picked up while she was in the forest; the skin on her arms and legs were raw from the elements, but beyond that nothing that would require any further treatment. "She's got a touch of hypothermia," he said, directing this to Eleanor. "She's talking about someone, but nothing clear—," he touched a finger to his temple, "— something she's trying to reckon with." He looked into the bedroom where Clessie was sleeping then back at Eleanor. "Maybe she'll tell us when she's feeling better." He pursed his lips, his eyes swimming behind his spectacles.

Her back was a different story. One that would remain untold. When Eleanor had gotten her dress off and helped her into one of her nightgowns she'd discovered the lattice of raised flesh and gasped, loud enough that Doc Fronske had answered her from the hallway and come in. After Doc had examined her and made his diagnosis—"The wounds are serious but they're healing well, the skin's contracted and it has a healthy color, and there's no infection"—they'd agreed not to say anything to Isaac. "It's none of our business," Eleanor whispered, still in shock at what she'd seen. "So there's no need to make it Isaac's, either." She looked down at Clessie lying in the bed in her nightgown, her face and arms ruddy from both the elements and Eleanor's careful efforts at bathing her with the cloth from the porcelain water bowl on the bedside table. She reached over to reorganize the bed covers which Clessie had kept kicking off in her restless fugue. "She'll tell us when she's ready," Eleanor repeated Doc's sentiment, too shaken to say anything more about what she'd seen.

She looked past Doc Fronske now at Isaac, who stood with his back to them, one shoulder propped against the frame of the open bedroom door, his eyes focused on the young woman lying quietly in the bed now under the covers. Her eyes were closed, her face relaxed, her breathing fitful but steady. The featherbed rose and fell with each breath.

Isaac could hear Dr. Fronske speaking to Eleanor again. "Maybe there is someone else. We don't know."

"Well. Isn't there always?" Eleanor spoke with sudden force, her attention returned to the doctor now, her determination to succeed in capturing her *paraamour propre,* along with her self-imposed responsibility regarding matters of the heart, not to

mention her own abiding grief and subsequent self-appointment to the position of local matchmaker emboldening her to make this statement. *What if she were the someone else? The one who'd found her? A vessel of the Lord's work?* So sure of herself now, she looked over at Isaac. "Don't you agree, Isaac?"

"Yes, ma'am." He could no sooner turn away from the bedroom nor wipe the image of the young woman's face floating in the lantern light by the gate from his mind than fly to Mars. All he knew was that she was not one of those crazies that appeared in the night from Why or Jackass Junction or any of those other towns with the hair on. She was a revelation. Finally he turned around. "If you don't mind, Missus Eleanor, I'll stay here," he said. "In case she wakes up and needs something."

It was after midnight. By all accounts the Babbitts' tea dance had been a success. Strains of music issuing from the fiddlers' quartet playing downstairs floated up, carrying with them the muffled shouts and laughter of the revelry below. The notes and voices, along with the tinkling sounds of cutlery, china cups and plates, bounced along the walls of the darkened hallway, each one an element of the miracle that Eleanor, the Lord's vessel, had brought about that night, each joyful sound eternal, transfiguring itself into memory.

Isaac was not aware of how much longer the party lasted, but eventually the sounds diminished, the house slipping into silence, as one by one or in couples or in groups the partygoers departed, their laughter and well wishes floating up through the frigid air outside the bedroom window.

One by one, the lights were extinguished and the house grew dark, leaving its hosts to retire, allowing Eleanor to go over and over in her restless mind the details of

how the evening had turned out, circling back around again and again to the most important moment, that of Clessie's unheralded appearance at the front gate that night, the very thing Eleanor had wished for more than anything else. So consumed was she by this image, she'd allowed herself to go upstairs once more, tiptoeing along the runner to stop at the end of the landing where she saw Isaac still stationed by the open doorway to the bedroom. He was sitting on the floor now, his back against the doorjamb, his legs stretched out in front of him, bootheels pressed into the runner. His head was bowed, chin on his chest, his eyes closed. She could hear the whistling of his snores under the muted ticking of the tabletop clock at the other end of the hall. She smiled, then quietly retraced her steps back down the stairs, unnoticed, unheard.

The sunlight trickled in through the half-pulled curtains at the end of the hall, pooling in the geometric, bird's-egg blue spaces of the Navajo runner where Isaac squatted on his haunches now, his head bowed, fast asleep. A tiny, high note pierced the silence of the bedroom behind him, causing him to raise his head, his eyes already open. Through the open door, across the bedroom, beyond the open window, the note came again. Birdsong? A chipmunk's startled cry, its breakfast wrested from its tiny claws by a badger or some other critter? Isaac's shoulders shuddered; the sound of his breathing stopped in mid-breath. He pushed himself to his feet, almost falling back into the pool of sunlight already moving along the runner as the morning sun continued its slow climb. The sound came again. Isaac turned and followed it stiffly into the bedroom.

Clessie was burning up; her face was flushed, shiny with sweat, her hair a matted halo on the pillow under her head. Isaac watched the uneven rise and fall of the

featherbed as she breathed. Her eyes were closed; her dry, cracked lips open slightly. The sound came again, a faint whistle, the sigh of a little girl. He stared at her. She looked helpless; her features so delicate, so fragile. She moaned. Isaac looked over at the small table next to the bed where a washcloth lay in a puddle of water in a bowl. He reached over and picked up the cloth and wrung it out over the bowl. Carefully, he laid the folded cloth across her forehead. He pressed on it—not like he did when he applied a poultice to one or another of the ponies in the corral when they pulled up lame, but gently, unfamiliarly, wary of his own strength and presumption.

The moaning stopped as if a switch had been thrown. The featherbed still rose and fell, having settled into a more rhythmic pattern now. Isaac lifted his calloused hands from the cloth, clearing his throat as quietly as he could, still rattled at what he'd just done. Clessie stirred. He moved off, back to the safety of the open doorway across the room.

Later, when Clessie woke up, she flinched, testing whatever it was that was holding her against her will. But there was nothing. She slid her arms out from under the featherbed and pushed herself up a bit, looking down at the white cotton nightgown she was wearing now. She raised her hand and took the washcloth off her forehead and dropped it into the bowl on the bed table.

As she turned her head she saw something out of the corner of her eye and started again. There, in the doorway, a man, his back to her. *Father? Slaver? Texas Ranger? The unhygienic doctor in Milwaukee?* The figure in the doorway turned. She recognized him but she didn't know him. *Who is it?* She looked around the room. *What is this place?*

Where am I? She fixed her eyes on him again. Yes, she knew him. She couldn't remember from where, or when. She looked down again at the nightdress she was wearing. She looked at her hands, her fingers, the nails broken, still gray under the cuticles, but the hands scrubbed clean. *Who was he? What did he do?* She closed her eyes again. She was so tired.

She was flying through a cloud-filled sky.

The wind smacked her face in sudden gusts. She licked her lips, wet from the condensation falling from the clouds and rolling down her face like tears. She was back on the passenger deck of the train ferry on her way up the Mississippi to Milwaukee, the mist off the great river washing her cheeks.

"You're all right, Miss." A man's voice, strained with concern.

She started; her eyes clicking open again. She stared at the figure across the room.

"Where am I?"

"Missus Eleanor's place."

"Who are you?"

"Isaac. McCaslin, Miss. I'm—."

"What did you do?" More frightened than curious; angry now, too.

"Well," Isaac shifted his weight slightly from one foot to the other. Winced at his hip. "I was looking out."

"For what?"

He didn't know what to say. "For you, Miss."

"It's a beautiful day!"

They both jumped, startled.

Clessie looked past Isaac.

"Well! You're awake!" Eleanor's cheerful voice filled the room.

Isaac turned, his face burning like he'd just been caught red-handed doing something he shouldn't.

Eleanor brushed by him and went to the window and drew the curtains all the way open. The room lit up like the opening scene in a play.

"I was just saying, Ma'am—."

"She's not talking to you now," Clessie had returned her attention to Isaac, her eyes bearing down on him again.

"How're we feeling?" Eleanor approached the bed.

Clessie didn't answer. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. "What's he doing here?" she directed this at Eleanor.

"Oh, dear. Where are my manners? This is Isaac McCaslin."

Clessie kept studying him. Not a word.

"Isaac," Eleanor spoke over her shoulder. "There's coffee on the stove in the kitchen. Help yourself."

"Yes, Ma'am." He was still across the room, making no move to go.

"Here. Let me help you, dear." Eleanor reached behind Clessie to straighten her pillow. "Oh, I almost forgot," she stopped, directing this at Isaac: "Charlie wants you to check the wells up on Teacup before noon."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Eleanor lifted her arms to plump the pillow again, eclipsing Clessie's view of him. She craned her neck around Eleanor's shoulder to get another look. He was gone.

As he made his way down the hallway to the stairs, Isaac heard Eleanor say, "There now. You're welcome to stay with us until you're on your feet again." He smiled, liking the sound of that. *Yes, sir. Between Missus Eleanor and Old Doc, she's in good hands.*

In the days that followed, Isaac made it a habit to stop by the house after he came in from the range at the end of the day. Ostensibly this was to give Old Charlie his report on Scoggins' progress and the health of the herd, but it would have been obvious to anyone with a pair of ears that that was not why he was really there. He'd looked in on Clessie a few times during her recovery, but that was all. The last time he saw her she hadn't spoken so sharply to him. So after trying but failing to muster his nerve but propelled by Eleanor's well-intentioned, busy-bodying encouragement, he finally invited Clessie to sit with him on the bench swing on the Babbitts' veranda. "It won't kill you to ask, Isaac," Eleanor had poked him. "Who knows, maybe she'll say yes."

Much to his surprise she did.

The evening after Clessie accepted Isaac's invitation to sit on the swing, he strode across the yard from the bunkhouse to the main house. He was clean-shaven, a splash of menthol on his ruddy cheeks, and was clutching a bunch of flowers—marigolds, the radiant bouquet inspired by his memory of Old Doc climbing the hill behind the house to visit his wife Vivienne's grave—their bright yellow and orange heads pressed festively

against the snap pocket of his one and only dress shirt, which he kept folded between the thin mattress and springs of his bunk. He glanced west, as he did at the end of each day. The sun was already behind the tree line. The wind had died down as well, the air hard and cold on his face. He allowed the image of the two of them sitting together on the swing under one of Old Charlie's Pendleton Mill blankets to invade his thoughts again, a recurring fantasy he'd had since he'd asked her to join him and she'd said yes.

As he came around the side of the main house, Isaac could see her already sitting on the bench swing on the veranda. She was looking down, her head slightly turned to one side, like she was watching a bug make its way across the wooden planks of the porch. He panicked. *You can't never tell what's on a woman's mind.* She looked up then, her face transformed by a diffident smile of recognition. *Sweet Christ, Isaac. You can bust a bronc lickety-split, but you damn well better ask before you sit down on that swing.*

As the last rays of the sun disappeared behind the barn, Isaac and Clessie sat on the swing together, each one hugging the opposite end of the bench, separated by the bunch of marigolds that Clessie had set down in the space between them as soon as he'd given them to her. They looked out at the expanse of cleared ground stretching before them, its surface punctuated by the shape of a lone gnarled oak tree hunkered on its exposed roots halfway to the main gate.

"He almost hit him," Clessie suddenly spoke.

In the short time they'd been together, Isaac had learned to recognize that tone, freighted with outrage and sadness, and now he knew she was talking about the driver who had given her a ride to the Weatherford Hotel from the train station when she'd first

arrived. She'd brought it up twice already. Unfinished business. He was happy to listen again.

"He could have killed him. But he—he cursed at him. Called him a dirty half-breed," the words tumbled out of her mouth. "I think he would've run him over if he could."

"He was out of line—."

"I should have said something. But I didn't." She offered him a closed look. "What's wrong with me?"

Isaac was stricken. He reached across the bunch of flowers and touched her hand, gently. She stiffened, but let him. "Nothing's wrong with you," he said.

They sat like that for a while. The sound of overheated voices and the bunkhouse door slamming shut broke the silence. Startled, Clessie pulled her hand away.

Isaac frowned. "Means."

"Means what?

"Terence Means. One of the hands." He pointed his chin at the darkness.

Clessie was silent.

"He gets rowdy sometimes. High spirits. Me and him go back—."

"He and I."

"Him and you?" Isaac was startled. *She knew Means?*

"No." She kept her eyes fixed in the direction of the bunkhouse and the butter-yellow sliver where the door was open a crack. In that moment, and in spite of her newly found teacherly habit of correcting the misuse of language whenever she heard it, she was

not so much interested in Isaac's grammar as she was keeping her eyes peeled for whatever might be rushing at her out of the darkness.

Isaac stood. "I better go check on those knot-heads. They get the hair on sometimes. Get them settled before they burn the place down." He made no move to go.

Clessie did not take her eyes off the trespassing gloom or the splinter of light emanating from the bunkhouse doorway. Isaac watched her, thrown by what she'd just said about Means and wishing he hadn't said *burn the place down* even in jest. *What did she mean by 'He and I'?* Clessie pressed her feet against the floorboards of the porch. The swing rocked slowly back and forth. She looked down at her hand in her lap, the one she'd taken back, as if it were someone else's, not her own.

"I mean, those fellas—," Isaac knew he was burying himself now but he couldn't help it. "I don't think they would burn it down—."

"You don't know what they'd do!" Clessie looked up at him fiercely. Before he could respond, she stood up, stepped around him and went into the house.

Isaac looked after her, following her abrupt exit. "You're right," he muttered. "I don't know what the hell they'd do."

Another shout from the bunkhouse.

He stepped off the porch and started across the yard. He looked back once. The empty swing continued to sway gently back and forth. The bunch of marigolds, their bright yellow and orange heads catching the light from the front windows of the house, lay abandoned where she'd left them, a sign, Isaac wanted to believe, that they might come back and try again.

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The next night they did. This time when he sat down on the bench the empty space between them wasn't so wide. She'd scooted over just enough to press something into his hand. It was a square of wax paper the size of a small envelope. Through its opaque surface he could make out the still colorful outline of one marigold head, its orange and yellow petals pressed into the shape of a fan.

"Thank you." Isaac had sworn to himself he wouldn't say anything that would drive her away this time.

"You left your flowers here last night."

"They were for you."

"Oh." For a moment she seemed lost. Then, pointing at the one pressed marigold he held in his hand, "That's for you."

Later that night Clessie lay in her bed upstairs in the Babbitts' house unable to sleep. She couldn't stop thinking about Isaac, how frightened she'd suddenly been the night before, but something else, too, elated even, when he'd touched her hand. How after he'd gone, she'd gone back out to the veranda and taken the flowers off the swing. How she'd made him a gift of the marigold pressed in wax paper. How nothing in her life had prepared her to do any of that, but she'd done it anyway.

She thought of Maria. The quiet ferocity of her spirit. Her willingness to keep Clessie's secret. To offer her a solution. How none of this would have happened had it not been for her.

She remembered the week before when she'd gone downstairs to look for a book and had wandered into Eleanor's study where she'd found stationery paper, envelopes and stamps lying on the open rolltop desk. She'd taken one of each and a pencil, and put them in the drawer of her bedside table.

She took them out now.

Dear Maria. She stared at the paper. What could she say? How could she say it?

She could hear the clock at the end of the hallway ticking dully through the wall. Finally, she began to write, thanking the old housekeeper for her steadfast refusal to tell Clessie's father that the thief who'd stolen his money had been his own daughter. She apologized for her father having let her go after Clessie had gone up to Milwaukee. Asked her to thank her daughter Luisa for the doctor's name and address she'd provided. She hesitated. She couldn't write the next part, about her baby and what she'd done. Instead, she wrote *I chose Flagstaff and everything is fine*. She folded the letter and tucked it into the envelope. Addressed it to Maria Braun, c/o General Delivery, Germantown Post Office, Keokuk, Iowa. Maria had lived there as long as Clessie had known her. Her crooked arm and fist were her most recognizable features. She would get the letter. She slipped it into the envelope and put it in the drawer of the bedside table.

Isaac McCaslin could dream. He could imagine a future for himself, however abstract it might appear, but he was not a man greatly inclined towards introspection.

Still, he was a man, and as such had spent the past week consumed by the thought of Clessie Bonaparte. The only time she wasn't taking up room in his chest was when he

was thinking about Darryl Scoggins and everything he still needed to teach him before he could hand over the reins as foreman of the Hashknife brand.

"Who is he?" Clessie's question bobbed like thistledown in the air between them. They were standing out by the oak tree watching the Hashknife's foreman-in-training as he rode off across the living area towards the east fields.

"Darryl Scoggins. He's gonna run the show up here."

"What show?"

"The Aztec. Mr. Babbitt thinks me and Scoggins—."

" 'Scoggins and me'. Or 'Scoggins and I'."

"Scoggins and you?" Isaac's heart sank. *First Means, now Scoggins?*

"It depends. 'You and Scoggins had better saddle up.' Or 'Scoggins and I are going to the market.' Or 'You should come into town with Scoggins and me.' All of those—."

"Wait. Scoggins and you—?"

"I said it depends."

It had been over a year since Isaac had started working with Scoggins. They'd done two drives together, the first one down to Litchfield in the fall of the previous year; the second one, the return drive, they'd just completed in the spring. As far as Isaac was concerned, Scoggins was ready; he knew horses, he knew cattle; he paid attention, knew his place and had made some good decisions. His grasp of land management was getting better. He'd done a decent job on the Munds Park paddock. The pasture down in Schultz

Pass was coming along, too. Isaac let himself imagine he would hand over the reins by the end of summer and head south on his own.

But what about Clessie? Where did she fit into his plan?

As frightened as she'd been at first, Clessie had begun to look forward to Isaac's invitations and visits. He was kind. *Kind.* That word wasn't in her everyday vocabulary, but the feeling that suffused her when she thought about him, the one she could feel in her stomach, in her chest, while unfamiliar, didn't lie. It was a stillness she'd never felt before. It held her. Nothing in her experience had prepared her for this discovery. She couldn't define it because she had nothing to base it on. Her father's faith. How could she rely on that to recognize this? Still, sometimes—whenever this stillness would suddenly speed up, banging around in her chest when she was with him, she recognized this feeling as joy.

The calf was late, and now it was breeched. It would have to be turned. The mother was breathing hard, groaning, but she couldn't do it alone. Isaac was on his knees, his forearm and hand vanished inside the birth canal. His other hand was on her rump. He looked again at the mother's face. She stared back at him, walleyed with discomfort and fear. They'd been at it since right after breakfast and from the way the light was slanting in through the open barn doors, Isaac reckoned it was almost noon. He felt around inside her again, feeling the calf's hind leg, moving it gently, then firmly, pushing it around and farther back into the birth canal. The mother moaned again, a long, exhausted exhalation.

Her nostrils flared, spraying ropes of snot against the back wall of the stall. Isaac had done this work more than a few times over the years, in even more urgent, less comfortable circumstances, and he was making progress now but the procedure was proving more difficult than usual. Isaac eased his other hand in, concerned at how long it was taking now. He felt around again, making sure his hand was where it needed to be.

The mother groaned. Clearly she didn't like his hands up there even if she could tell he meant her no harm.

"Easy now, we're gonna get you out." He could feel the soft, wet hair along the calf's back. He ran his hands further down and could feel both rear legs now. He pulled and pressed against the body inside her. This time, finally, it began to turn. The mother bellowed. Perspiration dripped down into Isaac's eyes and he blinked. He bent his head to wipe his forehead with one arm. He pressed harder with his hands. The calf was still turning. A little more. Slowly the cervix expanded. A little bit more. Suddenly, one, then two, hooves appeared in the aperture of the vagina, followed by the pink flesh and wet matted hair of the calf's head. An ear. The head was coming out. "Here you go. You're doing good." He pulled a bit harder, his hands slipping off the viscous flesh, then reapplied pressure, pulling, turning a little, working the calf further out of its mother. Suddenly, the head popped out: two pink dilating nostrils, two ears soft as sage leaves, two fragile, pink eyelids shut tight, as if the calf itself couldn't bear to see what was happening. One more tug and it slid the rest of the way out.

Isaac gathered the slippery newborn in his arms and sat with it cradled in his lap on the floor of the stall. He cleared the nostrils with his fingers and opened the mouth. It was already breathing. The mother sighed, her head still turned, staring at her calf. Isaac

had never gotten used to it. It was always a miracle. Both were alive. Both would make it. He stroked the calf's head. "There you go," he whispered. He wiped at his own face again with the back of one arm, looking away as he did. His eye caught on something in the open doorway of the stall. It was Clessie. She was standing there, her eyes fixed on the calf, then on him. She blinked. A miracle. Isaac smiled up at her, suddenly exhausted.

"Can I—." she said, almost inaudibly. Without finishing her thought or waiting for an answer, she stepped into the stall and knelt next to him. She reached out and stroked the calf's head still covered in blood and amniotic fluid. She looked over at the mother's face, the depthless brown eyes still locked on her baby as it began to stir, then struggle.

"He's ready to go," Isaac laughed with relief.

Clessie got to her feet. She stepped around Isaac and stroked the mother's head. A deep hollow gasp came as the mother's breathing settled. She pushed her face against Clessie's hand, anxious to see her calf.

"We done it," Isaac's face broke into a grin.

"Did it."

"What?"

"We did it."

"Yup. We—did it."

Sunlight filled the stall. Isaac let the calf go. It stood right up. It tottered over to its mother and sniffed her face and bleated out a small but forceful announcement of his arrival in the world. The mother began to lick the birth muck off his head.

Isaac laughed again. Clessie laughed, too, a melodious, bell-like sound Isaac had

not heard before.

The next day, emboldened by the experience they'd shared in the barn, Isaac invited Clessie to take a ride into town with him.

"Why?" she'd looked at him like he'd just asked her to go to the moon.

"Delivery day. Gotta pay a bill and pick up some fencing."

She hadn't gone into town since the previous winter, after she'd left the Florence Crittendon Mission. No. She would not revisit the streets where she'd allowed herself to imagine a new life only to have it turned to dust again by her own hand. Sure of this now, it would be "No." But what came out of her mouth was "Yes."

The midmorning sun was lighting up the branches of the oak tree in the front yard when Isaac pulled up in front of the Babbitt house in one of the heavy drays the hands used for hauling barbed wire and lumber. The wagon bed was empty and the two big dray horses were snorting and tossing their heads, prancing nervously in their traces. Isaac whistled once to settle them down. They settled but got excited again when the front door of the house flew open and Clessie shot out across the veranda. "It's a beautiful day!" she sang in her best imitation of Eleanor's voice. She came down the steps and climbed up onto the seat before Isaac could jump down and offer her a hand. She patted the pocket of her coat and smiled at him, "Let's go!"

Isaac had to agree, it was a beautiful day; but it was also the first of the month, the day the AT&SF freight trains pulled in from the factories in the east and off-loaded their

construction equipment and supplies into the storage yard behind Riordan's Mercantile on San Francisco Street. Riordan's crews would be out in force, waving their orders and making sure the deliveries were intact, barking like carnies how much and who for.

As they turned north onto San Francisco Street, Isaac had to pull up sharp to avoid running his horses right into the tailgate of another dray and a half dozen others in front of it, all of them waiting to pick up their orders or turn around fully ladened and be on their way. The noise was deafening. The hew and cry of Riordan's understaffed crew as they called out names and barked orders; the line of dray drivers waving their pick-up paperwork; the noise and commotion of a construction crew resurrecting the old feed building next to the train station as a lumber and masonry warehouse; housewives coming and going to the open wholesale markets over on Phoenix Street, their baskets overflowing with still-unripe fruits and fat leafy vegetables; all of this combined to make the horses even more spooked and fidgety.

When they finally got to the Mercantile building, Isaac tied the horses to the rail post in front and went inside. The horses stretched their necks and drank from the trough in front of the rail. Pretty soon, three laborers came around the side of the building carrying posts and rolls of fencing, and started loading the bed of the dray.

From her seat on the dray Clessie looked up the street, where she could see a dark green *U.S. Mail* mailbox anchored by its four metal legs to the far corner of an intersection. She jumped down, made sure the horses were tied snug, and headed up the street. When she got to the mailbox she pulled the letter she'd written to Maria out of her coat pocket and

dropped it through the box's creaking metal door.

By the time Isaac came out of Riordan's the wooden posts and rolls of fence had been tied down in the bed and Clessie was back where he'd left her, sitting on the high spring seat of the dray, talking softly to the horses, keeping them settled. She looked up, smiled and waved from her perch on the moon.

Isaac climbed up, and clucked once to back the horses away from the railing, but they weren't having it. Whether it was all the ruckus on the street or their feelings of abandonment and unprotection while Clessie was at the mailbox, they were spooked and fidgety and uncooperative. Isaac had to jump down twice to take them by their bridles and quiet them, then lead them around in a tight U-turn, dragging the heavy, unwieldy dray, its ungainly iron and wood wheels scuddering on the dirt.

Isaac had just gotten the dray turned around, and climbed back up onto the seat next to Clessie when the sound of a twenty-pound sledge hammer swung at full force against an iron crossbeam over at the construction site rang out and the horses bolted forward. As Clessie pitched forward off the seat Isaac lunged, throwing his arm around her. His hand skittered across her back and grabbed her shoulder before she fell off the side of the wagon to the ground—or worse, he was afraid, between the two spooked, kicking horses. He held her there for a moment until he was sure she'd regained her balance and composure. For one split second it had felt good, wonderful even, to be that close, that intimate; and maybe because she'd been so taken by surprise she hadn't seemed to mind his audacity one bit. In fact, he could have sworn she'd smiled, maybe out of embarrassment for her perceived clumsiness, or maybe because of something else. In any case he'd take it. But just as quickly this good feeling had been swept away by an

image, a memory so shocking Isaac couldn't hold it, even though he'd recognized it immediately for exactly what it was. As soon as he was sure she'd gotten her feet back under her and regained her seat, he took his hand away. *It was her dress. The buttons, the stitching, the folds of the material. That's what it was. It had to be.* He looked over at her again. She straightened, returned his look, and smiled at him again. It had gut-punched him. He determined to keep whatever it was that had popped up out of his head as much as he could, and by some miracle—*mostly that smile*—he was able to before he started thinking about it even more.

15

"I wanted to tell you, I'm leaving soon."

They were sitting in the great room of the Babbitts' ranch house, warming themselves by the fire Isaac had built in the big stone fireplace. A four-point elk's head was mounted on the wall above the mantle, its glassy eyes staring down at them impassively. Clessie kept her eyes focused on the crackling blaze on the hearth. Isaac rubbed the waxed scallop on the arm of the Queen Anne chair where he sat with his thumb. He shifted around. "I wanted to tell you before—." He stopped. He'd been meaning to, but he'd kept putting it off, and pretty soon the days had turned into weeks, and now here they were. *Face it, McCaslin,* he'd said to himself more than a few times as he lay in his bunk each night. *You're a chickenhearted fool*.

"It's a nice fire," Clessie looked at the flames leaping up the flue as if he hadn't said anything. She glanced circumspectly at the elk. "When are you going?"

"Mr. Babbitt's got some other things for me to do around here. Maybe January. Maybe sooner."

"Where are you going?"

"Phoenix. Litchfield Park."

The sound of the logs shifting as the fire settled was the only response.

"He offered me something better than what I got now. Land Manager. More money—."

"Well. I hope it's what you want."

"It is." He paused. "Pretty much."

They sat in silence then, both looking at the fire. Isaac returned his attention to the tiny carved motif on the wooden arm of the chair. He cleared his throat, then spoke. "You could go with me."

If she were startled by this she didn't show it. "Why?"

"Because—" He didn't know where to go with that. "I want you to."

"Why?"

"Me and you—."

"You and I."

"Yeah. Us—."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's not proper—."

"Well," he leaned forward. He picked up the poker that was leaning against the hearth and jabbed at the logs in the fireplace, sending a field of sparks up the flue. "We

could get married."

It was either one's guess who was more shocked by the words that had just jumped out of Isaac's mouth.

Clessie didn't answer. She kept her eyes on the fire. The only sound in the room was the snapping report of the resettling logs and the hiss of heated sap. Finally she said again, "I can't."

Damn, Isaac. What the hell did you just do? 'I can't.' What the hell did you think she was gonna say? He felt even more stupid realizing he had no ready answer for that. He hadn't thought that far ahead. *Bunkhouse jughead.*

They sat in silence, both of them staring at the elk's head above the mantel now as if they were expecting it to say something that might get them both off the hook. Finally, Isaac couldn't bear her silence or her refusal to look at him any longer. "I better go out and check on Banjo," he said without moving. She looked at him. He could see the reflection of the flames dancing in her eyes. *What the deuce got into you, Isaac?* "All right." He got up and crossed the room, the heat from the fireplace and his own embarrassment at what he'd done burning his face, then his back. When he got to the door he stopped, waiting, hoping she'd say something. When she didn't, he put his hand on the latch and let himself out.

Clessie looked around the high-ceilinged room. After everything that had happened. If she'd known *about this* would she have done what she did?

The sap in one of the logs popped like the sound of a gunshot. She jumped. Did any of what happened—what she'd done—even make any sense?

She couldn't hold it.

As he headed over to the barn Isaac heard Banjo's whinny. The horse had pulled up lame a week ago and didn't seem to be getting any better. He was old. Soon, Isaac knew, he would have to put him down.

Later, after he'd gotten Banjo settled in, Isaac headed over to the bunkhouse. As he lay in his bunk listening to the other men's ragged snores and mutterings, his mind wandered. He reached up and felt along the shelf above his bunk until his hand found the folded piece of wax paper she'd given him. He stroked the surface of the marigold, the petals' vibrant orange and yellow colors already fading, going over again and again the clumsy, painful parts of what he'd done. *Will you marry me? Did I say really that?* Everything was going fine and he'd blown it all up in a moment of jugheaded stupidity. *"I can't."* She'd made it clear all right. Set him straight as a fence post. He returned the marigold in its wax paper to its spot on the shelf. He laid his head back on the thin pillow and thought of the calf and its mother: after such a struggle, both of them healthy now, back with the herd, ready to make their trip south. Yes, sir. There were happy endings somewhere, just not for him on this night.

Another week passed, and then another. They did not speak again of the conversation they'd had regarding Isaac's leaving or his sudden offer of marriage. Still, much to Isaac's relief (and continued unreasonable hope), she allowed him to hold her hand again. She accepted the flowers he continued to bring her. She answered his questions about the

weather, about her general health, but nothing more personal, where she was from, what her life had been before they'd met that night at the gate.

He didn't know where it was all going now, let alone how he could feel sure of his place at all, given her mixed signals. But in moments, it was enough to know that she was this much in his life and to believe she felt the same. Whatever small gifts their time together had offered were enough to keep them going. All they needed was the space to allow their unspoken thoughts to bump up against each other. The rest would take care of itself, as Scoggins was so fond of saying in the early days of his training. It didn't fly then and it probably wouldn't now, but more than anything he felt like he just plain didn't have a choice. This was bigger than riding herd or branding calves or bossing a bunch of bunkhouse jugheads. This was bigger even than running a ranch. This was something so out of the ordinary, so beyond his savvy he dared not say.

While it had been Eleanor's habit to invite Isaac to have dinner in the main house with Clessie, herself and Old Charlie, on this particular night Isaac arrived to find that only he and Clessie would be having dinner in the dining room.

"Missus Eleanor told me to tell you something came up," Clessie spoke over her shoulder as he followed her into the dining room.

"Everything all right?"

"She said to tell you Mr. Babbitt had to meet Mr. Thude over at the Weatherford to hash out the details of the Teacup lease."

Isaac noticed there were only two places set at the long table. Clessie motioned to one of the chairs. "She told me you know how Mr. Thude can be."

"I do," Isaac went over to the other chair and pulled it out for her. She blinked once at his awkward show of chivalry, then sat, and continued, "She said she'd feel better if she went with him to make sure they didn't start throwing dishes or get into a fist fight in the middle of the dining room."

"Probably a good idea." Isaac pulled out the other chair and took a seat. Napkin in the lap.

"Thought a public place would be better suited." Clessie did the same. Satisfied that she'd finished her report, she was quiet then, her eyes averted. It looked to Isaac like she was studying the silverware next to her plate. Neither said anything. Isaac looked around, his eye landing on a china bowl full of mashed potatoes. He reached out to pass it to her but she still didn't look up, which Isaac knew was something she would do sometimes when they'd see each other, but he was also keenly aware of her doing this other thing though not as much as when they'd first met. *Her straw in the wind*, Old Doc called it. He could see now she'd slipped away. He set the china bowl back down and busied himself refolding the napkin in his lap. "Well, that's just fine," he said, the echo of his words swallowed up in the quietude of the great room.

"Sometimes I still hear him cry," Clessie looked up finally, fixing him with a stare that made the words a contention, a dare for him to disagree with whatever it was she was saying. Isaac looked up from his plate surprised.

Who? Old Charlie? Thude?

When she saw his face she regretted it immediately. "I'm sorry. He just—."

"That's all right—."

"Excuse me." She pushed her chair back, got up and walked out of the room.

Isaac put down his fork. *He? Who cried?* Whoever or whatever it was, he couldn't see it. He wondered if he ever would. If she would ever let him in. If he would even stick around long enough for her to let him in or finally just get fed up and walk away. What the hell was he doing? Why was he sticking around? He thought about his own life edict, "The past is past. Leave the sumbitch alone." It was true, he had not looked back once. The future would always be a bright, beckoning star. So why did his chest ache so bad? Why couldn't he get his mind off of her? And where the hell had he gotten all this goddamned patience all of a sudden? Was he in love? He had to be. He was too goddamned miserable to be anything else.

One morning, Old Charlie came out to the bunkhouse and handed Isaac a portfolio of documents he needed delivered to the Coconino County Courthouse. "Son of a bitch signed," he patted the folio, looking pleased with himself.

Isaac knew he was referring to Gunnar Thude, who'd refused to sign the Teacup lease the night of the dinner at the Weatherford and had been digging his heels in ever since. "You look like the cat that ate the canary, boss," Isaac said.

"Damn straight," Old Charlie clapped him on the back. "Why don't you see if Clessie wants to go with you. Make a day of it."

Later, as Isaac waited on the veranda for Clessie to come out, he worried again how she would react when he asked her if she wanted to go, but when the screen door swung open and she came out and said "Yes!" without even waiting to hear what he had to say, smiling as if she hadn't a care in the world, he could tell Eleanor had gotten to her first

and it was a new day. “Oh, wait,” she clapped her hand on her head. “Let me get my hat.” She turned around, flung open the screen door and headed back in, the sound of her voice ringing behind her, “Three shakes of a lamb’s tail, Mr. McCaslin!” punctuated by the door slamming shut again. He grinned, recognizing the sound of her having pulled out of her fugue and that her purpose in using his surname was to make it official.

The sun was just beginning to warm their shoulders as they strolled up San Francisco Street towards the courthouse. They’d been taking their time, looking in the windows of the various establishments when suddenly Clessie stopped. Isaac looked up ahead. A man, whippet thin, was walking towards them.

“Clessie? Is that you?” the man stopped in front of them.

Isaac looked at Clessie. She’d averted her face, but looked up again, returning the man’s curious gaze. “Yes,” was all she could muster. She looked away again.

Isaac could see the man was pleased to see her.

“Is this your husband?” the man beamed.

“Oh, no!” she blurted, startling all three of them.

“I’m sorry,” the man looked chagrined. “My mistake.” He regained his composure and turned his attention to Isaac. “Samuel Page, Headmaster of The Normal School, over on Leroux.” He chucked his chin in that direction, then extended his hand in greeting.

“Isaac McCaslin,” Isaac shook his hand. “Foreman of The Aztec.”

“Yes, sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The headmaster turned his attention to Clessie again, “How are you, Clessie?” he spoke, but her eyes were focused on

something across the street like it was the most important thing in the world. “Well,” he said after a moment, returning his attention to Isaac. “I was just on my way the post office. It was nice to make your acquaintance, sir.” The headmaster bowed cordially. “And it was nice to see you, too, again, Clessie.” He tipped his hat and stepped around them, continuing on his way down the street.

Clessie looked after him mutely.

“How do you know him?” Isaac asked her almost in a whisper.

She didn’t say anything. He waited.

“I taught the students at his school.”

“Oh—.”

“I lied to him!” she blurted suddenly. “Twice.”

Isaac didn’t know what to say. He took a breath. “Well. He seemed like a decent enough hombre.” He shrugged. “Seems like all’s forgiven. Water under the bridge.”

They started walking again.

Clessie made a soft, fluttering sound with her lips. “Water under the bridge,” she said, like she was talking to herself but wasn’t pleased with what she was hearing. “How much farther is the courthouse?”

“Right up here.” He pointed to a sandstone building on the next block. They continued in silence.

“Only the Lord forgives,” her words came in a whisper, one ghost talking to another. “A person just says that to make themselves feel better about what they’ve done.”

The wind picked up, ruffling her hair, blowing leaves and scattering bits of debris

along the sidewalk up ahead. It felt to Isaac that running into that Page fellow had scattered her, too, swept her away from him again.

When Mr. Page arrived at the post office, he looked back once, then pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"Morning, Philip," he said to the man behind the counter.

"Morning, Samuel." The postmaster looked up through the bars of the service window; he reached around and pulled a thin stack of letters from a mail cubby. He slid the stack across the counter to the headmaster. "That's it for this week."

"Thank you, sir. Everything good with you?"

"Right as rain I expect," the postmaster stopped, then brightened. "Say, whatever happened to that young woman who taught at your school last year?"

Page looked surprised. "You mean Clessie Bonaparte?"

"That's the one. Got a letter for her. Came last week," the postmaster reached under the counter and held it up for the headmaster to see. "'Miss Clessie Bonaparte. General Delivery.'"

Page looked at the envelope the postmaster was holding up in his hand, trying to wrap his head around the coincidence of this information. Finally he said, "Believe it or not, I just ran into Mrs. Bonaparte over on San Francisco Street. She was with a Mr. McCaslin."

The postmaster looked surprised. "The Aztec foreman?"

"Yes. That's the one." Page looked lost in thought again. "I hadn't seen her since she left. Didn't expect I would ever again."

"You don't say," the postmaster grinned; himself surprised by the serendipitous moment. "Well, if you run into her again, tell her I'll hold onto it for her. She can come by and pick it up anytime she wants."

"Her husband was in that terrible train collision," Page went on, looking down at his own letters now, lost in his memory of the last time he'd seen Clessie, the day she'd told him she had to leave. "Or he wasn't. The whole thing was quite odd." He looked up at the postmaster. He paused. "Who's the letter from?"

The postmaster turned the envelope over. "Braun. Germantown, Iowa."

Page thought again about the McCaslin fellow, the foreman of the Aztec, Mr. Babbitt's outfit. "I'll tell you what," he brightened. "Why don't you send it out to the Babbitts'. Mrs. Babbitt will know how to reach her. She'll make sure she gets it."

16

"We done good, huh."

Isaac and Scoggins sat astride their horses, looking out at the Hashknife's north paddock. The wind had transformed the sward into an undulating sea of green, the fescue and blue stem grass they'd planted in the spring having come back stronger than ever.

"'Did well,'" Isaac kept his eyes on the newly regenerated field. He leaned over and spat in the dirt at his horse's feet.

"Did well what?" Scoggins looked over at him, the start of a worried look on his face.

"You did well," Isaac looked over at him. Leaned. Spat again.

"That's what I said."

Isaac studied him for a moment. "So. You think you're ready?"

"Know I am, boss."

Isaac looked at him hard. "You know that, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well then." Isaac kept looking at him. Finally he touched the brim of his hat. "It's all yours."

Scoggins tried to hide the look of surprise on his face but the closest he got to that was a shit-eating grin. He puffed himself up a little bit. Sat straighter in the saddle. "Darryl Francis Scoggins—." he intoned.

"*Francis*?"

"Hey, my mother named me that," Scoggins looked hurt, but even more hurt at having been interrupted in his self-congratulatory soliloquy.

"Poor thing."

"—Foreman of the Aztec Land & Cattle Company, Western Territories." He grinned. "That bell's got a nice ring to it. Yes, sir."

"Yeah, well," Isaac clucked once, turning his horse around. "Make sure it stays rung."

It was September. The wind was up again. Fire season, Isaac thought automatically. In one week Scoggins and the men would be heading south with the herd. As he came out of the barn, a gust hit him in the face, and dust gritted between his teeth. He saw Clessie standing by the railing of the remuda corral, watching the horses as they circumnavigated

the perimeter. He headed over to her. She didn't turn around, her attention taken by a buckskin mare that had stopped and was nuzzling her hand.

"Good morn—."

"When are you leaving?" she said without turning.

"I—."

"You'd better go soon," she said.

"Why?"

"I want to ride this one," she said, changing the subject as fast as she'd brought it up.

"You sure?" he looked at her.

"I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't."

Why the hell was she like that? So—galled all the time?

Isaac went back to the barn and came back with a saddle and bridle. He brought the mare out of the corral and saddled her up.

When he was finished he put out his hand to offer Clessie a leg up, but she ignored it, taking the reins and climbing up on her own. "It's a good thing I don't need any help, since you won't be around."

"Clessie—."

She clucked and touched the sides of the mare with her heels. The horse started off at a trot around the enclosure.

"Fine," he said, more to himself than anyone else.

As she rode around the corral, the wind came up again. Isaac had to put his hand on his hat to keep it from blowing off, and Clessie's strawberry blonde hair covered her

face in tangles, obscuring for a moment the look of undisguised pleasure on her face. When she finally pulled up and dismounted Isaac was so impressed he forgot everything he'd told himself about keeping his own counsel. "You ride like a real horsewoman," he took the reins. "Here—," he reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She jerked back as if she'd been touched by an electric wire.

"I'm sorry," Isaac withdrew his hand. "I was just—."

She looked down, unable to meet his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Clessie. I forgot. I won't do that again," he mumbled, furious at himself for forgetting. *She's going backwards.*

"No," she said, still looking down.

Doc said you gotta look back sometimes to see what's up ahead.

"Clessie—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—."

"I know." She marched off across the dirt expanse towards the main house, stumbling as her foot caught on a root sticking out of the uncleared dirt. She caught herself and kept on towards the house. "They need to put something out here that makes a person feel welcome," she spoke without looking back, "So they're not tripping all over themselves trying to get where they're going." She took another step, and stumbled again on another root. "Damnit! You!" The violence of her exclamation startled them both. She kept going, took three more steps up to the veranda. "Or maybe they want to sit on that bench swing," her voice barely a whisper now as she crossed the veranda and opened the screen door. Without a backward look, she disappeared inside.

Isaac knew better than to go after her. *She'll come around in her own time. Doc had said*

that, too. Isaac had learned that would only make things worse. He stayed put at the corral railing, watching her as she went, the shift of her shoulders, the pause when she put her hand on the latch of the screen door, all of it betraying the truth that she didn't really have any particular destination in mind other than anywhere the hell away from him. Or herself, he didn't know.

Make an honest woman out of her, that's what those jugheads in the bunkhouse keep telling me. He shook his head. *The day I start listening to them.*

A week later Isaac and Old Charlie stood in front of the main house, their hands raised in farewell, voices barking in broken Spanish *Vaya con Dios* to Scoggins and the other cowpunchers who'd been charged with making the journey south for the winter. *Adios*, Scoggins returned their gesture, still not quite able to take in the fact that he'd been entrusted with such an enormous task. He'd gone over the checkpoints of the trip a hundred times already: set up camp the first night on the Kaibab; take the beefs over the Rim the next day and down into the Verde Valley; move them through Black Canyon, pray the Cordes wells were full, and bring the herd safely into Litchfield Park. "Piece of cake, *Patron*," he'd reassured his boss as they'd shaken hands in front of the house before he'd mounted up.

"Go easy with that cake," Old Charlie rejoined. "I don't want to have to come down there and wipe it off your face."

"You'll be dealing with both of us if that happens," Isaac put his two cents in.

Scoggins looked hurt, then grinned at Isaac. "I got this, boss," They shook hands. He swung up into the saddle, clucked once, and headed off down the driveway to the

main gate where the crew was already mounted up and waiting. Further off in the distance, Isaac could see the herd and hear their lowing.

"I hope we got this right," Old Charlie said. He looked south where the sky held its windswept, pale blue palette, not a cloud to be seen.

"He's gonna do fine," Isaac assured him. Scoggins was one of the few things he was still sure of these days. He'd take it where he could get it.

Two weeks later, Old Charlie got his first report.

The weather on the way down had remained in their favor. The drop into the Verde Valley had come off without a hitch. The Cordes wells had been full. Black Canyon was open all the way to the Litchfield pastures. Scoggins had gotten the herd settled into their paddocks, every beef accounted for, all safe and sound. Isaac and Old Charlie breathed a collective sigh of relief.

It had been four months since Clessie had appeared on the property.

Isaac tried to hold it in his head as best he could what Doc Fronske had told him, that he'd had no doubt Clessie was on her way to making a full recovery, her fugues and lapses in civility notwithstanding. Isaac wasn't so sure; his patience was stretching thin. But still he was game; his heart kept sending him signals he couldn't ignore. Faith and patience. Neither one had had much of a reliable history with Isaac. *Hell,* he'd think to himself, lying in his bunk, having run out of anything else to hang his hat on, *Scoggins came through. So will she.*

The Appaloosa was making its way around the perimeter of the remuda corral, switching its tail over its spotted rump, stopping at the water trough when he felt like it, then moving along. Isaac had finally put Banjo down, and the Appaloosa was the one he'd picked to replace him, but it still hurt whenever Banjo intruded in his thoughts, especially the memory and loss of his company all those bitter nights on the Bellemont. Loyal to the bone he was. One of a kind. *But this one,* Isaac was watching the Appaloosa now, his cocky perambulation around the circumference of the remuda, the recalcitrant wag of his rump, *you can just tell the way he just stands there and wall-eyes you when you tell him to do something that he ain't buying any more of this "out with the old and in with the new" bullshit old Isaac's selling; no sir. He'd just as soon stand out there in the north paddock chest high in sweet green fescue, eyeing the mares, waiting his turn, happy as a pig in shit.* Isaac waxed and wallowed in his philosophy as he leaned against the railing of the gate trying to decide who was a bigger pain in the ass: himself, the horse or Clessie, who just happened to be standing a short distance away, her arms resting on the top fence rail. He had to admit, at that moment pretty much everyone's body language, or at least his own and Clessie's, was telegraphing exactly how they felt: their desire to be close but neither one quite knowing how to manage that, so distance would remain their partner until something else happened to break the spell. It had been a month since Isaac had blurted out his marriage proposal in the Babbitts' great room, the thought of which still made him blush. He'd not brought up again. It seemed to him that Clessie wasn't inclined to revisit it either.

"Yoo-hoo!" The voice was still some distance off, but recognizable nonetheless. "Oh, Clessie!"

They turned to see Eleanor coming towards them from the house through an arbor of newly-planted birch trees, the ground beneath the archway flattened smooth and covered with flagstones. “The beginning of a grand park, like the Vanderbilts’ in New York City!” she’d been announcing to anyone within earshot ever since Isaac had brought her the plans for his big idea. Her statement, while flattering to Isaac, hadn’t come close to Clessie’s soto voce response which had just happened to be within earshot, “Finally, someone around here is listening to me.”

Eleanor’s footsteps slapped lightly on the shaded flagstone walkway, its gentle bends between the veranda and the corral protected on either side by the saplings Isaac had just finished planting. Her smile, which was threatening to take over her whole face, winked in and out of the shadows cast by the slender branches overhead. She had one arm raised, in her hand an envelope waving like a flag.

As Eleanor emerged from the arbor she handed Clessie the envelope. Isaac watched as it changed hands. *Who in Sam Hill knows where she is?*

Clessie turned it over. She looked at Eleanor as if she had sent it, then over at Isaac. She hesitated, then tucked it into her apron pocket.

“Oh dear! Who’s it from?” Eleanor cried out. “Open it! Let us see!”

Isaac wanted to join in, but he held his mud.

Clessie stood still in the face of Eleanor’s joyful anticipation, then took the envelope back out of her pocket. She tore it along the top and opened it.

Isaac and Eleanor watched as she took something out—a letter, it looked like, and then a smaller, stiff piece of paper, maybe a card or a photograph. She glanced at them, then tucked them both back in the envelope so quickly Isaac couldn’t tell for sure.

"What is it, dear? Family?" It was all Eleanor could do not to tear the envelope from her hand and hot-foot it back through the arbor and into the house where she could decide for herself what it was and then go tell the world.

"No," Clessie said. "It's—nothing." She stuffed the envelope back into her apron pocket, turned and headed towards the house through the arbor, her slender frame and sunflower hair flashing in and out of the shadows cast by the boughs of the birch trees overhead.

"Braun," Eleanor finally said.

"What that, Missus?" Isaac was still watching Clessie as she crossed the porch and let herself in.

"The name of the sender."

Isaac and Eleanor looked at each other again, neither one having an answer for the other's unspoken question. Finally Isaac looked up at the sky where storm clouds were gathering and said, "Well, looks like it's gonna rain."

"That's good. We need it," Eleanor answered automatically. "It'll keep the north paddock tanks full."

"Yes, Ma'am," he was already turning away. "I'd better get the rest of that fencing out to Means before it dumps on us."

17

That night, the rain fell so hard and for so long it seemed to Clessie it was Mother Nature's intent to drown the world of all its dark history, memories or any other news

that might demand immediate retribution, be it divine or otherwise. She thought about the little cemetery she'd seen behind the Mission the night she'd fled, how the souls lying in their graves would surely hear the muffled tapping of the raindrops on the frozen leaves above them, each spirit waiting for Her signal that it was safe to rise up and rejoin the newly unspoiled world. As she let her imagination unfold, she thought she could see one of these creatures already returned, standing quietly by its marker, its raven black hair plastered to its head, its dark eyes searching through the rain for something it had lost. She thought about Isaac. Imagined him lying on his bunk, surrounded by the other hands, wondering if they were disappointed because they'd wanted to go into town on this night and get the hair on, whatever that meant. She decided she would not see him. Too much to think about since Eleanor had given her that letter. Besides, the ground was too wet and muddy, although she was sure if she asked someone to go out and get him he would be there before you could say Bob's your uncle.

She lay in her bed in the bedroom upstairs in the main house listening to the rain beating against the window, her mind still too full, unable to quiet itself and allow her to fall off to sleep. She took the envelope from the bed table, took the letter and the small picture board out to look at them again. She set the picture board to one side and took the letter out of the envelope.

Dear Clessie,

I have asked a friend to write this so it will be proper when you read it.

I hope you get this letter as I have only the Flagstaff post office as an address for you.

I was so pleased to get your note, and I am happy to know you're doing fine. Thank you for your kind words about my grandmother. She was very fond of you.

I'm sorry but I have some news, although from the little my grandmother told me, you may not consider it altogether bad. Please forgive me for having to tell you, but your father has passed. He died shortly before we received your letter. I'm so sorry, Clessie, I know this news is difficult to hear, and please forgive me, but there's more I must say. I only wish that I were not the one to say it.

Your father had been out of sorts for some time after you left for Flagstaff, and as I said, by the time I got your letter he was gone. This next part is the hardest. The constables who came to my house told me it was only fair that you know the circumstances of your father's death, other than both they and the coroner have agreed it was by his own hand, so while I wish it had been by natural causes, it was not. They had found him hanging from a rafter by a noose around his neck in the root cellar under the house. He'd been there for quite some time as no one else had come to the house as far as they could tell, and they'd had a difficult time getting him down.

He was buried in the Catholic section of Oakland Cemetery, something that if he was alive I know he would not be happy about. But then again, if he was alive I wouldn't be writing this to you.

The constables had wanted to talk to my grandmother, as they were aware she'd been working for him for many years, but I told them she hadn't been for some time, that she'd had a stroke and was bedridden now. They still wanted to see her so I let them in and they were quickly satisfied that indeed she was incapacitated to the extent that they would not get any information from her. They asked me if I knew you or your

whereabouts and because of the whole reason for your trip I said yes of course I knew of you, but only through my grandmother's reports and that was all. As you can imagine, I was shocked beyond words at all of this news.

The constables told me that if I hear from you I should let you know all of this, and that you need to return to Keokuk as soon as possible and report to the mortuary to sign the death certificate, and then to the county assessor's office to have the property deed transferred to your name since you are the sole surviving family member. The constables told me that if you do not do this the farm will go into probate and the Church will likely get it.

In the meantime, just to put your mind at ease, I have been going out to the farm twice a week to make sure the animals are fed and watered and let out into the north field to exercise. Pinkie whinnies when she sees me. I think she misses you. Please know I'm happy to do this as I'm not working right now and the walk over the bridge from Germantown and out to the farm is invigorating as the weather warms up more and more each day. I only wish my grandmother could walk with me, but alas I'm afraid that will not happen now. Again, my heartfelt condolences to you, Clessie. Please come soon as I would hate to see you lose the property.

Best regards,

Luisa Braun

PS: I've enclosed a picture of your mother that my grandmother found in your father's sock drawer one day when she was putting away the laundry after you left. She gave it to me to give to you if I should hear from you. I hope it gives you solace.

Clessie looked at the picture once more. It was a grainy black and white photograph, the image faded but still clear enough, of a young Native American woman. Her hands rested on her swollen belly, betraying the fact that she was pregnant. She was standing in a dirt yard. Behind her the land, desolate and flat, rolled out forever. She was looking directly at the camera, the fierce expression on her face belying her poised stillness. She wore an apron with a beaded embroidery design of wildflowers over a long buffalo hide dress and hide moccasins on her feet. Her hair was long, jet-black, and hung in braids on either side of her angular face.

Clessie turned the picture over and looked at the back of it. Written in neat penmanship, the kind the white teachers taught at the Carlisle Indian School where Alfred had been sent before he'd arrived at the Keokuk schoolhouse, was the name *Half-Sky*, and below that, *Iron Warrior*. Had her mother been taken from her tribe when she was young and sent to Carlisle, where she'd learned to write her letters with such fine penmanship? Had her name been Half-Sky? Had she named the baby in her belly Iron Warrior? So many threads. It would take too long—lifetimes gone now—to unravel them all. She dropped the picture on her lap and stared across the room at her closed door as if she were expecting her mother, or Luisa, or Maria, or her father with the rope still around his neck to step through. Finally, she returned the letter and the photograph to the envelope, put it in the drawer of the bedside table and turned down the lamp.

The next morning, Clessie made her way out to the bunkhouse under a cloudless sky, envelope in hand. She was grateful again for the flagstones and the job Isaac had done with the arbor as the yard had turned into a muddy bog from the rain. When she got to the

door she hesitated, her hand on the latch. She knew Isaac wasn't there, that he and the remaining Aztec hired hands had already had their breakfast and were out riding line, mending fence, or engaged in any one of the myriad other jobs that kept them busy every day until the dinner bell rang. She looked out at the corrals, at the barn, at the pastures and the tree line and the forested hills beyond. Not a soul anywhere to be seen. Satisfied, she opened the door to the bunkhouse and went inside.

When she stepped into the room she caught her breath, her nostrils assailed by the vinegary smell of men, of aftershave, sweat, tobacco, close quarters, clothes in need of washing.

She headed down the center aisle, looking left and right as she went at the neatly made-up bunks on either side. When she got to the last bunk, the one by the ticking wood stove that was still warm and had been banked for the day, something caught her eye. On a narrow shelf attached to the wall at the head of the bunk was the piece of wax paper with the marigold she'd given him. She looked once behind herself to make sure she was alone, then lifted the piece of wax paper and slid the envelope containing the letter and picture underneath it.

She retraced her steps to the bunkhouse door and let herself out.

Isaac had spent the day on the Sweetwater lea chasing a herd of sheep that had gotten loose from their pasture and were hell-bent on devouring the first tiny sprouts of fescue that wouldn't be ready until the next summer. It was a long day, but the Appaloosa had responded well to everything Isaac had demanded of him. He made a mental note to tell Scoggins when he brought the cow herd back up in the spring that while the Aztec beefs

could be willful and ornery, those woolies were squirmy, savvy sons-a-bitches.

After he'd rubbed down the Appaloosa and put him in his stall and fed him—hay, fresh off the bale, not the lush green fescue the ornery equine probably thought he was going to get for the rest of his pampered life as a stud—Isaac washed up and headed over to the house determined to explain himself to Clessie, to tell her that whatever it was he'd been thinking when he'd said what he said that night a month ago under the glassy-eyed gaze of the elk's head mounted over the fireplace mantel in the Babbitts' great room, not to mention whatever the hell had gotten into him to make him think he could just reach out and brush her hair back without asking the other day at the remuda corral, these were inexcusable acts and would not happen again.

Eleanor answered the door and looked at him, a puzzled look on her face.

"Is Clessie here?" he started right in.

"She said she was going out," Eleanor replied. "She didn't say where she was going but I assumed it was to meet you."

Isaac headed back out across the yard. The living quarters and grounds of the ranch were preternaturally quiet. With the main crew down south the bunkhouse was almost empty. The weather had turned, the trees were dropping their fall colors and glistening with dew as the nights grew colder.

He entered the bunkhouse and looked around. A couple of the other men were already asleep in their bunks. As he lay in his bunk by the wood stove, Isaac could feel the shift of the season in his bones, or in his hip to be more precise; it always ached when

the weather got colder or before the first snowfall. He closed his eyes. He'd apologize tomorrow.

IV

HOME

1917

18

It had taken Clessie longer than she'd planned to walk into town from the Babbitt ranch. She'd lost a shoe on a cattle guard south of town—something she'd never done before—and had spent precious minutes trying to recover it in the dark. She'd barely caught the eastbound AT&SF.

Outside the window the world flew by on its own track. Clessie looked out through the glass, keeping her eyes on the horizon, a depthless blue shroud, the only part of the framed picture that stayed constant as everything else, fields, trees, water towers, train station platforms, all rushed by in a blur, like images in a flipbook. The world in locomotion; the result of its winnowing held out like a promise: God's universe, to be had for the taking, with all of its joys and sorrows.

Isaac.

Her little one.

The curse of her father and all that he'd done.

Two days went by and Isaac still hadn't seen her. *Where in Sam Hill did she go?* It was as if she'd been removed from the earth. On the third day, he got up before dawn and rode into the forest. No sign of her. He went into town and asked around at the churches: Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Catholic, even that nutty Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene crew hadn't seen her. He checked The Salvation Army homeless shelter. He even went to the Mission and described her to the nurses in the hope they might have heard of her,

seen her, even though he wouldn't let himself imagine why she would have been there in the first place. The nurses did not say. Wished him a good day. Closed the door. At the Weatherford Hotel, the deskman told him, "Our guests have a right to their privacy." At the train station, the redcaps shrugged. The stationmaster said, "Look for yourself. I can't keep track of everybody coming and going around here."

That night, he rode out to the itinerants' encampments along the railroad tracks outside of town where he got nothing but mixed up conspiracy theories and nonsensical tales, the inhabitants only too happy to say whatever they imagined he wanted to hear on the chance they could collect a finder's fee.

He looked everywhere. No one had seen her, or if they had they weren't talking.

He headed back to the ranch.

The worlde is an apte frame of heauen and earthe, and all other naturall thinges contained in them.

The wind was coming from the east, over the Mississippi River. The moon appeared briefly from behind a great bank of clouds, illuminating the cornfield. A sea of tall green grass caught the light, rippling in the wind.

Clessie stood on Rural Route 7 in front of the gate to her father's property. The gate's bolt latch was closed as it should have been, but the padlock had been left open and the rusted chain dangled from the latch ring. An unlit lantern hung from a hook on the wooden post by the gate as it always had. She bent down and felt around at the base of the post until her hand closed on the small metal box of wooden matches he'd kept there since she could remember. The moon disappeared behind the cloudbank again. She

straightened and looked down the driveway at the darkened house hunkered like a sleeping animal in the starlit darkness.

Unbidden, the feeling slithered through her gut. She spat into the dirt at her feet. The vertigo receded but she knew after so many visitations and so many years that she would not be rid of this fugue so easily, regardless of the fact that it had been replaced for some months now by her preoccupation with her baby, and then Isaac. She knew there was nothing she could do to fight off its reappearance, its unwelcome, familiar presence as maddeningly familiar as destructive as it was. She was home. *Let it in.* She straightened and looked down the driveway at the house once more, firmly in the grip of her old acquaintance now, and saw a light burning behind the drawn lace curtains in the window by the front door. The curtain moved. A shape appeared in the gauzy, butter-yellow aperture. Suddenly, she felt violently ill again, her fear and long history in a pitched battle with her curiosity to win her attention. She shoved the feeling down, and stared at the outline in the lacy window frame. She marveled: there he was, standing there, looking out. While she could not make out the particulars of his face, she knew his eyes would be searching the darkness, and that he would not see her for the distance between them. She imagined them standing there facing each other for some moments, taking each other's measure.

Finally the figure disappeared. In quick order, the light was extinguished and the house went dark.

In the bunkhouse, the other hands were already asleep. Isaac let himself in and made his way through the sea of snores and farts and mutterings to his bunk at the back of the

room by the wood stove. He opened the creaky door on the stove and shoved another log in. He closed the door and straightened, his eye drawn to the shelf on the wall above his bed and the piece of wax paper with the marigold pressed inside. He hadn't looked at it since he'd discovered she was gone. He picked it up now; his eye ticked on the envelope underneath it. He picked it up. He knew immediately it was the envelope Eleanor had given Clessie when she'd emerged from the arbor.

He sat down on his bunk, opened the envelope flap and took out the square of stiff paper. The photograph was faded but still clear enough, that of a young Native American woman, her hands resting on her swollen belly. The fierce expression on her face seemed to be daring the beholder to dismiss her and the imminent arrival of her child. *Clessie.*

Something else about the picture—the innocence and ferocity of an expectant mother and her unborn child—brought it back to him then: *"It's a beautiful day!"* Clessie's salutation as she'd come out of the main house; that crashing up against the discovery he'd made later when they were leaving Riordan's Mercantile and he'd put his hand on her back; the memory all of it had triggered, which he'd quickly, forcefully pushed away.

It came back to him now.

It was one of those blindingly sun-bright Caribbean mornings in the summer of 1898, immediately after Isaac's regiment had made its second successful assault on San Juan Hill. He'd been awakened in his tent by the sound of a man screaming and immediately thought he was back in the trenches amongst the dead and the dying as he had been the night before, and the night before that. He remembered thinking to himself that if he were

being honest, he would have to admit that at least for the foreseeable future he'd continue to wake up in that stinking mud- and corpse-choked trench—unable to stop seeing what he'd seen, what he'd done, what he'd survived when so many others had not.

Isaac plunged out of his tent into the hot, humid morning, dragging his eyes across the burned-out site where the decimated Alpha Company was bivouacked. Colonel—it was odd, for everything else he remembered, he couldn't recall the company commander's name—was whipping a Spanish soldier who'd been tied to a post for reasons Isaac couldn't comprehend because the Fifth had come away victorious from the brutal hand-to-hand fighting of the night before and he thought that was all over. And while the whipping of enlisted men for infractions was still common, he'd never seen a man being whipped with a chain, which was what the commander was doing now.

The next day when Isaac saw the medics attending to the barely ambulatory soldier at the water pump, his back still naked because he couldn't let a shirt touch the site, Isaac had seen scattered in all directions across the Cuban's back the raised imprint of three, four, then five metal rings in a row, snakes and drains of chain-linked flesh; bloody, raw, split open.

He knew now that that was what had blindsided him when he'd caressed Clessie's back that day on the dray as they were leaving Riordan's Merchantile. *But it couldn't be*, he'd kept saying to himself, his hand across her back giving the lie to his unspoken words, to his desperate wish that it wasn't so.

But Clessie hadn't blinked, had never pulled away. She'd smiled at him. He'd asked himself the question over and over since then: what was it about that moment that

was so important she'd let herself feel nothing else but the two of them sitting on that seat behind those spooked, unruly horses, smiling at each other like a couple of idiots?

He'd never brought it up to her. Nor she to him. It was as if they'd agreed without saying that for the two of them, and in that one moment, that was all there was, and the rest had never happened.

You can never satisfy the Lord, but you must never stop trying.

Clessie lifted the lantern off its hook. Struck a match and lit the wick. She reset the chimney, put her hand on the gate latch and slid back the bolt. With a protesting creak the gate swung open. She pocketed the little metal box of matches and started down the drive to the darkened house.

Nothing less than Paradise is your reward.

Halfway down the driveway Clessie stopped. The lantern swung gently by its bail, its light arcing ahead of her in the darkness. She looked up at the sky, once again hoping she'd see a guiding message the stars had stitched for her and be saved. An expanding bank of black clouds was all God had left to offer. She continued down the drive, took the three steps up to the narrow porch and crossed to the front door, avoiding the plank that *moaned like a haint* like her father had always said, steadfast in his refusal to fix it ever since she could remember.

She put her hand on the latch. The door was unlocked. She pushed against it and let herself in. The first thing she noticed was the density of the air. The ashes from the stove had settled across the floor but were churned up now by her entry. The second thing

she noticed was how small the main room looked. She listened: the house was silent. She waited, intent on marking every detail, her heart beating against the stillness.

She coughed, tasting the ashes in her mouth now and feeling the heaviness in her lungs when she breathed. She imagined that Luisa would not have lit a fire when she came over to take care of the animals, that she wouldn't have bothered. She raised the lantern and crossed the main room, stopping in the entry to the kitchen to take in the source of the pollution: the gaping mouth of the wood-burning stove, its door bent open ajar, the iron grate lying on its side on the floor nearby. She could just see her father, undone by her disappearance and his inability to find her, hurling it there. Two of the joints where the stove legs had been attached to the squat iron body had been sheared off, and the legs themselves lay twisted and covered in white ash on the floor. The sleeves of the stovepipe had become uncoupled, and dangled from wires that were still attached to the blackened wall.

"Daughter."

She wheeled, expecting to see him standing there, ready to drag her down to the root cellar again.

But there was no one. No bogeyman or monster.

She breathed in, choking on the coal dust again, then spoke, her voice incantatory, "I am Iron Warrior, daughter of Half-Sky!" calling out the names in the hope that this would banish the memory of her father's violations, rid the old place of its haunted *wiindigoo,* and free her from her fugues once and for all.

But nothing happened.

She could hear the animals out in the barn kicking up a ruckus now, their domesticated sixth sense alerting them to the arrival of someone who should be letting them out to feed and water them.

She crossed the kitchen and went out through the back door. The screen door banged behind her. As she crossed the back yard, the animals, possibly recognizing who it actually was, really started up now, raising their voices, kicking and banging at the stall doors, giving her the old *gitcher-fanny-out-here-Mabel*. Clessie dragged open the barn's doors and headed down the main aisle, unlatching the stalls as she went. The occupants rushed out as if a bogeyman were after them. Some stopped to sniff her but quickly joined the rest as they bolted towards the open barn doors.

Clessie ran back outside after them and opened the gate to the unharvested cornfield that had gone to seed, its untended stalks overtaken by wild rye grass now. The horses and goats rushed through the gate into the head-high undulating sea of grass on the other side. Pinkie nudged Clessie with her nose and kept going, determined to get her bellyful.

Clessie turned and crossed the yard to the pump; she filled buckets with water and carried them over to the trough by the gate.

After she'd refilled the trough, she looked out at the field again, at the ghostly moonlit shapes of the larger animals' heads bobbing as they pulled at the tall grass, and the rippling currents along the surface betraying the smaller ones' invisible peregrinations to find and eat as much as they could.

She turned and went back into the barn and stopped at the tractor bay just inside the doors. She set the lantern down and picked up the can of kerosene she knew would be

there. She made her way back down the middle aisle again, tipping the can as she went, slopping the fuel on the floor, over the gates of the stalls, onto the straw. When she was done, she retraced her steps, retrieved the lantern and stepped outside. She looked up at the sky to the west. The moon was almost down. The horizon was starting to light up; it would be daylight soon. She crossed the yard to the house and went in through the kitchen door; she came into the front room and went down the stairs into the root cellar. She stopped at the edge of the pile of straw that was covered by the rumpled blanket. She did not look up at the rafters. There was nothing there to see now. She hefted the canister and dumped the rest of the kerosene over the blanket. When she was finished, she dropped the can. She took the metal match box from her dress pocket, took out a match and struck it. It flared and she flung it at the blanket. When it landed it fell short and one corner of the bed of straw began to gobble up the flame hungrily.

She turned and dashed up the stairs, hurrying through the front room as the first flickering light from the flames shuddered across the wall behind her. She headed back through the kitchen and outside. She could see the horses more clearly now, far out in the field, their backs glistening from the dew, their heads plunged deep in the sea of grass. She crossed the yard and shooed the poky chickens along with a pig and a goat over to the field gate and pushed them through and closed it. They'd find their way back around eventually but for now they'd be safe.

She picked up the lantern, looked around once more, then winged it through the open doors into the barn. She heard the bail shatter and the sound of breaking glass. The interior of the barn—the middle aisle, the stalls and their open gates—was suddenly revealed as if someone had turned a light on.

She watched for only a moment, as mesmerized by her handywork as if she'd discovered a master's canvas long-believed lost. An explosion behind her made her jump. She turned. A wall of heat hit her in the face. Pieces of burning lath and plaster, coal sparks and embers blew by her. She took off running across the yard, past the burning house, down the driveway. When she looked back, she saw the embers falling through the air, lighting up the eaves underneath the edges of the barn's roof. Beyond the fire light the field and its itinerant occupants were well away from the conflagration. The explosion had gotten their attention, their heads were raised in curiosity, maybe even fear, but they would stay where they were and be safe until Luisa returned to feed and water them again. *Luisa.* Clessie swung open the gate, stepped through, and closed it behind herself. *I'll write to her on the train.* The next thought tumbled in on top of this. *I don't have anything to write with.*

She looked back at the house once more. The dwellings were all aflame now, their destruction assured. Clessie turned and started back down the road to the railway station.

Later, when she'd reached the lights of the Keokuk train station, she looked behind herself once more, imagining for a moment she could still see the house in flames, the barn alight, the animals let out of their stalls, plunging into the darkness and across the cornfield to safety.

She began to shake, adrenaline flooding her body, along with something else she didn't recognize until she did. *Elation.* She breathed in. She remembered the nights she'd spent in the wilderness after she'd fled the Mission, how she'd wished so fervently to be purged of the horrors that plagued her so she could be free. On this night, while she

wasn't empty, for a moment she'd felt the unbounded rush of the one thing she'd always hoped for but had never been able to feel: she was free.

The station was vacant except for the stationmaster who was propped on a spindly chair across the platform, his hat in his lap, his wattled chin sunk into his white uniform shirt. He was fast asleep.

Terrified and elated, the feeling of freedom that had visited her already receding, Clessie started up the steps.

19

Isaac heard the screech of a gate hinge and figured it was Means coming back to get his wallet. He forgot it every time. It was payday, the rain had subsided, and the hands were going into town to drink in the bars and troll the bordellos out on National Old Trails Highway east towards Holbrook. He waited for the door to open. When it didn't, he got up, crossed the room and opened it to see who had opened the gate and if they'd closed it after themselves. He made out a shape in the darkness, moving past the barn. Isaac waited as it drew closer into the lantern light.

"Clessie—!" He was already running in long strides. He wanted to sweep her up in his arms and squeeze her as hard as he could, but he stopped short, knowing that without her invitation this was all he could do. "Clessie—."

When she'd seen his figure in the lighted doorway and heard her name, she'd quickened her step as well. She ran into him now, almost knocking him over. She pressed

herself against him. He put his arms around her. She tipped her face up and looked at him, her eyes fierce, like her mother's in the picture she'd left him, her face luminous in the lantern light. "I'll marry you, Isaac," she spoke the words as if they were the most natural thing in the world to say.

Isaac looked at her, not believing what he'd just heard. Finally, he said, "Yes, ma'am, Miss Bonaparte," using the formal form to make it official.

Clessie put her arms around his neck. Isaac hesitated once more, afraid the spell would be broken, but she did not stop looking at him, into him. He moved his hands and felt the intricate armature of her back again and she kissed him on the mouth, and if either of them were shocked by this Clessie made no sign except to press her lips even harder against his.

November.

The trees had dropped the last of their leaves; the wind had once again scattered them along the gutters and up against the foundations of the buildings in town. The aspens along Leroux Street especially had marked this change, whipping their bare boughs in the cold air, signaling the onset of another winter.

She was home. It was as if she had never gone away. That was how she saw it. That other place, the one she'd called home her whole life, was gone, along with the demon that had ruled it for so long.

Eleanor was overjoyed that Clessie had come "home"; Old Charlie was relieved she was

alive. Both of them kept their questions and comments to themselves, allowing *the youngsters,* as Old Charlie had begun referring to them now, to pick up the thread of their courtship and unravel the knots that remained as best they could.

They agreed they wouldn't tell anyone they were getting married yet; it would give them time to get used to the idea themselves. Also—although he would never say it aloud—Isaac wasn't completely sure Clessie wouldn't back out of it at some point.

Isaac did not ask Clessie about Luisa's letter and the picture Clessie had left him and she offered no explanation.

One night he placed the letter, still in its envelope, and the photograph next to her on the porch swing. "I thought you might want them back."

He'd read Luisa's letter more than once—half a dozen times if he were being honest with himself—but for however much it may have revealed about Clessie's life before, it had left that much more unanswered—the reason for the scars on her back, the origin of her sudden outbursts, her fugues. *"The past is past."* As worn as that old saw was, as cleaved to under such difficult duress as it had been in his own life, he knew that if were ever to act on those words now was finally the time.

Clessie looked down at picture. "My mother," she spoke, her tone challenging, daring him to say something or turn away.

"She looks like you."

She stiffened.

"She's beautiful." He tipped his chin at her. "Like you."

"Ojibwe." That same challenging tone. The name hung in the air. "I'm Métis—."

"I know. It don't matter."

"'It doesn't matter.'"

"What?"

"It *doesn't* matter." She looked down at the picture again, but left it there untouched. Part of her had thought her revelation would have been the end. But there was something about the way he'd said it, *It don't mattter* that allowed her to take him at his word. It was enough that they both knew. Enough that he still wanted her, and that she wanted him.

A day or two later, Isaac joined her under the oak tree where she said she'd be if he needed her. He still wasn't a hundred percent sure she wouldn't up and *vamanos* again, but Clessie had given him fair warning that things were going to be different from here on out and that he'd better get used to it.

"I've got something for you," he held out a small package wrapped in plain paper.

She took the package and unfolded the paper wrapping. She stared down at it cradled in her hands.

"It's for—," Isaac motioned at the strand of her hair that was always falling down, the one she was always tucking back.

She was silent.

"I know it ain't much," he said, suddenly worried.

"'Isn't much.'"

"What?"

"It *isn't* much." She looked at the small, elegant bone comb in her hand, then up at him, tears filling her eyes again. "It's everything."

A week later, as the southbound train started its descent into the Verde Valley, Clessie looked out the window, thrilled and stricken all at once. This was how it would be, she knew, wherever she went, in whoever's company she found herself, or however much more distant the events of those years became as she grew older.

This is my history now, she thought. *Our history, spirit child. You will always be safe, always be with me.* She pulled her bag closer and looked out the window at the thickets of Catclaw and Gray Thorn, their deadhead flower tops and fists of tiny black fruit swiped by a painter's brush rushing by on either side of the tracks. As they reached the valley floor, ancient sycamores, their trunks bearded with peeling bark, bent their boughs in the wind.

Phoenix. How will we find it? She looked over at Isaac again. He was looking past her now, out the open window, lost in his own thoughts. She squeezed his arm. He looked at her and touched her hand. *Together.*

A gust of wind brushed Clessie's face and ruffled her hair. The bone comb Isaac had given her held it in place. She looked up at the blue gulf of the sky, the massy clouds cruising like swift galleons. *Our history, little one, as far as we can go.*

CODA

20

Iron Warrior (the name she'd given him) stood on the naked edge of the world, his supernal eyes reflecting the vastness of a universe only he could see. His tiny hands cast mantic spells, his mind absorbed in all the possibilities one soul could imagine.

He missed her, but not nearly as much as she missed him. The longing would always be there, but the universe was so immense, so endless in both distance and opportunity, he couldn't wait. He filled his lungs and sang into the abyss:

Hear me Half Sky
O-gin-i-waatig
With my own hands
These graves I dig

For all the souls
The thousand thorns
The lives cut short
The outcasts born

This Iron child
This life you saved:
Now Iron Warrior
Now no one's slave

Remember me
I am the one
Who catches moons
And touches suns

Remember me
And know my name
You have my heart
We are the same

It was all before him now. All of his molecules were firing. The sound of his voice, reaching across time, unimpeded, flooding the universe with his love.

END