

CAN'T PLAY DEAD: A SOUTHERN GOTHIC NOVELLA

by

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HONORS THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Evie Goddard has spent most of her life in solitude on her family's West Texas homestead, isolated from the world and touched only by a few close calls with the Great Depression and the beginnings of World War II. Her father, Lloyd Goddard, a man as deeply religious as he is repressed, spends his days evangelizing in the shed out back, reciting and rewriting the gospel, much to the dismay of his scorned wife. Rebecca Goddard, an unwilling matriarch, refuses to acknowledge how profoundly disturbed she is by the timeline she finds herself within—and sometimes without. After the Great Depression forces the young family out of a comfortable life in Dallas and onto the desolate family estate, Rebecca is set to fill the same role as her late mother and serves as the matron of her own childhood home.

When the past begins to repeat itself and Evie finds herself falling into the same missteps as her mother, Rebecca begins to unravel, catapulting the family into turmoil and uncovering sin that was never meant to see the light of day. As her mother and father both withdraw into their pasts, Lloyd finds himself freely indulging in his faith, while Rebecca begins losing touch with reality altogether. Evie, disturbed in her own right, begins to wonder if her family will be able to cling to each other when they need unity the most, or if the wickedness of their pasts—and its reverberations in their present—will pull them apart at the seams.

Can't Play Dead follows a family at odds with their own sin, facing the trauma and violence of war, of love, and of religion, and asks what happens when the people you

are supposed to love and be loved by so deeply are the ones you may need to fear the most.

PREFACE

The process of writing this thesis was quite the undertaking for me. Before this, I had never written any longform creative pieces. All I knew was that I wanted to do it one day. Writing this story as my thesis seemed like the perfect plan because I'd be able to test my own creative abilities while being backed by the Honors College and supported by an experienced advisor, which gave me a huge sense of security. With that in mind, I felt more freedom to experiment and push some boundaries that I was not quite sure I could push before I first began to think about completing a thesis.

In the fall of 2021, I took the first thesis course, where I learned research and citation techniques. While the course was more tailored to the needs of a student doing a traditional thesis, I still came away having chosen to add a historical element, since I now knew how to search archives and better represent a time and place other than my own present. I spent a few months researching my newly developed ideas, and then I set out to put them on paper.

When I began drafting, the beginning came easily to me. I was inserting background information to a skeletal outline I had been staring at since I began my first thesis class. I was describing the homestead and the goings-on of the back acre, the dehydrated earth and fruitless garden. It felt like historical fiction. Like I could sit with it all day and never feel the little pinpricks of uneasiness that would surely follow when my story took a turn. I was, admittedly, extremely nervous for the upcoming portions of the novella because once it took off, there was no stopping the story and all of its accompanying horror.

As the story developed and I began my second thesis course, I realized the importance of checking in with myself. It's only natural that a piece of writing takes on characteristics of the author's real life, but with this novella, many of those characteristics were intentional, major plot points. Adapting real-life experiences to fit a historical timeline was simultaneously cathartic and extremely stress-inducing. It helped me to fictionalize these events because I was the one in power while writing. At the same time, I spent months sitting with the fear that if people rejected my writing, they were rejecting *me* because the novella contains so much of myself. I have, for the most part, moved past this fear because I am just excited for my words to see the light of day after being shut inside my laptop for so many months.

Now that I have finished writing, I can breathe a sigh of relief—not only for the fact that my deadlines have all been met and my documentation has been submitted, but also because I have given life to something that I am genuinely proud of and excited for others to consume. It is bitesize in physicality but not in nature. It is years of trauma and far too many feelings. It is the love of a dirty, nasty genre rolled up into a little package that will gnash its teeth and bare its wounded soul and pray with you when you ask God to forgive it for its sins.

CONTENT WARNING

The following novella contains scenes of graphic violence, domestic abuse, and sexual assault. Please read with caution and care.

Prologue

August 1943. Mescalero County, TX

Evelyn gripped the fencepost, hand to gut, foot to gravel. She blinked once. Twice. Took a deep breath in. The moon had only just come out of hiding. Back breaking, head aching hurt. Everywhere. Her breath hitched, and she unfurled herself from against the post. Headlights silhouetted her dwindling shadow, retracing their steps back out of the driveway. Dust settled like ash. Evelyn fumbled with the lock in one hand, the other still holding her belly together. The lock fell open with a clatter sent down the humble few acres, dwindling now from what they once were. A hen startled in her roost. A dog raised its drooping jowl to peer at Evelyn's silhouette.

A goose egg was forming on the top of the girl's head. She patted it lightly. Lovingly. Her fingers detached themselves from her aching belly and brushed her cheek. Still warm. The rest of her was warm—far too warm. Like someone had stuck a lit match up inside her. Evelyn felt the bruising up and down her arms, her legs, her throat, as if manhandled by a wild animal playing with its food. She supposed it had gone something like that. She wandered up the steps, double checking that this was her house. Her brain fogged and eyes lost focus. She felt uncertain, uneasy that she was not going to be safe even after entering the property.

Each gateway deeper into the property shut with rushed fear. Putting as much distance between her and the outside. The deadbolt was left unlocked as a 'goodnight' from her mother and father. She blinked into the aging doorway and through the room her mother called the foyer. Paint peeling and wallpaper long gone.

Rebecca Goddard was a proud woman whose luck had run out. Forced to move back to the home she grew up in after life in Dallas had gone awry, Evelyn's mother returned to the old homestead with her family, and rather than lick her wounds, the woman stripped the house to its studs before rebuilding it around herself. It shamed her deeply to sleep in the same bedroom her own mother and father had taken up. Lloyd Goddard didn't mind. *The mattress is new*, he had said. *That's all I care for*. Evelyn's mother saw it different. She had pledged to escape this home. Had scratched into every childhood diary, cover to cover, that this was not a life sentence.

Despite her appeals, Fate would have the woman shackled to this home until her judgement. There was no sense in making the best of it, even after recovering from the Depression and from what the papers had called the Dust Bowl, so Rebecca feigned ignorance. Sometimes she woke up in a panic, not sure if she was waking from a dream and was still a schoolgirl or if she really was the woman of the house now, her parents gone with the dust storms that swept the South. It unnerved her to experience her past and present with such fluidity, but there was no sense in dwelling on things she couldn't fix. Rebecca survived by categorizing her life: there were things she could control and things she couldn't. If Rebecca woke the next morning to plaits and a wrinkled jumper, so it was, but by God she wouldn't let her fear show.

Evelyn padded deeper. Through the entryway. Past the den without a sideways glance. Through the dining room, with its sinking floors and aged spice cabinet stuffed into the corner. Into the room that once was her mother's. The wood-slat flooring was expectedly unpreserved, having been laid before the county lines were drawn and surviving even the worst of the past decades. The girl began to pick up her feet as she

walked for fear of splinters. She walked into the bathroom adjoining the room and stared into her own mirrored eyes. Her eyes bulged, tears edging in their corners. “Why are you crying?” she whispered at her double. “You’re grown, Evie.” She straightened. “Evelyn.” She picked up her chin, jutting it out and blinking away her grief for her stolen girlhood. The bruising and the heat hit her in waves. Guilt. Fear. Pride. Plain old pain. Evelyn put a hand to the bump forming on the top of her head again, rubbing at it. She pinned her palm down onto it with a fist and pushed, willing away any evidence. A miserable whine escaped her lips, the kind Danny had told her to stop making, and she released her palm from her scalp. Evelyn sat down onto the toilet, expecting to see the foretold blood in her underthings. There was none. *I gotta bleed from it, right?*

As she relieved herself, the match lit in her snuffed out. Evelyn breathed in until her lungs ached at being filled so wholly. She ached for the same reason. As she stood up and leaned to the sink, she looked herself up and down in the mirror, tracing her hips, cupping her breast underneath her wrinkled t-shirt—with less ferocity than he had—twisting and arching her back to get a better view. Her white shirt clung to her back with sweat, and a small patch of blood had dried and stuck the shirt to her protruding spine. Evelyn reached to take off her shirt to investigate, peeling off the shirt and the drying blood, leaving the fresh pink skin beneath exposed. She fingered the wound, drawing her fingertips over the imprint of the small stone that had been lodged so forcefully into her back. Each time her head hit the car door, her spine was jerked along a small rock that had been left on the bench seat.

This wound would follow Evelyn, and she knew it. She shuddered and reached for the sink, wrenching at the faucet and thrusting the shirt beneath the water. She

scrubbed the white shirt with soap and water, biting at the stain when fingernails could not scrape it away. The spot was persistent, turning pink, then orange. She scrubbed until her fingers ached as much as the rest of her. Trembling, she held the shirt up to the light. Mama will see it in the laundry. Evelyn wrung out the shirt and balled it up, secreting it away in the corner of a cabinet left closed since the bathroom belonged to her mother. She shuffled out of the bathroom and into her bed.

Chapter 1

1923

Mescalero County, just west of Pecos, wasn't much to speak of—one of the larger counties with some of the least going on. It had been that way since Rebecca was a child. She grew up on this land, her family settling before it was incorporated. Her father, Robert Bridges, grandson of one of the original settlers to come to Texas, found and wed Rebecca's mother Emma quickly, and they never left the land they had squared away before the turn of the century. Their address used to be *the mailbox up near Saltcreek Draw*. Rebecca had sworn she'd leave the dust and the heat—marry comfortably and move to the big city. Unsatisfied by anyone in town and determined to forge her own way, Rebecca set out for Dallas alone after graduating high school, her parents unable to change her mind despite their pleas for her to stay and meet a nice boy in town. Though she couldn't have afforded school even if her parents were willing to help her, Rebecca coveted a college education. Set on earning her own way, Rebecca took up residence with the Dallas YWCA, where she could live among like-minded young women, take classes to get her first job, and save up to put herself into college. Along the way, she met Lloyd Goddard, young and promising true love, and all but abandoned her plans of feminine independence in her new world.

Only a year older than her, Lloyd swept Rebecca off her feet. He came from nothing but didn't talk like it. He knew jazz, and he knew booze, and he knew exactly what Rebecca had been searching for. He was nothing like the farm boys back home, Lloyd offered the security Rebecca needed to be able to step out into the city—on his

arm. Lloyd held a steady position at the Ford manufacturing plant and made enough to fawn over the simple farm girl. When breaking her curfew to stay out with Lloyd no longer sufficed, Rebecca dared to leave the safety of the women's housing and moved in with Lloyd. They were married in the spring of 1925 at the Baptist church and began renting a small flat just shy of downtown, and Rebecca left her old life and her maiden name behind in the dust of West Texas.

It had been since Rebecca's time at the Dallas YWCA that she had written to or heard from her parents—nearly four and a half years—and her parents did not know that she was married or that they were now grandparents. Rebecca, consumed with the niceties of daily life, rarely considered her upbringing anymore, and had not stopped to remember her past correspondence with her parents for years. Evie was now nearly two years old, growing up happy and healthy and wholly unaware of the shame and disdain Rebecca felt towards her own roots. *Evie won't grow up to be like me*, was the mantra that kept her going, kept her able to face the unknowns of each day.

As a grisly reminder of the impermanence of her escape for Rebecca, a bundle of letters arrived at the Goddard's one particularly icy December morning. The mail carrier, not their usual delivery man, greeted Rebecca at the door with an apologetic smile, telling Rebecca that she was from the Dallas YWCA and was *terribly sorry, but we couldn't find your new address for quite some time after you hurried off to be married. But these letters, backdated as they are, are for you, Mrs. Goddard*. The mail carrier hurried off, leaving Rebecca on the doorstep with a stack of envelopes and a small and flattened parcel, all addressed with the same scrawled hand. Rebecca's eyes flicked over the envelopes. They were all from her parents, dated from January of 1925 up until July of

1930, five months before they found their way to Rebecca. She set them on a side table and did not touch them for three days.

On the fourth day, she conceded. Rebecca was far from being a sentimental woman, but the banded parcel of letters she now stared at struck her in a way that she had not let many things in the last few years. Rebecca made her way to the den, shooing Evie away, and slit open the side of the first envelope. January 5th, 1925. Before Rebecca had married Lloyd, but after she had left the YWCA.

Rebecca,

Happy New Year, my dearest. Your father & I hope all is well in Dallas. I wish we could hear of you more, but I suppose your life is beginning in the city. I miss you every day, sweetheart. Write soon, okay?

Mom & Dad

The next was from a few months later, again asking Rebecca to send correspondence, to say anything at all. Her father wrote, telling her that there was a new church built in town and that her parents had begun to attend the service there. They spoke of monotony on the farm, of things that bored Rebecca, and yet these small letters pieced together a story in which she was no longer a character. Rebecca felt a bead of loss drip from her, and then another, soon threatening to unleash a flash flood into a fissured and long-dried riverbed that Rebecca had dammed up long ago. She thumbed through letter after letter from her mother and father, and that dam's foundation began to crack, small fractures opening until at last, she opened a letter postmarked February 23rd, 1929. Her mother wrote that both her and Rebecca's father had contracted tuberculosis

sometime in the winter and weren't sure how they would manage the land while they were sick. Her mother said that they didn't have any neighbors nearby—the land still being mostly arid and unsettled—and that she worried deeply for Rebecca's father's health. The church did what they could manage, but life was hard for everyone in the county, and a pair of old folks were hardly the keenest worry of a congregation whose babies were sick and hungry, too. *We've worried so much for you these past few years, but I think now's the time for you to worry about us. Write soon, Rebecca. Please.*

That was the last letter. The parcel that followed was sent by a solicitor. A newspaper clipping of her parents' obituaries pinned to their will, reading that Rebecca was the sole inheritor of the family's homestead and requesting her attendance at their funeral in July of 1930, five months prior.

By the springtime, work was slow and rent was high. Lloyd worked at the Ford plant, but Rebecca listened to his whispered prayers after he thought she was asleep and understood that he would soon be out of his job. No one could buy cars in 1930. No one could buy much of anything. Rebecca had not worked since Evelyn was born, and she knew that there was no chance of finding work after Lloyd's inevitable layoff. She had kept the letters from her parents hidden and had only told Lloyd that they had passed but that it wasn't worth it to spend the gas and travel back home for a funeral. *Mama would understand*, she told herself.

With the entire city facing mass layoffs, the young family knew the chances of eking out a life in Dallas would be slim if neither Lloyd nor Rebecca could find work. Still, Rebecca couldn't bear the thought of bringing her family to where she grew up. The land was hard and the people harder. But there were things Rebecca could control and

things she could not. Right now, the young mother could control keeping her family off the streets if the need arose. And so Rebecca steeled herself against the threat of that once-distant desert, preparing to relive her girlhood—though this time she held the reins.

Chapter 2

The Goddards moved into the late Bridges' homestead in the summer of 1931, shortly after Lloyd was laid off from the Ford manufacturing plant and the young family realized how close the threat of poverty loomed. The homestead, though it had sat empty nearly a full year, was not in an irreparable state: all of the windows were preserved and the lean-to shed out back still stood. Lloyd had figured since the land was far enough from any major roads and there weren't many people nearby to begin with, no vagrants had cozied up in the vacant house.

When the family arrived in Mescalero County, no one remembered Rebecca Bridges, and no one cared to meet Rebecca Goddard. The same went for Lloyd and Evelyn. The county had tried to grow up while Rebecca had been away, but being a child of the Depression had left it runty and malnourished, so most kept to themselves, heads down to the cracking soil. The Wrights, the only other family that lived along the backcountry road, heard of their arrival, but the nature of the desert was to keep to yourself and mind your own, so as not to bother the others daring to scratch out a living. It was hard enough to keep your own kin alive out here, let alone worry yourself with the neighbors.

The church from her parents' letter still stood—not that Rebecca would allow her family to attend it—and many had turned to God these past years when no earthly force could provide answer or aid. Rebecca had turned her back, while Lloyd had strengthened his faith in the Almighty. “The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing,” he parroted about the house. God will always provide for the faithful. Rebecca forbade the name of God from entering her home, not out of respect

or fear of taking it in vain, but out of resentment for what He represented to her. That undying, unyielding conviction that overtook the senses and wreaked havoc on earthly judgment. And so Lloyd was faithful in secret.

To Lloyd, the homestead was a gift from God, a second chance at a perfect family. A shot at redemption after failing to provide for his wife and daughter. He wasn't a country boy—that was what Rebecca had liked so much about him to start—but every morning he would rise with the sun and tend to this or that repair until the property was up to his standards. Often, when he would wake up before Rebecca, he would walk out to the lean-to shed—now sporting four walls and a roof—and would pray, thanking the Lord for another morning. He knew Rebecca disapproved, understood almost, why her first proclamation as woman of the house was to prohibit God's entrance onto her property. He figured some people just couldn't hold onto hope for as long as others. Sometimes he prayed on this. Sometimes he just took pity.

There was little reason to leave the property except for Evie to go to school, once she was old enough, so national affairs seldom affected the homestead. So far out West, they had felt little of the Depression, instead shouldering the physical burden of the drought and dust. However, no one in the county, not even the Goddards, could escape the news in December of 1941. Hawaii was about as far from Mescalero County as anything could be, but it was as good as the next county over with the way people talked. War and bombers and *those goddamn Japs* were all Lloyd could think about. He tuned into radio news programs instead of fervid sermons, and for once, Rebecca welcomed violence into her home, as long as it drowned out Jesus.

And then one morning, Mescalero County was a land of women and children. The cock's crow that morning was prouder, as he realized that he was the last able man standing for at least a few square miles.

Lloyd found himself ringing in the new year aboard the *USS Chester*, a Navy cruiser usually home-ported at Pearl Harbor that had mercifully been at sea that past December. Lloyd was among the first batch of men sent abroad with the Japanese in mind, and though he was more than grown, he felt himself a fledgling seaman, unfit for such hasty service. It was the nature of the United States to not care much for what Lloyd thought of himself. He saw his conscription as a punishment from God for forgetting to pray these past few months when the war had occupied his waking thoughts, and that only his ritual prayer could get him through the war and back on solid ground. Every morning, he rose before his compatriots, just like he had on the homestead, and prayed to God to let him survive and get home—to get another chance at proving himself a worthy servant. He never missed a single morning.

In February, the *Chester* engaged the Japanese in the Marshall Islands, with Lloyd in tow. During the raid, she sustained considerable damage, losing eight sailors. Lloyd was, by the grace of God, not counted among the dead or injured. He had been deep in prayer when the *Chester* was hit and had not been near the deck, where the lost men had been.

In the midst of the chaos, Lloyd had found himself below deck, clutching his bible tight and whispering to his God to spare him. When he would recount the tale later, he would say that God laid it on his heart to run up to the deck to aid the crew, but the

lieutenant that found him, huddled and clutching his damp bible to his heaving chest, may have had a different story to tell.

“What in the hell are you doin’ down here, Goddard?” the lieutenant Miller yelled down the wobbling stairwell. Lloyd looked up from his chest, hand folded around the bible and knuckles white. He didn’t get a chance to protest before the enraged lieutenant rushed at him, skipping two and three steps on his way down to the man and leaning down to his upturned face. “I said. What in the hell. Are you doin’ down here, Goddard,” the lieutenant seethed.

Lloyd could barely whisper, the ragged breath of the lieutenant hot on his cheeks. “Sir. I—um. I got a touch queasy an’ figured I’m no use up on deck heavin’ over the side, seasick an’ all. You know, I haven’t quite got my sealegs like you have yet. Sir.”

The lieutenant did not dignify Lloyd with even his pity. “Seasickness turns you green, not yellow, Goddard. What the hell good can any man do down here cowering? What are you waiting for down here?”

Lloyd looked up at the lieutenant and sighed weakly. “I—I’m waitin’ to hear from God fer what to do.”

The lieutenant swung hard, landing his first blow in Lloyd’s hunched ribs. Lloyd lost his grip on his bible, curling in on himself as the lieutenant straightened and repositioned himself to kick the cowering man.

“I’ll make sure you see God if you don’t get your ass up and act like a dignified goddamn navy man.” He kicked at Lloyd, who was now on one knee in front of him and trying to stand, and swept his leg out from under him at the knee. Lloyd heard the wet

pop of the snapping ligaments before he felt it, but the lieutenant took no notice. He reached down and snatched up the bible Lloyd had dropped, peering at its worn edges with disgust. “You think this can save you, Goddard? We’re in the middle of the goddamn ocean fightin’ with the goddamn Japanese. There’s no God out here. Get your ass up and onto the deck. I’m going to start walking, and you’d better beat me there.” He turned on his heel and started up the stairs, dropping the bible onto the floor in front of Lloyd. His greasy fingerprints shone on the cover, illuminated by the light of the door at the tops of the stairs.

Lloyd made to stand up, but his knee wouldn’t allow for much. He tucked the bible under his armpit and grit his teeth, fearing if he ground down much harder they’d turn to pearly sand in his mouth. He made his way to the uppermost deck, limping on a knee that he didn’t trust with his weight, not quite able to take in a full breath due to the deep, pulsing ache that had set into his side. When he got to the deck, the chaos had all but ceased and the *Chester* had retreated. Men were running back and forth, calling out to one another, and one ran straight into Lloyd as he squinted into the fresh sunlight, knocking him onto his ass and into a puddle of seaspray and something deep red and viscous. The man looked at Lloyd like he might hit him like the lieutenant had, and Lloyd realized the man had been calling for him to move out of the walkway and let a medic get by. While some of the crew gathered the casualties and tended to those gravely injured, Lloyd counted himself among the other thirty seven injured men, sitting himself on the ground beside a boy he thought couldn’t have been more than nineteen. The boy’s eyes were glazed over and he spoke to Lloyd as if he couldn’t hear his own voice over the ringing in his ears.

“You okay? Yer leg looks pretty busted up.”

“I’ll be fine, son. I ‘spect I’ve got a guardian angel lookin’ over me out here if all’s wrong with me is a busted leg an’ a bruised rib or two,” Lloyd said, one hand cradling his midsection and one stabilizing his knee. His bible was tucked beneath his shoulder still, but had been fairly damaged in the initial commotion when he reached the deck. When the angry crewman had run into him and Lloyd had fallen backwards, he’d caught his fall with his bible in his hand, and the small book hadn’t fared well. The seaspray had dried and dehydrated the pages, blurring the words. The viscous liquid in the puddle had blended with Jesus’s red words, turning everything a deep and unreadable maroon. Lloyd flipped through, growing anxious as he realized the state of the book. Its thin pages dissolved in his hands as he flipped through them, searching fervently for a single one that was undamaged. He could not find one, so he shut the bible tight and folded his hands over it and began to recite from memory. He began to pray—for himself, for his wife and his daughter, for the boy beside him, for the souls lost during the attack, but mostly for forgiveness.

When the medics came by, Lloyd said he’d been up on the deck when they’d been hit and had sustained his injuries trying to aid the men closer to the impact. Lloyd knew this was a sin, but he felt that it was a greater sin on the part of the nation for having kept him from his family. Having survived the attack, Lloyd felt the Lord had given him yet another chance to bring His word to his family. He decided that constant, daily prayer was the only hope to save a lost soul, and this wife and child’s souls would surely be lost without his guiding light.

Lloyd was medically discharged after assessment at the Navy hospital in Hawaii, the medics telling him the damage was too great to be worth rehabilitating him as a seaman. He would have to be off his feet for weeks and on crutches for months. Lloyd had let out a sigh of relief that was cut short by the ache in his broken ribs. He was going home. So much sooner than he'd thought possible. *That's the power of prayer*, he told himself. Not only had the Lord allowed him to survive the attack on the *Chester*, but He was sending him home after only a few months of service. *Such a small punishment for my sins*. He vowed not to miss another day of prayer, knowing that surely the Lord wouldn't be so quick to forgive him again.

The day Lloyd returned home, he walked through the entryway and straight out the back door to the shed. He placed his decaying bible onto the old platform of a table saw, turning it into an altar of sorts. He walked out of the shed, small axe in hand, and went to the nearest tree—an ancient pecan. He swung and brought down a branch as big around as his wrist. He chopped it into two smaller pieces and dragged the branches towards the shed. With an artist's care, Lloyd sheared the branches, clearing away small sprouts and digging down to the green flesh beneath the bark until they were slicked with the tree's honeydew.

He sawed at the felled branches until they were fit to his measurements and then went inside of the shed to retrieve a rusting hammer and a paper pack of nails no bigger than a matchbox. Sticking a few nails between his lips like a cigarette, he knelt before the branches and began to hammer. When he was finished, Lloyd lifted the cross, raw and green and peppered with dirt, and took it into the shed. It weighed a considerable amount and Lloyd grit his teeth as he shifted his weight onto his bad knee to balance himself.

Once inside, he removed a rotted shelf bracketed to the wall above his new altar and screwed in two newer brackets close enough to hold the arms of his cross that sat with a wingspan of nearly a yard.

Lloyd reached for his bible on the altar and found that more than half the pages were unreadable. The saltwater and blood had done a number on the small book. The bible he'd had since he married Rebecca. The bible that sat on his nightstand every night until Rebecca had stolen it with the intention of burning. That had been some months before his Evie was born. Lloyd had dug through Rebecca's bureau until he'd found the bible buried beneath the pretty underthings Rebecca never wore for him anymore. She had never brought it up again, but she surely knew Lloyd had stolen it back, so Lloyd had found ways to be more clever about his preachings and prayers. He found his illicit affair with God thrilling, a secret between himself and the Trinity.

But now his bible was water-damaged and blood-stained beyond repair, and he felt like he'd lost a physical piece of himself at sea. He whirled around, struck with sudden enlightenment. He dove into the nearby set of drawers and fished out a nub of a pencil that must be older than Evie and a small but thick moleskin that only had a few occupied pages at the front that detailed Rebecca's father's plans for alterations to the rear fenceline. Lloyd had repaired that fenceline when they moved out to the property. He tore out the pages that Robert Bridges had written in and moved back to his altar.

Pencil and paper in hand, Lloyd lowered himself to his knees, forehead leaning down so closely to the moleskin that it nearly pressed into the floor of the shed, and began to write.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters...

Chapter 3

Mescalero County, June 1943

Evie sat, spine pin-straight, in the den. Hands in her lap, feet square. Her mother slouched beside the radio, humming along with what Evie called her *wayward cowboy music*. Music for pretending you're sauntering through an old saloon's loose-hinged doors rather than the drugstore down in the main part of town. Music for souls lost to time, for tipping the hourglass and watching it pour from upside down, as if the sand isn't running out on you after all. Music for those hanging onto memories best left in sepia toned prints. Her father, paying no mind to the music, sat in his armchair with only the warmed and diluted dregs of his drink left in the thick glass tumbler.

The walls were hung with ornaments of bygone eras. Pearly antlers no one remembered mounting. A mantelpiece with chipping masonry, its sand-fine shards collecting in the small gap between the stone and the hardwood, books that no one bothered to read the titles of anymore. They were stacked along the windowsills: the T-book from the unfinished encyclopedia collection, the photo album that had gone without updating for far too long, the book whose author no one could pronounce the name of, the book Evie's father read to her while she was still growing within Rebecca. Some held open windows where the paint sticks had faltered under the panes' weight. All of them were yellowed, unread. Spines were cracked only for show. A photo of her mother and father at their wedding faced the westerly window, its frame a tarnished pewter and the print caged within left faded from the sun setting on their staunch faces each evening. Lloyd sighed. Rebecca did not cease her humming. Evie stiffened, but only enough to

feel it inside of her—a wave of adrenaline subsiding before she knew it had hit. Her mother and father took no notice.

“You know, I wouldn’t find some goddamn peace if it walked in that door there and introduced itself to me,” Lloyd said, empty hand reaching limply towards the entryway. It wavered and dropped back into his lap as no one responded to his laments.

“You’re some godly man, taking His name in that manner, Lloyd Goddard. And you sure as hell won’t find peace at the bottom of that glass. Maybe you should go lookin’ down the business end of that shiny new .38 you bought me,” Rebecca crooned like some smooth-talking cowboy. She kept her eyes closed as she said this, taunting Lloyd to make a move as she left herself so vulnerable.

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you mean by that, sweetheart,” Evie’s father smiled, teeth clicking. He tipped the watery contents of his glass into the potted ivy whose vines already reached out to escape its station on the side table that separated him from Rebecca. Lloyd held the tumbler high and shook the last drippings into the poisoned soil. He brought his hand down and closer to his eyes, examining the room through its magnifying glass effect. He refocused his eyes and looked deeply into the fisheye reflection of his face and sighed.

“Gimme your dinner plates. I’m gonna go wash the dishes. No sense in lettin’ ‘em stack up since I’m the only one that’ll ever do ‘em anyways.” Her father stood up more abruptly than Evie nerves would’ve wished. Plates clattered and cups were stacked as he stole away to the kitchen, emptied tumbler still in hand. Rebecca continued her humming.

Creaking floorboards led into the kitchen and the faucet ran until hot. Lloyd began muttering incomprehensible secrets with himself, saved for when the water drowned out his words.

Evie's mother turned to her, clicking off the radio. "Go help him. Now. I'm gonna go put the chickens up for the night. We had dinner too late an' I forgot to put the chickens up an' now it's already dark. They're probably already roostin'—just sittin' pretty for a raccoon". She stood up, smoothing the wrinkled hems of her pants and stuffing them into her galoshes beside the door. Rebecca reached for her flashlight and clicked it on. She took aim and flashed it into Evie's bewildered eyes, motioning to the kitchen with the light for Evie to *get her ass off the couch and go help her father with the dishes*. She let the screen door slam behind her, bouncing off the doorframe enough for the cat to scurry in just before its second blow landed. Her path was illuminated out the door and Evie's gaze followed, looking through each window her mother passed by until she got out to the henhouse.

Evie stood and padded into the kitchen, its open window displaying her father in a fishbowl facing the backyard and their land extending land behind it. Through the open window the two could hear the country highway beyond their property and its clattering traffic. Cross country semis skirted big city traffic and stopped up the narrowed highways this far out, but it was still faster than braving the horrors of the growing urban sprawl further east. The trucks rattled on, day or night, carrying unknown goods to unknown places or aiding the war effort, though not much talk of it reached as deep as the Goddards were planted. The war didn't touch the Goddards anymore, not since Lloyd had come home. They didn't listen in on Roosevelt's fireside chats. Hadn't for a while. So

they sat, untouched by whatever plagued the rest of the nation. It was how they survived the Depression, and it was how they would keep surviving the war. Though once upset by how slow the news traveled both to and from Mescalero County, the family mostly adapted to their lifestyle, unanchored to a timeline and untouched by the struggle of the common man.

The light over the kitchen was dim, but a wall of empty pickling and jam jars reflected just enough to make Evie squint as the light caught her eye in the seam between the dining room and the kitchen. Though it was late in the summer, the okra had yet to push through the garden soil. The soil was usually fertile, hearty, but it had not proven its worth in the back stretch of the family's property. It was no fault of the earth. The spiritual drought had poisoned the crops, just as the vining plant in the den. And so the jars sat, waiting to be filled by specimens that would not come to fruition.

Lloyd didn't hear her walk into the room over the running water and his small radio he'd brought out and set it atop the windowsill. Pastor G.E. Lowman, all the way from Baltimore, rang out from the small radio. Evie knew that her father sometimes listened to this program, but she also knew that her mother would never allow a Christian radio show to play in the house. Neck whipping, his eyes bore into Evie. She squinted harder and Lloyd flashed a smile, laughing heartily. He came alive.

"Evie," he called, "I feel it! I surely do! That soul, it's alive in me! It's burnin'— oh! It's burnin'."

The girl blinked. "God?"

"Yes ma'am! God, Jesus, whatever you'd like to call 'em. Only, don't let your mama know you call Him by anything at all. She'd hang me from the slats of the hen

house roof for disrespectin' her rules in her own house. In her *mother's* house," he corrected. "This'll be a secret," he winked. Evie blinked again. *The open window. Mama will surely hear the music through the window.* She leaned a shoulder into the doorway, interested in a fearful kind of way to see how this would play out. "Need help?"

"Yeah. Dry 'em off for me," her father said, pulling off the towel on his shoulder like a flapper's feather boa. He twirled it around itself and pretended to snap it at Evie as she walked to the drying rack beside the sink. She grabbed the towel and began to manhandle the plates, pulling them through her towel clockwise, counting the seconds until her mother would walk in from the henhouse. Lloyd was caught up by the spirit burning in him, but his daughter's jaw was wired, teeth gritted, pulling at the dishes and setting them down with expert soundlessness, a talent she'd picked up along her way through childhood. She peered through the open window, watching the flashlight blink through the fence posts. Lloyd stayed alight. Pastor Lowman kept preaching.

Her mother's flashlight out back caught Evie's gaze, its dusty beam swinging as Rebecca walked back towards the house. The light rounded the pathway and made its way to the front gate, its rusting hinges croaking out just too quietly for Lloyd to catch. He continued to wash and nod along to the radio program. Pastor Lowman was just ending a prayer as the screen door shut and Rebecca walked into the house. She padded through the entryway, then dining room, then into the kitchen, Evie feeling her encroaching footfalls on the hardwood as she made her way over to the sink.

"Absolutely not. Not in my home. Not in *my* kitchen." Rebecca stepped towards the two and Evie felt her insides constrict. "I don't give a damn if it's Lowman or Jesus Christ his-goddamn-self. Get that out of my house." She reached for the radio—neither

Lloyd nor Evie could with their hands wet and soapy—and shut it off, lugging it across the countertop and out of Lloyd’s reach. Rebecca then looked to her daughter, whose eyes fell as Rebecca’s eyes seared into her downturned head. Surely just by being in the room Evie hadn’t incriminated herself. *I don’t even know Jesus*, she thought, though she sent a quick, unconscious prayer up that her mother wouldn’t be angry with her for partaking in the gospel. Evie didn’t quite understand why her mother hated God, but, quite frankly, she didn’t want to know. *It’s gotta be somethin’ bad if she don’t even let daddy listen when he’s alone. Not even pray.* All the girl knew was that they hadn’t gone to church since before they’d come back to West Texas—not even when the Wrights had invited them to the newly renovated church, saying they’d hold a potluck as a housewarming for the Goddards. Rebecca had said something about not feeling comfortable inside a church whose prayers or tithing hadn’t delivered her parents to safety and good health, but Evie had not missed the words shared behind the master bedroom’s closed doors when Lloyd had reminded Rebecca that *neither had she*.

Lloyd did not turn to face his wife. Evie saw him tighten his grip on the bowl in his balled fist, his knuckles turning a violent shade of white. Lately, he’d seemed like he was always on the verge of something violent. He was angrier since coming home, and all that seemed to calm him was a secret radio show or time spent in his workshop out back. The more alight he seemed with his secret gospel, the angrier he seemed to become when he went without it. It was bold of him to bring the radio out when Rebecca was nearby, and Evie couldn’t imagine what would happen if he got bolder. He released the bowl into the soapy water. His eyes seared, now filled more with hate than faith.

“Remind me again whose kitchen this is?” Lloyd asked under his breath as he walked out, water still running. No one’s eyes met another’s. The kitchen quieted and Evie reached to shut off the water. Rebecca stood with pride and took stock of her home. Godless and ordered.

Evie watched her father stalk to the back third of the property, towards the shed he’d made his. It sat as far back as the garden and the henhouse but on opposing ends of the back fence line. He disappeared inside as Rebecca turned on her heel to leave, satisfied with her husband’s obedience. Her gaze shifted to Evie, whose eyes were still fixed on the bowl Lloyd had left for dead, just like he’d left her.

Evie ducked her head and wiped her soapy hands, slinking out of her mother’s gaze and into her bedroom.

Chapter 4

Evie's hands rested above her head in part supplication and part prayer. *Though maybe those meant the same thing*, Evie thought, shoulder to shoulder with dried stalks of her mother's sunflowers that had refused to take proper root. She hunched in the garden, out as far back as the chicken coop. Head to chest. Chin pinning down her heart. Jaw tightening in rhythm with her breathing. She sat unmoving and crouched, pleading for her father to join her in the infertile plowed lines with words left unspoken. Though the garden and neighboring chicken coop were her mother's domain, Evie was still hopeful that her father would seek her out.

Moments before, Evie had made a grave misstep. Heat of the moment. Passion. Plain foolishness.

Rebecca had gone down to Abernathy—to the collection of buildings a few miles down the county road—to see if the drugstore had some liniment oil or another she had seen advertised the last time she ventured into the so-called swarms of people that were, in reality, a few dozen citizens of the newly incorporated town, still fluttering with excitement at the newfound prestige of becoming a dignified municipal oasis so far out in the desert.

Evie had sat herself in the den picking at the spine of a book whose cover might as well have been welded shut when her father thudded in. He sat in his chair and leaned down to loosen his work boots' laces. Evie knew he sensed her unease as he slowly lifted his head to face her. He sat, blinking slowly, inviting her to speak up—whether it was an invitation or a challenge she did not know. She began to squirm under his eyes that trapped her like a pinned and spread butterfly.

“Daddy,” she cried, “I don’t feel love in this house. Not from mama. Not from you. I don’t understand it. It’s always so cold. Even here in Texas. I can’t step into the den without catching a shiver. One second I’m burnin’ up in the sun and the next second I’m colder’n the back of the icebox.”

Her father blinked, looking down at her face with an expression she couldn’t quite decipher. Evie didn’t know if he would cry or break into laughter or lean down and pop her on the mouth for speaking so openly. Then he started smiling like he knew something Evie didn’t. Like she had just unknowingly decoded some cipher she wasn’t supposed to know about. Cracked some code to clue her in on why she couldn’t decide if she felt more like a flame about to be smothered or a match about to be dropped into a sundried wheat field. If Evie had gone another moment without speaking, she feared one of the two would happen, and she didn’t know which scared her more. Her father lifted a hand, rubbing the back of his neck and shaking his head, then brought it down onto Evie with a gravy exhale, harder than a kindhearted clap on the shoulder but not enough to hurt.

“Girl,” he said. “Why do you think I wear my socks to bed? It’s August and I can’t wake up without numb bits and pieces every morning. I gotta rub my hands together and blow into ‘em like a damn eskimo.” His eyes darkened, and he stepped away from Evie.

“Why does it feel that way?” Evie whispered, eyes wide.

“I can’t quite tell you what it is that does it, but I can tell you that all you gotta do is find little pieces of sunshine to warm you up. It doesn’t matter what your sunshine is, but if you find it, you just gotta bask in it for a moment. Just soak it in and warm your bones so you can sit through the shivers.”

“What’s your sunshine?” the girl asked.

Lloyd looked down to Evie, his smile fading. Evie knew good and well what Lloyd’s sunshine was, and she knew herself a fool for asking out loud.

“Your mother wouldn’t want me corruptin’ your mind with ideas of your own salvation. Of sacrifice and undying love. Wouldn’t want you to know there’s anything out there but what’s right here at home.”

Evie froze, calculating her next words. “And what do you know of salvation and sacrifice and undying love, daddy?”

“It’s not something to know. It is something that simply *is*. The trouble with your mother is that it’s so unknowable. She can’t fathom something’ she can’t see or touch or hear. Something that doesn’t have clear-cut guidelines.” He continued, Evie transfixed and yet ready to jump out of her seat to flee at any moment. “I oughta give’er more credit, what with her havin’ to come back here and live just like she did as a girl and makin’ it all work for her as best she can. It’s just that that doesn’t work for everyone, myself included. I gotta grab onto somethin’ bigger’n me to keep myself afloat out here.”

Evie knew that her father had been different since coming back from the war a year and a half ago, however short his stint had been, and that while most men sought solace at the bottom of their glasses, Lloyd had found urgent, pressing meaning between the whisper-thin pages of the Bible. And when he did drink, sometimes in an utterly un-Christian way, it was as if he was taking communion. Lloyd had developed a holy relationship with the unholy parts of his life, perhaps as a survival mechanism. As a way to weather whatever the lonesome and battered homestead hurled at him.

Evie also knew that her mother had taken a far different approach to ensuring her own survival. Sometime between Dallas and Mescalero County, she has estranged herself from God and all of the comforts He seemed to offer Lloyd, though something about her suggested she was still perpetually one step ahead of even His almighty will, ruling her home and family as if she were the deity to which her husband prayed.

All Evie could be sure about was that neither her mother nor her father had seen to ensure their daughter's survival and that they had an understanding that their opposite would see to her survival. The missing piece, the piece Evie thought had clicked into place when she broke and began her father's disconcerting confessional, remained hazy, but Evie knew better than to inch too far onto the paper thin ice she tread on and collapse the growing rapport she held with her father. Still, the threat of that unknown context sent spiders crawling up her neck.

Something compelled her. Took control of her body and demanded an answer.

“What does mother have against God?”

Lloyd glanced out the front window. “Some things aren't meant for a child's ears. Not 'til later, at least. Not 'til you're grown.” He sighed. “I think that her prayers went unanswered for too long and she couldn't hold out any more.”

Evie was hardly satisfied, but just as the words ceased their echo in the now-silent den, the gate swung open, announcing Rebecca's return home, and Lloyd darkened upon its impact with the hitch.

“I would mind my tongue if I were you, girl,” he muttered, turning from her with such icy intensity that their shining moment of intimacy withered in Evie's palm. Shame overtook her.

And so she had fled, to the back of the property where she sat waiting for her father to tell her he loved her—at least that she was forgiven for prying. She sat, surrendered, embarrassed for feeling. Embarrassed that she had run like a child, that her performance had gone unnoticed by her audience. Evie raised her eyes and looked about the property. The tallest of the grass out back just reached her eyes.

None of the Goddards were particularly emotional people. Not to each other, save for the curious moment Evie and her father shared in the den. They tiptoed across the eggshell floorboards and slunk around corners for fear of being caught feeling. That was what this place did to you. The homestead, the desert. Though never quite fertile, the land had produced far more in years past. The Depression and the drought and the heat had calcified the land, trapping the drying reservoirs beneath the hardening surface. The cracks in the soil appeared, maybe as a last ditch effort to soak up whatever the heavens offered, but it was far too little and far too late. The crops withered and the people along with them, damning all those that dared attempt survival here. West Texas was not a forgiving place. It was not built for anything but hardness and heat and dust. Once it had been called the Frontier, the Promise Land, God's Country. But God had left here, and in His wake was a land stripped of purpose and a people left wiping their brow and praying to their unknowable God for the rain.

Evie didn't suppose she expected her father to come to her. Did not expect him to give her a shining moment of forgiveness for her words. But a small, only slightly withered seedling in her still longed for the heavens to open. Still waited for the rain that would not fall.

Lloyd did not come. Instead, he slunk to Rebecca, whispering in her ear that their daughter was ungrateful. *Unloved, she said. Frigid and shivering, even in this hellish summer.* This was not a decision he made out of comradery or love for his wife. It was tactical. A move to get the memory of his radio program out of Rebecca's head. Now he had a leg up, pinning Evie on her stomach. She gazed up over Lloyd's steel toe at her parents' unified front—allied, but only against her.

And so, she knelt beside the withered stalks. Itching to move. To *go*. But there was nowhere to go *to*. The porch light flicked on. Not an apology, not even a peace offering—just a signal to tell Evie she cannot hide.

She tiptoed. Through the foyer, through the yellowed books, through the paint sticks, not meeting her mother and father's windowsill snapshot, whose eyes glowed orange with the sunset. Their pewter trappings did not catch the same shine. Rebecca was not playing her music, so the girl caught no notice of her in the unlit den, leaning lazily over the arm of the sofa. Her eyes were glazed with bored satisfaction. Evie froze, knowing the crosshairs had shifted onto her hunched back. In control, back on top, Rebecca smiled hungrily, eager to pick her daughter apart. All Rebecca had to herself was this homestead. It belonged to her like it had belonged to her mother.

“My daughter,” she called, just as Evie had thought she'd passed by unaccounted for. “Why don't you feel love in this home? In my home?” Her neck bent at an unfamiliar angle, freezing Evie in the doorway.

“I didn't mean to say it. I was—wasn't being serious,” Evie winced.

“That’s awfully crummy of you, Evie.” Her legs began to unfurl themselves, and she rose from the sofa. Evie felt her feet sink into the floorboards. The pier and beam could not support a heart as heavy as hers.

“I don’t think that’s true and we both know it. Why would’ya go off an’ tell your father somethin’ so crazy like that? Evie? Answer me when I ask you a question, girl.” Evie gasped for air. A bulb was swelling in her throat, choking her.

“Evie, you might think I don’t hear the things that go on in this house. I was born here. I walked on this floor when it was packed down earth. These bones are mine more than they’re yours or your father’s. Every stud an’ beam an’ creaky floorboard—it’s me. I hear the two of you conspirin’ over Jesus. I hear everything in this house.”

Her mother moved closer, eyes wide and unblinking. When she reached the girl, she bent at the knee to meet her eyes. Evie felt her breath. She lifted her face. Blinked. Swallowed hard. Rebecca’s eyes softened. Her brows furrowed upward, worried—terrified. She let out a mourning howl.

“But it hurts me, Evie. You’ve gotta think I’m a terrible mother! How cain I do this to my little girl? I’m acting just like my own mother, an’ I swore up an’ down I’d never do that. But here I am breakin’ my promise that I’d give you the do-over I never got.” Rebecca’s eyes widened, willing tears to well up and spill over. She lunged forward, clutching Evie against her chest. She petted the girl’s hair, running her hand up the base of her skull and tangling her fingers in her hair. Once her fingers had matted enough, she pulled Evie in deeper and wrenched her head back in a feigned spasmic sob. Evie’s face jerked from underneath her mother’s chin and into full view of the woman’s

face. Eyes met eyes once again as Evie grit her teeth against the woman's fistful of her hair.

“I'm a failure 'cause of how you've turned out. Cold an' ungrateful, just like when I was a girl. I bet you cain't wait to run away from here 'soon as you get the chance. I cain't believe myself,” she cried.

Rebecca released Evie's hair and sent her to her room for the night. Lloyd had slept through it, but he had already done enough to help Rebecca.

Chapter 5: Rebecca

Rebecca stood alone in the den, having sent her daughter to bed. Her eyes couldn't quite focus, couldn't quite distinguish the shadows of the mounted antlers behind her on the wall from her own. They blended together, a devilish projection haloing her bowed head. The shadows pressed in, constricting her throat until she had to gasp for air, the unfamiliar beginnings of a prayer forming on her lips.

Not loved? Rebecca thought. Cold? It cain't get cold out here. Not in August, not when even my darn okra cain't grow from the heat an' drought, an' my sunflowers won't take proper root.

Rebecca backed away from the wall and lowered herself into a chair in the den. She reached up to her hair and began to comb at it with her fingers, catching them on knots and ripping with abandon.

I 'spect she's just gettin' the growin' pains, the itch to get outta here. Lord knows I felt the same. Feel the same.

She leaned to the side table where a decaying ivy sat, vines outstretched towards the window that never quite gave it the sun it needed. Beside the planter was a photo album full of Evie's baby pictures, Rebecca and Lloyd's wedding, the young mother sitting at the windowsill in their flat in Dallas, Lloyd holding a box marked **CHINA** on

the front walk of the same flat. It must have been the day they moved in. She flipped through the photos, not quite reminiscing, just acknowledging what used to be.

Lord knows. Heaven only knows. Just a couple'a words strung together to make you feel like you got a fightin' chance out here. Like you ain't all alone an' only pretendin' there's someone to watch over 'n make sure you're saved.

Still flipping through the photo album, she came to the last photo— older than the rest and tearing at the well-handled edges. It was Rebecca as a child, one of the only photos she'd kept of herself as a girl. She smiled down at herself.

That girl is gonna cause me an' you some heartache, Robert. That's all I know. Better'n I know anything else. I gotta show 'er how much love we cain find in this little family. Even so far out here

I'll cook us up a big 'ol dinner, fit for ten, full'a love an' warm an' we'll need

ham and ham and greens and potatoes and some rolls and butter and apples and—and lemons! Lemon zest and some wine— yes, I think I'll even let Evie have a sip of wine maybe a glass of her own she'll feel quite grown up won't she

Rebecca felt herself slipping. She cradled her head in her hands, finger gripping her temples, as if the ache could bore in and keep her put together.

*yes, mama, I'll go fetch some eggs for you. I just need 'a finish my last bit of arithmetic—
then I cain get back to writin' my grocery list for our dinner. I'll send Lloyd out to get the
foldin' tables, mama, and we cain all sit down to dinner won't that be nice*

Rebecca stood from the chair in the den, realizing that she had forgotten to close the chicken coop again. In the summer heat, her mind sometimes got away from her, and she found herself forgetting her chores, forgetting herself between household duties she did remember. Though she had convinced herself years ago that she had reacclimated to Mescalero County, there were times she came to with her head resting on the windowsill of the flat in Dallas or rose from sleep, anxious to have been caught sleeping in her parents' bed, for she was far too old and proud to tiptoe in after a nightmare. Sometimes she would wake up and begin to braid her hair as if she were a schoolgirl again. The longer she spent living on this land, the more often she thrashed awake, a call for her mother on her lips, as if the woman would come to soothe her after a girlish nightmare. But her mother was dead. Dead with the crops in the cracking field. Dead with whatever faith she had kept alight until she had realized that blind faith could not sustain a woman like herself.

*oh, gosh, Lloyd. I've broke the pencil tip tryin' to write my grocery list for our big dinner.
Fetch me a pen, will you? Under the stack 'a letters the girl from the YWCA dropped off
earlier—*

She grabbed the flashlight from the side table and trudged out back to the coop, all the the while planning how to show her daughter how much she loved her. How much she was *here* and *now* and ready to love her family.

I'll go first thing in the mornin', but mama? I lost your recipe for that pineapple upside down cake you made last Easter won't you send it with your next letter, mama

Chapter 6

Evie woke with the sun, her curtains too sheer to allow for sleep past its rising. Chilled toes to ragged floorboard, she edged through the house. An unwatched hip caught the spice cabinet on her way to the kitchen. The whole room was warming with the oven, at least fifteen degrees warmer than Evie's room, but she shivered still. Rolling her hands over each other, she defrosted, watching her mother at the sink. A small feather held tightly to last night's sweater, which Rebecca still wore.

“Ah! She rises at last!” Rebecca called over her shoulder. “Come help me. We're gonna have a big 'ol dinner tonight—big as Thanksgiving! Your daddy's getting' the foldin' tables from out back so we can sit outside and lay it all out nice an' pretty.”

Evie blinked. “How come?” She did not understand how her mother had forgotten their last encounter. She certainly hadn't.

Rebecca pivoted with the second hand on the wall. The feather came loose from her hair and fluttered to the kitchen floor. Her smile was full of teeth and far too wide. “A family doesn't need a reason to celebrate, Evie! She cried. “Don't you understand? How full of love our home is? You understand that don't you?”

Evie met her eyes, unblinking and bloodshot. Her smile pulled back like a facelift. Her hands wrung a towel, twisting it like she was bending a voodoo doll to her will.

Evie shuddered at the twinge in her spine. “Yes'm. Sounds real nice.”

“Good!” Teeth click and glisten. “I couldn't find mama's recipe for the pineapple upside down cake, but I got you some cranberries and apples. You go on ahead an' make the pie you made last Christmas. Your father doesn't like much, but he eats that one up like a death row dinner.”

Evie's head cocked to the side, and she edged around the kitchen island to the bag of lemons her mother had ripped open for her. Far too many. All she needed was the zest.

Evie measured and poured. Peeled apples. She dug her hands into the bowl of sugar and berries, working alongside her mother like nothing. Cold ache from the refrigerated fruit did not stop her sweating. And still, she kept a feverish chill. Rebecca reached around her daughter's waist to tie off an apron, and Evie slipped past her arms to pour the leftover apple skins into the bowl to be fed to the hens.

Evie padded out of the kitchen but just missed her mother's eyes follow her to the kitchen entryway. When Evie turned back to face her mother, she had returned to her work. Greens seasoned for roasting on one side, potatoes ready for cooking on the other, ham ready to be packed tight in the oven. Rebecca straightened her back, hands to hips, and smiled, clucking like her hens and shaking her head and she looked back, her eyes were bloodshot from across the room.

"You know I love you? Tell me you know I love you. Your father, too." Evie met her eyes.

"Yes'm. I know."

Rebecca nodded knowingly. All as she expected.

It was nothing like Evie had expected. Decadence. Gluttony. The china was dusted off, having not been used since the Goddards had held their own housewarming. Lloyd had set up two card tables end to end in the side yard, near to the edge of their property and backing up to the furthest corner of the neighboring land, and the food was spread across both, barely leaving room for their table settings. Even when the crops had

done well, Evie had never known either of her parents to provide such a meal. But the woman that had cooked this dinner had a raw kind of look on her face that unnerved Evie more than the calculated coolness and control she was familiar with. This raw look was usually on her father's impassioned face, but he stared at the table with apprehension that was just as foreign to the girl. She'd never seen a table this full in her life. Too big for the dining room that was easily crowded just by the three of them. A family of sons would barely make a dent in a supper like this. Evie looked upon the table of food they'd surely freeze and eat off of for weeks.

Butter dripped down the side of a roll. It held on until the last moment, clinging to the bread overflowing past the edge of the dish it sat in. It fell to the tablecloth. A small puddle began to bleed through the white cloth, staining it a greasy yellowed color. Tin foil stripped back from the great bowl of mashed potatoes caught the sun. Steam rose out from the gap despite the warmth outside. A pool of grease the same color as the tablecloth's stain sat in an eddy in the mash. The bowl of greens began to wilt in the sun, now a few hours past its apex. There were candles set out for when the sun began to set, but the wax had begun to melt prematurely in the afternoon sunlight. It edged down the candlestick. Hot and wet and burning meal. Sickly, sickly. Evie gagged. *Dripping. Raw.* Something in her said the word *unholy*. Her mother's compassion was nauseating.

Rebecca smiled easily. "Sit down, family. I made this all for us. To show how happy we all are." Her mother's voice had such a twinge that Evie half-expected her eye to begin twitching during the meal's dedication. "I invited mama, but I guess the letter must'a got lost in the mail. That's okay if it's just the three of us, idn't it?"

Lloyd sighed. “This is unrealistic. We won’t finish this. The freezer won’t even fit the leftovers. It’ll go bad before we can even enjoy it. And your mama can’t come to a dinner, Rebecca. You know that good ‘n well, so don’t play that way.”

He whispered. “It’s downright unchristian to talk that way.”

“Oh, we’ll finish,” said Rebecca, picking up just about the largest carving knife Evie had ever seen. Rebecca reached for the monstrous ham on its gilt platter. She cut into it deeply, sawing while holding Lloyd’s eyes. She butchered with intent. The meat was flayed and flopped to the side, still marbled and a transparent pink. The fatty layer was white as bone. *Raw. Unholy.*

She waited, looking at Evie, cueing her to fix herself a plate.

“I—I’m not very hungry, mama.” Evie’s stomach churned. Her gut twisted, whispering not to dare serve herself a plate. *Hot and wet and raw and sick.* She looked up from her lap. The china plate’s gilded edges caught her attention. Small and vining pink flowers somersaulted around each other, tangling themselves at the center of the plate.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed. Lloyd’s widened.

“Make a plate, girl. Because I swear to all things *sacred*, I will not let you up from this table ‘til you’ve eaten your share. I made a meal for my family and it will *not* go unappreciated.” She still held the carving knife, its handle carved from the antler of a deer Lloyd had butchered a few seasons past. Her voice cracked, heightened and frightening. Evie did not know the last time she had feared her mother like this. Not when she pulled her hair. Not when she locked the door if Evie missed her sundown curfew. Not when her eyes tracked her through the house for no other reason than because they were all-seeing.

“May I be excused?” Evie shifted in her seat, uncomfortable, itching to escape this purgatorial feast she had been kidnapped into. Lloyd slid his chair back, digging the back legs into the grass. He leaned backward, trying to catch Rebecca’s eye to plead for excusal. But Rebecca was fixated on her table, overflowing with apparent love for her family. Her fingers gripped the tablecloth, knuckles white, fingertips digging in with all her might. Fingers unlatched and fist balled, she raised it overhead. Evie braced for impact.

“No!” Fist bang. Cutlery twinkled, not quite grasping the atmosphere. China clattered, and the pie rack wobbled from across the table. Eyes clenched shut, Evie’s face turned to the color of her mother’s white knuckles. No one moved to serve themselves a plate. They sat.

Rebecca’s voice wavered, her vibrato sending Evie into a shiver.

“Make a plate, girl.”

The food was cooling. Less steam, the rolls hardening and deflating. The foil no longer caught the light. They sat.

The sun bowed and the wind chilled. *Please let me go.* Candles lit, Rebecca’s eye sockets hollowed in the trembling shadows. Pupils dilated and irises darkened, blurring into her brow’s growing contour. They sat.

“You’re not movin’ ‘til you get a plate,” said Rebecca. “It’s a real waste, lettin’ my dinner go uneaten.” Her tone had evened in a way Evie felt was somehow worse than the deranged manner from before the sun had wilted. Evie sat, plate empty, but her stomach growling in protest against her better judgement. Lloyd stood. The back legs of his chair

had settled into the soil and tipped back as he rose. It fell with a hollow thud, cheap plastic meeting dusk-chilled grass.

“I’m not gonna be held captive at this hand-me-down table outside this hand-me-down house.” He turned on his heel and started out back, wringing his hands to keep them occupied. Rebecca rose and let loose a howl—a wail so anguished that Lloyd froze in his tracks, a deer praying the mountain lion would not see between the trees. Mouth-gaping, voice-mangling horror. Evie thought her mother’s jaw would unhinge and swallow her whole.

And then Rebecca smoothed her top and sat back down. She smiled lovingly into her wine glass and nodded to the overflowing table with a slow blink. Evie was aghast. She tumbled backwards, napkin lost under the table, fork falling into her lap. Her mother kept her smile peeled back. Her hand shook the wine in its glass, and she lifted the other to steady herself at the wrist. She winked. Lloyd unfroze. Evie ran for the fence line.

Evie did not see it because her back was turned and running, but her mother stood from the table as her family dispersed with an elegance completely foreign to the remote wasteland. She rose, delicate and poised, as she moved towards her chicken coop, table left uncleared, without a glance in the directions her husband and daughter had retreated to.

Chapter 7

Evie ran. She slid through the gate to the property, onto the fissured earth they called a driveway, down the big hill she had always been scared to ride her bike down. She ran. Her mother's face was seared into her mind. Eyes wide, mouth gaping, fingers curling around the glass as she brought it to her mouth. She ran to Danny Wright's house, usually a painless bike ride, but she'd never realized how far on foot. She knew Danny from school, and they were as close to friends as Evie had. He was two years older, but being neighbors, sometimes he'd give her a ride home from school. He could drive and had his own truck, and Evie was as easily impressed as any fifteen year old would be to receive something as special as a car ride from the pretty boy from up the road.

Now that it was summer, she hadn't seen him for a while, but she knew the way, since it was just down the flat road from her own house. She'd only been to his house a time or two before, once to run a neighborly errand and once to tell him about the first time her mother had called her *Rebecca* instead of by her own name, but finding her way to the Wright's property was easy enough.

Her legs began to ache as she slowed on her way up the driveway. It wasn't quite dark, but the porchlight had already been flicked on. She walked up to the front gate and, seeing it was only latched shut and not locked up for the night, opened it, and entered the property. She knocked at the door and preemptively wiped her feet on the doormat. The door opened and she was met with a warm smile.

Danny pushed a hand through oversaturated hair—the kind of grooming only a boy trying to be his father could manage. Evie could see straight through the house to the

back door, spying his mother and father at the kitchen table in between, who barely looked up from the puzzle they were working on after supper.

“I hid their last piece,” he winked. With that, he took Evie’s hand and pulled her inside.

“This is the classmate I told you about. From up the street.” His mother and father, too focussed to have heard him, nodded from the kitchen, allowing the children to pass through the entryway and into his room. He gripped her tightly, hand wrapping fully around hers, pulsing with teenage curiosity.

“Everything okay?” He tightened his hand. *Thank you.*

Evie looked up. He wasn’t tall. Taller than her, but not by much. He felt safe. Safe like a little note tucked into a hand during the passing period. Like packing more than usual for lunch so it could be shared. Like asking permission before reaching for her hand for the first time.

“Let’s just drive around for a few minutes. You can tell me what’s goin’ on and I’ll just keep drivin’ and listenin’. Pinky promise.” The key bowl rattled as the two were waved out the door and into the cooling evening. The engine turned, brake lights then reverse, down the dirt driveway and out to the old country highway. Danny patted the centermost part of the bench seat for Evie to move closer.

“Scootch. C’mon,” he smiled. Onto the road. Too late to catch the sun but early enough to catch the first stars making their appearances. They drove. *Don’t make me talk.* And he didn’t. They drove until it was fully dark, until his foggy headlights were almost useless to penetrate it. Evie enjoyed the warmth of his silence. It was reassuring to her.

Foreign, but reassuring—being given the option to be listened to and looked after. It was like Danny didn't expect anything from her. Like he was okay with just sitting with her.

Once the two got to where two slow lanes met the interstate, he decided to turn back. They would not make their escape quite yet. He switched focus from the road. “Ready? I can take you home now if you want.” Evie lifted her chin, hesitating to make it nod, and looked past the bridge of her nose.

All she saw were the lines on the road skipping past and the bugs on the windshield. Evie imagined they kept going. That they drove until they reached somewhere they'd never been. Somewhere no one would think to look for either of them. Las Vegas or Albuquerque or Tijuana. In her fantasy, they stopped for gas and the attendant winked as they paid in fantasy coins and bills. She made a habit of reading every town's welcome sign that they drove past. She held her breath past every cemetery and picked up her feet over every railroad crossing. Evie cranked down the windows and let her hair tangle in the wind.

Then she brought her chin down and crashed back to reality. Skipping lines and bugs on the windshield. No Las Vegas. No Albuquerque. No Tijuana. She didn't like the desert much anyhow.

Danny flicked his blinker on and turned up the country road, the last turn to get to the Goddard's house. All the way down. Straight shot home. Just before her driveway, he braked and pulled into a small turnoff, shifting into park and settling the engine. Danny flicked the dash lamp, and it shone onto their laps. He turned to look towards her house, only just visible through the trees and fence line. He turned to Evie with furrowed brows, like something was eating at him. Like he knew something was eating at her, too.

“What’s wrong, Evie? I can’t very well send you home still all down like when you came to me.”

Evie fingered the hem of her shirt. “Aw, I don’t know, Danny. Mama’s gettin’ sorta strange. It’s like, sometimes she’s all there and sometimes—I don’t know—she’s somewhere else. Still here, in our house, but it’s like part of her is missin’.” She looked into her lap, wanting to curl her knees to her chest but worried it would make her look like a small, scared child in front of Danny. “And my daddy—he was already spendin’ so much time out back in that shed—but now, it’s like I don’t hardly see him ‘cept for dinner. An’ I don’t even know what he does out there, but the colder mama gets, the angrier he gets, and I don’t see why either one is gettin’ the way they are. ‘Cept maybe ‘cause the okra won’t grow.” Danny looked down at her and smiled an apology.

“Sometimes, I think, you can’t always figure what your mama and daddy are doin’, and you just gotta hold out ‘til it feels normal again. That’s what I do. Keep my head down an’ keep going ‘til one mornin’, the sun comes up an’ it feels like normal.”

Evie screwed up her face, regretting bringing her family into the conversation. She wanted to think about anything but home when she was with Danny.

“Hey. Let’s get your mind off the bad things, huh?” Danny asked. Evie shrugged. They were already parked practically in her front yard. If she squinted, she could see her father through the fogging windows of the truck and the brush beyond the vehicle.

He leaned closer. “Can I kiss you?”

Evie’s heart beat fast. Though she’d put plenty of thought into the theory of it, she’d never been kissed herself. She blinked and her eyes almost crossed as she tried to focus on his face, now so close to hers that she could feel his warm breath. She leaned in

and formed a shape with her lips that seemed like the way people kiss. She tilted her head opposite his and met his lips. Danny turned off the dash lamp, and they were moving blindly. His lips were wet like he'd licked them in last minute preparation. His top lip found the beauty mark above her mouth, and Evie tilted her face too far. They recoiled, crooked, and laughed.

“It’s a work in progress,” he smiled. “We’ll try again.” He leaned towards her again, this time cupping the side of Evie’s face. His thumb slid back against her ear and cradled her neck. Evie wasn’t sure if she liked it, but she shrugged, not knowing how else to react to something she was meant to enjoy. She supposed that she liked him well enough, but she wouldn’t mind being dropped off in front of her house. She opened an eye as he reconnected to her lips, squinting to look at her house, the porchlight aglow as her mother and father most assuredly waited up for her. *Curfew*. She’d forgotten sometime when she was busy pretending they’d kept driving straight up into New Mexico.

“Hey. Wait. I gotta—I gotta go home. I have a curfew. I’m s’posed to be home by dark, an’ I left near that time already, so I gotta get inside. C’mon, another time. Pinky promise.” Evie pulled back. Back into his open palm against the nape of her neck. His eyes were different. They narrowed as he sighed.

“Another time? C’mon. Don’t be a tease.” He rolled his eyes and kept the back of her neck in his grasp. “I can get you back home so fast. It’s not a big deal if you’re out a little while longer, right?”

Evie looked away from him, unsure what to make of his tone. As she tilted her neck up and away from him, he leaned in and began to kiss her throat. *Oh*. His grip on

her neck shifted back to her cheek, a second hand joining on the opposite side as he climbed back up to her lips, his body now fully facing hers. Slowly. Tenderly. Evie still flexed and tightened. She kissed him back, unsure. She came up for air, but he pulled her back under, barely giving her time to inhale. It didn't feel right, but it felt textbook.

Danny reached a hand down her waist and squeezed, and Evie whined with insecurity.

She whispered, "Not there. I'm all bony an' soft at the same time." He looked up and grasped her tighter.

"No. I like it. Let me touch you. I'll make you like every bit of you. Trust me." He pulled Evie in closer and scooped her up from the small of her back. She winced. She more or less let him lay her down across the bench seat. Some piece of debris caught the middle of her back and dug in as he let her weight go and laid her down. The small, heart-shaped rock Evie had found outside the schoolyard before they got out for summer and had shyly passed to Danny one May afternoon. She blushed to think he'd kept in with him.

She tried to reposition, but Danny held her down. She arched her back and caught one last glimpse of her house through the trees before Danny pulled her beneath the edge of the window. *Wait. Stop. I gotta get home.* Evie wasn't sure if she said it outloud or just in her own head.

He kissed her. Deeply. He lingered, pulling at her bottom lip with his teeth. Evie reeled backward and turned her face, catching it on the handle to roll down the window. Danny took it as an invitation to her throat, leaning in first with his lips and then with his constricting fingers. One hand reached beneath her shirt and found her heaving chest. He

pinched at her budding breast. Hard. Stinging and confusing and *unholy*. Evie wanted him to stop. *You kissed him. You said yes.*

“You like that?” *No.* “Yeah you do. I know you do.”

He cupped and pinched and groped, whispering into her ears, her widened mouth that gasped for words to make him stop. He did not. A hand slipped down. Out from under white t-shirt. Beneath her waistline. Beneath her shorts. Rested just above her pelvic bone, tempting itself to reach further. He took two fingers and circled blindly. Evie twisted, scared to make a sound, trying to upturn her face enough to get an upside-down view of her front gate. The window was fogged up, but she could still make out her house, just out of reach. She opened her mouth. *They wouldn't hear me anyways— wouldn't be listening for me.* Her mother and father did not expect her to be spending time with anyone but herself, let alone a boy that told her she was pretty and had held her hand and passed her sweet notes. One that was kissing her right this moment.

Danny pulled his two circling fingers out from her shorts and jammed them into the girl's open mouth. Evie thought hard about what she was supposed to do next. She was going through the motions. Didn't know she was allowed to want him to stop. She kissed him back, after all. She closed her lips around his fingers and squeezed her eyes shut tight. A tear escaped, and he pulled his fingers from her mouth to wipe it away. Her cheek was left wet and a chill caught her, shaking Evie down to her knees.

“Shh, don't worry yourself.”

He collected the escaped tear and retreated again beneath her bottoms, this time pulling them down around her ankles. He looked at Evie expectantly, nodding towards her shorts. She pulled up her knees. Reached for her shorts. Dropped them to floorboard.

He reached down, finger still wet with her spit and tear, and forced them into her. Evie gasped. His fingers curled inside of her, gesturing up the arch in her back. He repositioned his knees outside hers, trapping her beneath him.

He pushed her back down. Hard. The heart-shaped rock lodged firmly into her spine. He kneeled before her, breathing heavy, and sank down onto her body.

“Let me kiss you again.” He leaned to her face, one hand holding himself up, the other cupping himself. He rearranged and looked down to Evie’s face. She was unmoving. He gave her a sly grin. “Ready?” *No. Please no.*

Evie reached a hand up to brace herself on the door handle. He grabbed her wrist, pinning it against the windowsill. Danny pulled her down again, splayed out across the front seat bench. Her toes reached the driver's side door. Heels almost touched. Her head was lodged against the passenger door. *Tight.* He pushed himself in.

“It’s so tight. Jesus, Evie.” Evie closed her eyes. *Stop. Stop. Stop.* She was scared. Felt good. It was *bad bad bad. Unholy.* He did not stop. Her head knocked the door. Again.

Oh Jesus. God. What’s mama gonna think?

Her spine raked along the rock still stuck beneath her. Her back began to feel wet. Raw and stinging as the skin peeled back each time she rocked along the seat. Evie’s head jerked again. And again. She ached. Head, back, insides. She let out a small, slight whimper. All she could muster with what little air filled her lungs.

“I want to hear noises out of you but not that kind,” Danny grunted, knees corralling her thighs and face leaning over her, nudging her to face him instead of the floorboard.

Danny kept a grip on her wrist, holding himself up against it. Wrist to windowsill, head to door, spine to that small token of her adolescent love, pushed up so hard from each thrust that her toes no longer reached the driver's side door and her neck was bent up against the passenger side.

Evie felt herself bruising, bleeding, throbbing. She stopped squirming.

I kissed him back.

Mouth open, she let out a sigh. High and pointed. Another. Eyes closed.

“Oh, *God almighty*,” he cried, finishing with a final theatrical blow and pulling himself from her at the last moment. Danny dropped to the driver's seat. Evie didn't think before she pulled her knees to her chest. She sat hunched over herself like when she had willed her father to come love her.

“Will you take me home? Please. My curfew—I'm past late.” Her voice came out mangled from disuse. Danny began to dress and motioned for Evie to reach below the wheel, below his unclothed legs, to retrieve her bottoms. Her hands shook. Unfolded and refolded, searching for a tag or a seam to orient herself. He reached for the dashboard light, and Evie saw the aftermath in the yellow light. Saw the stone that had been beneath her, her handprint on the window that was dripping from the condensation so it looked like it was crying. She turned her bottoms right-side out and pulled them on. Danny turned the key and flicked the light off again. Evie settled into the passenger seat, and Danny patted the middle seat again. She looked at his hand. She hesitated and then slid over. He pulled out of the turnoff and back onto her street.

The porchlight grew larger, brighter, until he pulled up to the Goddard's front gate. Danny turned and reached for Evie's hand. Reached past to brush the bruises

emerging on her wrist. He leaned in and kissed the goose egg on top of her head. Lightly. Gently. He had softened. Evie ached. She opened the truck door and dropped to the ground.

Evie gripped the fencepost, hand to gut, foot to gravel. She blinked once. Twice. Deep breath in. He pulled the truck out of her driveway and was gone. Dust settled and Evie cradled herself. The dinner table stood in the side yard, still adorned with their untouched meal. She went inside.

Chapter 8: Lloyd

In the den, Lloyd lifted his folded hands from his lap and reset the curtain, blocking out the moonlight he had let seep in. He reached into his pocket and fished out a thick and worn moleskin. Placing it opened in his lap, hands laid atop it with his palms facing upwards, he began to speak aloud to himself.

Lord God, let me pray over my family. Let me ask you to wash them 'a their sins— even those they have yet to commit. An' Lord, if you don't, I ask that You let me swallow 'em whole, God, an' let me take on their sins. I can take it, Lord, with all the strength imbued by You.

I ask that we humble servants, we eager vessels, can speak an' act clearly an' of Your will, for we know it's final an' perfect, Lord. Sometimes, we can't always figure what You're doin' in our lives, but we just gotta hold out 'til You show us Your design. Your holy creations are beyond the minds of man, Lord. But through You, I can reach the godless, the unholy, and impart some small bit 'a sunshine—

Lloyd glanced up as the front door knob turned and the door was opened by hands that knew when to stop the door to keep its hinges from whining. His daughter padded through the entryway, hellbent on reaching her bedroom unseen. He could smell the urgency on her, and she did not turn to see him as she passed through the entryway, which sat directly to the left of the den. Lloyd looked back down to his lap.

Lord, I pray You let my Evie—my Evelyn—make herself comfortable with surrender'n. I hope You let her see that nothin' goes on in this world that You haven't had a say in. An' help her to take comfort in knowin' we are conduits for Your will to be brought to the world an' that nothin' goes on without a reason. Right, Lord? Can't nothin' really wrong happen to my baby or me if we trust in Your plans?

The sink nearest Evelyn's bathroom began to run, and Lloyd hoped Evelyn would sleep well tonight, despite how full the moon was. Her sheer blinds in her room left little moonlight to the imagination on nights like these.

When he was less faithful and more stupid, Lloyd had had a strong distaste for the word *surrender*. He'd refused to surrender to anyone, anything. More often than not, his strong will would get him into trouble. Especially in those Dallas speakeasies he'd known all the passwords to. Lloyd had lost plenty of fights to guys much bigger. Guys he'd never stood a chance against in the first place and kept going because he'd rather lose teeth than *surrender*.

That was, of course, before he'd felt true surrender. Not the kind that left you bruised and bloodied because you didn't know when to quit, no. The kind that held your hand and whispered *it's okay to let go*.

When he'd been baptized, he didn't know it would feel like he was dying. Like a part of him sloughed off and sat at the bottom of that old tank he and the preacher knelt in. That was the sin, he figured, sitting at the bottom of the tank like thick black oil.

Heavier than water and much heavier than how he felt now. In fact, he'd felt weightless when he emerged from that tank. That was partly why he thought he'd died. He couldn't feel barely anything around him and thought he might be a ghost, might have drowned in that damn tub and floated out like a spirit on the wind. But then he blinked the water from his eyes and looked around for Rebecca, who stood behind the small congregation.

Rebecca, tired and angry as she was, was as beautiful as she ever would be that morning. She had a slight sheen to her, and Lloyd thought she would surely cool off with a dunk in that same tank. She didn't even have to act like it was a baptism, really. God would know it was real. That it was what she really needed.

Before the moonlight burned out, Lloyd turned his attention back to the moleskin in his lap. He'd made considerable progress, having transcribed from Genesis through Isaiah by hand, with his own preaching in between as love notes to his savior. He had based his transcribed copy off of both his old Bible and his own memory, turning to prayer when he drew a blank. Lloyd spent hours a day praying on the unreadable verses, asking God to give him the words when his own memory failed him. He often scribbled his prayers in the margins as well, and the moleskin had become part diary and part bible over the months he'd been writing. If he wasn't buried with it, Lloyd hoped the book would be put on display somewhere for future generations to see the power of faith and prayer at work. Maybe they'd build a library in Abernathy and put it in a glass box in the lobby.

Lloyd closed the book and tucked his pencil nub in his pocket. He stood and walked to the back door, strolling out to the shed, moonlight lighting the path he could walk in pitch black. As he entered the shed, he bowed his head at the cross he'd hung on the wall and placed the book on the altar beside his old bible.

When he left the shed, the heat lamp in the chicken coop was on, and Lloyd could see the silhouette of a hunched woman through the mesh-covered window panel. Rebecca squatted below the roosting chickens, and Lloyd could hear the lilt of her voice but could not decipher the words. She seemed to be singing or humming something to the sleeping hens. Not daring to get a closer look, Lloyd closed the latch of the shed's door and hurried up to the front of the property and into the house. Evelyn's bedroom light was off, and he hoped she had found sleep, though when he poked his head through her bedroom doorway, she tossed in her bed. Lloyd made his way to the master bedroom, laid in the bed, and began to pray.

Chapter 9

When Evelyn woke, the sun was already high in its arc, and the rooster had long since crowed. She peeled herself from the sheets and tiptoed into the adjoining bathroom. After washing her face, she leaned both hands onto the ledge of the sink and peered into the reflection before her. Leaning deeper into the mirror, Evelyn's shoulders flexed and ached, and she tilted her neck until she felt the same ache there too, maintaining eye contact with the young woman before her. Her eyes followed Evelyn's like the eyes of a haunted painting, and Evelyn tilted her neck until she was nearly upside down over the sink, spine bent over itself and twisted like a grapevine, shoulder blades raised like hackles. Her knuckles bleached with concentration as she gripped the ledge and lifted onto her tiptoes, never once breaking eye contact.

The figure in front of her had the same deep-set eyes and dust-brown hair, the same morning flush and same few freckles dotting her upper lip and cheeks. *Evelyn*, she whispered to the girl. She tipped rightside up and brought a hand up to her throat and then brushed her hand down, her fingers just whispers across her skin. But still, she flinched. The soreness, the ache, was set deep under the skin. A bruise was beginning to form at the base of her throat, but it was still faint, so Evelyn untucked her hair from behind her ear and pulled a section forward over her shoulder.

Childish, girlish hair, she thought. She grasped the handful she'd pulled forward and folded it over itself, looking at the frayed ends. Half disgust and half curiosity. Her hair had been fair and silken when she was a little girl. And now? Now it was the same

color as the cracking Earth, the same color as the bark she peeled off of the ancient pecan out back. It was the color of drought.

Evelyn padded back into her room and pulled out a drawer of the small desk that sat against the painted-shut window. She reached for a pair of sewing scissors she had stolen from her mother for a school project a few months prior. Walking back into the bathroom, she grasped at the same handful of hair and raised the scissors.

Despite the growing tremor in her hands, Evelyn cut with precision. Her mother usually cut her hair for her over this same sink, and Evelyn had always watched with intent, memorizing Rebecca's strategy for careful replication. Inches fell away, and Evelyn shivered as a draft caught the back of her neck. Pinpricks bit at her beneath her nightshirt. Tiny spiders crawled in and out of her hairline.

Evelyn combed through her hair. Without the sun-bleached ends it was deeper, richer. She looked freshly tilled. She looked like her mother.

Lloyd was standing in the kitchen peeling a hard-boiled egg when Evelyn walked in.

"Mornin', sunshine," he called without turning around. Evelyn rolled back her shoulders and righted her spine the best as she could and paced forward.

"Mornin', daddy."

Lloyd turned around and nearly dropped the peeled egg from his outstretched hand.

"Oh, Evelyn. Look at your hair! Someone's been experimentin' with her mother's scissors."

Evelyn quirked an eyebrow. "Well, I thought it made me look more grown."

“It certainly does. Grown right into your mama. Gosh, Evie, you do look just like your mama when she was young.”

“Evelyn,” she corrected.

“Gosh, *Evelyn*, you act just like your mama when she was young, too. Lord, she had a mouth on her. You couldn’t tell her nothin’ when she got to thinkin’ this way or that. She settled down. Took plenty ‘a time and plenty ‘a years off her mama and daddy’s lives, though, from the stories I heard.” He paused, remembering a time before himself and his daughter. “Me and her both were young once, too, Evelyn.”

Lloyd returned to his work and continued to make up breakfast plates for himself and Evelyn. He worked in a knowing silence, and Evelyn’s breath hitched at the realization. Her father knew she had come home late last night. Knew she’d been away, someplace with some boy doing God knows what, and—

“Evelyn,” her father said. “There is a verse. One that says a girl is like a church, and her man is the Christ of that church. Now, that don’t mean you go an’ pray at the feet of any boy. That means the will of God is often done by man, an’ His will is somethin’ you can’t question. Understand, Evie?”

She did not. Didn’t quite want to. “Evelyn,” she whispered.

“Evelyn, what I’m gettin’ at is—I’m not one to interrupt God’s will playin’ out in the world. I watch it an’ I write it down an’ I pray on it. I was watchin’ last night through the curtains in the den.”

He still wasn’t looking at her. “I can’t help how much you remind me of your mama. An’ I never did tell her what she needed to hear. Maybe she never listened to me

well, but I know you will, Evelyn. You listen to me ‘cause you’re a part of me, girl. Part me an’ part your mama.”

Evelyn still stood in the kitchen, edging towards the doorway, abandoning her breakfast already fixed on her plate. The pinpricks of leftover hair stung at her.

“What do you mean, daddy?” Her cheeks burned, flaming red.

Lloyd exhaled.

“What I mean is I got a lotta lessons I can teach you that your mama wouldn’t be too happy to hear. Your mama didn’t listen to me back then, an’ I—I jus’ wanna give you a piece ‘a what the Lord’s given me. That sunshine we talked about.”

The spiders kept their crawling up her neck, in and out of her ears. Evelyn didn’t know if she believed in God, but she couldn’t see the point in it all if bad things still went on to the people that prayed to Him.

Evelyn and Lloyd still stood at opposing corners of the kitchen. Evelyn breathed deeply, and it caught on the way into her lungs.

“Daddy,” she whispered, not sure if her father could even hear her. “Daddy, he didn’t listen to me. I swear I didn’t mean for any of it. I just ran after mama’s dinner, an’ I didn’t stop runnin’ til I got to his house, an’ I didn’t tell him anything mama did, I swear! I swear I didn’t tell him anything bad, daddy. But he took me drivin’, an’ then he kissed me.” Tears welled in her eyes, and her hands reached around her belly, protecting her insides. Her swallow caught in her throat, stopping her breath. She opened her mouth to speak, and the spiders crawled inside, itching and biting all the way down her throat and into her burning center, eating up all her words on the way down.

Evelyn gagged. “I told him no, an’ I tried to stop him, but he’s bigger’n me. I don’t know why I couldn’t make myself scream, daddy, because I saw the light on in the den, an’ I think maybe you could’a heard me an’ made him stop yourself.”

Lloyd’s hands shook, and he reached into his pocket for the moleskin book he’d retrieved from the shed before Rebecca had gone out to let the chickens out of the coop. He fumbled with the pages, hearing Evelyn speak without quite understanding it all. *Not my God. Not her God.*

He held the book out to his daughter, showing her his prayers, his pleas.

“Daddy.” Evelyn was still whispering to him, her voice broken and hoarse and terrified. “I couldn’t make him stop.”

Lloyd felt a crack open up in his chest, and he wanted more than anything for it to be filled by prayer and song and salvation. But nothing came down from the heavens to repair the gap between his gut and his heart. His moleskin was still stretching towards Evelyn.

“Sometimes, my daughter, God’s will can’t be explained, can’t be understood. A long time ago, I learned that you gotta make yourself comfortable with surrender. To God, to that boy, ‘cause the Lord’s already chosen who He’ll lead to salvation, an’ there ain’t a thing on this earth that can stop His will. You gotta find comfort in the submission to God’s will. I love you, my daughter. My God—our God—wouldn’t somethin’ bad happen to one of His daughters. Whatever that boy may have done was God’s will carried out by man. You gotta find peace in that.”

His words hung in the kitchen like drying meat. Pungent and raw and fighting against its own rot.

“Can’t nothin’ bad happen to you, long as I pray enough for us all,” Lloyd said, half to his daughter, half to God.

Evelyn nodded and retreated out of the kitchen. She knew the value of a secret in this household. The currency the three of them traded in. She knew she needed to wield her secret before her father did. Evelyn weighed the shame of her secret and the pride in its growing value. Pockets weighed down with gold and guilt, she walked out the back of the property to clear her head.

Chapter 10: Rebecca

Rebecca hung on the other side of the kitchen doorway, shielded by the spice cabinet. Lloyd went on, preaching to her daughter about submission and salvation, and she stood. Hunched and ragged and growing numb. She dissolved further into the wood grain as her daughter backed out of the room and made her way to the back door.

Had she been younger, less tired, she would march out back and drag her daughter over to her. Tell her that her body is sacred, precious, like Lloyd had said, but *different*. Not a church for a holy enough man to have free reign over. Not an answer to anyone's prayers but her own. But she was not young, and she was too tired to keep fighting.

God came to me, Rebecca. He told me we ought'a start a family.

Rebecca's hands shook, and the mug of chilling tea she held threatened to spill. She was just a girl herself. She knew her responsibility as a wife was to give her husband a family. To be a loving mother and a quiet wife. To submit to her husband without complaint. To let him bend her over and press her face into the mattress and then to smooth down her skirt and go press the pleats into his work pants.

If she dug deep enough, Rebecca could remember a time before that obligation. Before a god-sent baby, before marriage, when she thought she could play at independence. A memory, distant as the expectations she'd had for herself before striking out, shone brightly in her foggy mind like a lighthouse. She'd wanted to go to school, to become someone worth saving from whatever purgatory she was in now.

I'll be fine, mama. Promise. Dallas ain't really all that far, an' I'm sure I'll find time to visit plenty.

She loved her husband, and she loved her daughter. But that love was some overgrown beast, no longer fit for its cage. *She* was that beast, heartsick and lost and too comfortable with her own undoing.

Lloyd, I don't wanna try for it yet. I'd like to keep workin' at the courthouse.

When they first married, the couple had not been deeply religious, though they thanked God before each meal and were dutiful Baptists like the rest. But as the months wore on, Lloyd began to sit up next to the radio preacher longer each Sunday evening. Even though it came all the way from Pittsburgh and even though it was Episcopal, he tuned into each broadcast, Bible outstretched on his lap, while Rebecca kept herself busy in the other room. It was not that she was becoming a faithless woman. She called herself a realist. She called herself tired. Tired of unanswered prayers and unfulfilled promises.

Nearly three years of marriage and she was not yet ready to bring a child into the world. But her readiness had not mattered. Not to Lloyd's eagerness for fatherhood. Not to those early, slight prayers she had gasped into his chest to *please, please let nothin' take hold*. Not to the doctor she pleaded to behind the pulled curtain when Lloyd stepped out for a smoke break.

She and Lloyd would name their daughter Evelyn. *Wished for child*. That was what Lloyd had proclaimed. Evie answered Lloyd's prayers, but she did not answer Rebecca's.

When Evie was born, Lloyd had it in his head to get himself baptized a second time and to take Evie with him, as if renewing himself as thanks to God for answering his prayers, but Rebecca drew the line at allowing Evie to take the plunge while sitting on his knee. The young mother had been excited to begin a new life in a growing city with seemingly limitless opportunities for a young woman, and yet a part of her felt bound just as tightly as if she had stayed home in Mescalero County and married for acreage instead of love. Still, Rebecca reminded herself that she could always have it worse. Could be stuck back home.

Rebecca took up her new motherly occupation and quit her position as a courthouse stenographer. She had coveted that job, and Lloyd had been so proud of her for beating out plenty of other young women that were just as eager and qualified as her. And for what? Motherhood? *It's a new domain for you to rule, sweetheart*, Lloyd had told her. Rule, indeed. Rebecca took her role as a mother seriously. Their small flat became Rebecca's courtroom, and Rebecca the presiding judge. And jury. And executioner. So much control, so much of her own self had been taken from her, she felt that she had no choice but to pull back. To become the mother her own mother had dreamed she'd be.

You'd be proud of me, mama. I got a home an' a family, jus' like you wanted for me.

Rebecca stood still, watching her daughter walk out back through the sunlit doorway. She breathed deeply, righted herself, and walked to the bathroom. She stood in the mirror, watching herself. Turning on the sink faucet, she let them run as she started to mutter to herself, a trick she'd caught Lloyd doing when he wasn't so bold with his sermons. She straightened her spine and shrugged her shoulders back. A deep-set ache hummed through her bones. She had slept fitfully the night before and woken up sore, breathing heavy from a nightmare. Rubbing a rough hand over her shoulder, Rebecca worked at the knot. She had a dull, persistent headache that a few more hours of sleep should help. Shifting her focus back up to her reflection, Rebecca looked into her own eyes. Since moving back home, she hadn't let her hair grow past the length it had been when the family lived in Dallas. Practical and short and girlish, despite her weathering face. She couldn't tell if she looked more like her mother or her daughter, or if all of them looked too much like each other to be able to tell any which way. She stared into the mirror, searching for any sign of her own face staring back. She could lay claim to her tired, hollowed out eyes, the freckles that she'd always thought made her look speckled with mud.

That girl's growin' more into me each day, an' I wonder how long it'll be 'fore we cain't even tell which is which anymore.

Rebecca came to with a violent shiver. She shut off the faucet and walked to her mother's side of the bed. She crawled under the covers and waited for her mother to

come back after finishing her morning chores. Mama never minded when she crawled in after a nightmare.

Chapter 11

Evelyn, far from clear of mind, walked to the henhouse out back. She had figured herself a plan to talk to her mother. She stepped into the shack through the unlatched door, peering in to see the back wall lined with chicken boxes for Rebecca's small flock. The hens had been out and scratching for hours, so Evelyn had no difficulty digging into their boxes to rifle for eggs.

Empty. It figured her mother had already been out this morning to check for eggs. In the last box, after running her fingers through the nest, Evelyn picked out a speckled egg. She held it close to her chest and left the henhouse, heading back to her mother.

Rebecca had crawled back into bed and was nursing her cold tea. When Evelyn walked in, her mother looked so old, so fragile laying in that bed with the quilt swaddled around her frame. She had lost the look in her eye from last night, the wild animal terror. She couldn't swallow anyone whole. She looked like she couldn't get herself out of bed.

"Mama? I'm sorry I left last night."

Rebecca winced briefly at the apology but straightened herself and peeled the quilt back. She gathered all her hurt and shame and stuffed it deep into someplace her daughter couldn't see—someplace she held out hope for forgetting about herself. She exhaled.

"Well, no sense in comin' to grovel to me. Y'know I just wanted to be a happy family? For once. I couldn't have imagined that was too high a hope for the three of us, but here we are."

Evelyn wilted.

“Mama, I’m sorry. But—” she faltered, second guessing the value of her secret, “I went to get eggs this mornin’. I only got one, but I brought it for you. Figured you’d want it collected so no rat snakes could get at it.” Nothing.

“Mama,” the girl continued, feeling just about as small as her mother looked under the quilt. “Could I... could I tell you somethin’? Somethin’ about last night?” Rebecca softened and opened the quilt to let Evelyn crawl under. “About last night. I went to Danny Wright’s house after I ran away from your dinner. The neighbors up the road, y’know? I—I didn’t tell him about dinner, I swear I didn’t. I just went there ‘cause I knew how to get there from memory. He drove me around for a little bit. We didn’t really—didn’t really talk.”

Her voice hitched, and she swallowed to control it. Sickly, sickly secret-sharing. Evelyn was going to vomit. Empty stomach. Everything felt empty. Nothing to lose. She went on. “Danny drove me around and we were just quiet mostly. Then he kissed me.”

Rebecca smiled, remembering when she was young and neighbor boys would take her out country roads. There were less then, just long driveways from each property to the main road and widened deer trails.

“But then he—he kept going. Um, an’ he didn’t stop—an’ I tried to make him stop—I really did, mama. I didn’t know he was as strong as that and I—I couldn’t move out from under him. Mama I didn’t mean to. I promise.”

Rebecca stopped smiling as another dam she’d walled up began to fissure. She looked down to her daughter and unwrapped the two of them and rose from the bed. Eyes unblinking. Her mouth sewn shut and clamped like a vice held her lips together.

Something came undone within her, and it was all she could do to keep from cracking open like a starving chasm and swallowing the property whole.

She walked around the other side of the bed to stand before Evelyn and wedged her finger under the girl's jaw, wrenching up her chin to look at the bruising leftover on her throat. She dropped Evelyn's chin and pulled her into the bathroom. Closed the door. Evelyn was trapped, frantic.

Rebecca reached for the bathtub faucet and twisted. Steam began to blur the mirror, and she sat Evelyn on the floor, balancing herself on the bathtub's edge to fish for the right water temperature. The tub was filled, still sloshing up to the edge and up to the drain directly beneath the faucet. She looked down to Evelyn.

"Where did he touch you?" Evelyn retreated into herself. She motioned as if to douse her entire body. Head, throat, breasts, tracing all the way down to her toes. Nothing untouched. No stone unturned.

Rebecca sighed. "I think it's important for a girl to learn her place in the world, Evelyn. But I also think it's important who she learns that lesson from. An' it's not your Baptist daddy or some farm boy that's tryin' to get his pecker wet."

She breathed deeply. Exhaled over her shoulder into the bathwater. "Do you know why I don't allow God into my home?" Evelyn shook her head. "It's because of somethin' your daddy did. Before you, when it was just two of us. Lloyd said God spoke to him one night an' told him He willed a child into our family. Said God told him it was our responsibility to create a family. I told him I wasn't ready. That I was too young an' a little scared. An' your daddy told me it was God's will an' that he was an exactor of that

will ever since he surrendered an' got himself baptized." Both women were flushed and sweating, neither making eye contact.

"I didn't want you. You remind me of being powerless. And now this. Powerless. Again." Evelyn shuddered, and her mother cut her off again. Teeth grit, facelift smile. "I've tried to learn to love you even though everything that was taken from me was made into you."

Rebecca reached down to Evelyn and pulled off the girl's socks, bottoms, and nightshirt. Evelyn fought against the exposure until she looked into her mother's face and saw the same girl she'd seen in the mirror earlier that morning. She stripped her down and assessed the damage Danny had done.

Bruises peppered her body like a banana left out too long. The goose egg on her head stood proud no matter how long Evelyn spent pressing it back down. When Rebecca spun her around and caught sight of the raw spot on her back, she paused, gently circling it with her finger. *Goddamn Baptists*, she thought as she turned her daughter to face her. *What is it about me an' my blood that makes boys like this hunt me down? What're they sniffin' out?*

After being appraised, Rebecca thrusted Evelyn into the bathtub. She sat by the side, still clothed, while Evelyn hunched in the center of the tub.

"Your daddy was praying as he finished. He praised God, and religion died for me. He said I should praise the Lord for having such a God-fearing husband. But I do not pray with him."

She plunged Evelyn's head under the water and pulled her bruised wrist to the surface. Furious scrubbing. She rubbed Evelyn's wrist raw with the graying washcloth.

The bruising only deepened. Angered and protested against Rebecca's force. She couldn't rub it out. Not then and not now, and now her daughter cain't ever be clean. Cain't wash away the fingerprints an' the hot breaths an' the praises to the Almighty spoken into her open mouth as Lloyd collapsed onto her. She could steal all the air in the room and it wouldn't be enough to catch her breath and steady her hummingbird heart.

Evelyn's head broke the surface. Gasping, choking. Rebecca wrung the washcloth over her head. She thought about holding her under. Thought about how she'd have done that if she stood closer to Lloyd when that preacher dunked him in the old stock tank behind the church.

Rebecca dropped the cloth into the water and turned her palms up. They were angry and red as hot coals. They stung and itched like spiders crawled across her knuckles, in and out of the webbing of her fingers. She scratched at them furiously, breaking the skin around her cuticles first. Her nails dug in, scraping away at the pruning skin that sloughed off with ease. Evelyn looked up at her, shivering in the chilling water. *The water cain't purify a damn thing.*

Rebecca pulled the stopper and left Evelyn at the bottom, willing herself to slide down the drain. Rebecca leaned down and brushed her daughter's face. A smear of blood streaked her flushed cheek and beaded up like raindrops on a wet window. She kissed Evelyn on the bloody smear before she stood up to leave.

"There ain't no use dwellin' on the things you cain't control. God-fearing men won't bow to anyone's will but their own that they tell themself is God's. Get up an' dry off. You cain't play dead at the bottom of that bathtub."

Chapter 12

Days later and Rebecca still had not faltered in her grief, her anger after her encounter with Evelyn. Evelyn supposed her anger was also towards her father for creating the girl, at her own mother and father for never letting her escape this house, at God for not stopping any of it.

The house began to reek of grief. Meat lay thawing and raw in the porcelain sink. Windows left open ushered in the flies. The bananas browned too much even to bake bread. The fruit bowl swam with spores. Rebecca ceased collecting eggs, and they piled beneath the hens, baiting the chicken snakes to come feast. The ailing garden went untended. The table in the side yard had not been cleared. Liquid fat saturated the tablecloth, small beads hardening like candle wax droplets on the hem of the cloth as the temperature dropped each night, only to melt and drip into the grass when the sun came up each morning. The table legs sunk deeper into the wet grass each day as the puddle beneath it grew.

Rebecca would disappear for hours at a time, resurfacing only to cook a meal or to hover in the corner of a room and stare past Evelyn. After one too many dishes were served uncooked, Evelyn took up making dinner for her and her father, who by now had realized his newfound freedom and begun to migrate from his shed. He started small.

Gospel radio played from the kitchen nearly all hours of the day. Grace was said before each meal, the table only set for himself and Evelyn. The moleskin bible sat on the bedside table, spine cracked and pages face down—never closed, only bookmarked and saved for later devotionals. Evelyn sat through the discomfort, urging, for the first time in

her life, her mother to make her way in from the henhouse and restore the household. She only existed because her father had forced her into life. She was thrust into existence by the will of God and the strength of man. The cowardice of man.

Night after night Evelyn heard her mother wailing from the henhouse. Crying to God and the fates that a mother and daughter should never become one. She listened and watched as her mother's reality turned to dust in her outstretched palms.

Evelyn wandered to search for her mother to try and call her in for supper. The sun set sooner this late in the summer and the hens and woman alike had begun to roost for the night. Evelyn padded blindly through the uncut weeds of the back acre. Past the garden gate's rusting hinges and the bleached, vining skeletons of green beans stopped short in their climb up the trellises. Past the shed that used to stifle Lloyd's preaching to rustling and muttering. Out to the henhouse. Clucking hens met the cadence of Rebecca's cooing, and Evelyn moved to step inside. She reached a hand up and brushed the decaying coils of a rat snake out of her face. Rebecca had favored hanging its corpse from the entryway rafters as a warning to any other predator rather than bringing in the heaps of eggs sitting in the boxes.

Evelyn stopped in her tracks. *The smell.* Chicken mess and ammonia and sweat. Evelyn did not know when her mother had come inside last. She crouched beneath the roosting side of the henhouse. Filthy. Sickly, sickly. She had bare feet, caked with grime.

"Mama? Are you okay?" Evelyn squatted to meet her mother's eyes, crazed and darting about the henhouse.

Rebecca turned to her. “I cain’t do it. Cain’t save myself. Not then. Not now. Not from your father. Not from God. Not from you. Not from him.” Her hands rested on her knees, the knuckles scabbed over and bleeding from fresher wounds. The spiders still crawled in and out of her fingers, underneath her nails.

“Mama I don’t understand,” Evelyn pleaded. “Please come inside the house. Please don’t stay out here anymore.” The woman paused to consider. Looked up at the hens, over to her daughter. Closed her eyes. She began to mutter.

“I cain’t do it again. Be forced. Be made to love it. Love Him. Love her.” Her head shook violently. “I said no. I said no. I did. I let him. Wasn’t loud enough. Strong enough.” Her hands reached up to her hair. Pulling, ripping by the handful. Her eyes rolled back.

Evelyn stumbled back, horrified. Her eyes filled with tears. She grieved for her mother, for herself.

She crawled forward to her mother. “He’s bringing God into the house,” Evelyn whispered. “He’s everywhere, mama.”

Rebecca knocked Evelyn onto her elbows as she scrambled out from under the roosting slats on all fours. She moved so fast at hearing God’s name that Evelyn thought a demon had snuck inside her.

“Where is he? Tell me!” her mother shrieked, grabbing Evelyn by the shoulders as she wrenched her upright. Evelyn pointed to the shed.

“He’s usually out back ‘til supper’s ready, then he’ll come back inside.”

Rebecca took off out of the henhouse. Evelyn followed, picking her way carefully through the filth. She met Rebecca outside of Lloyd’s shed. Rebecca pried open the door.

It swung open to Lloyd kneeling at a makeshift altar. Above him hung a cross, large enough to be used for Evelyn's own crucifixion. Candles burned and wax dripped down the legs of the table saw he'd turned to an altar. A ragged bible at the center, water-stained and foul. A war relic, painted with blood and salt from aboard the *Chester*.

Lloyd knelt, palms surrendered, deep into his homespun revival. Rebecca's jaw went slack. It unhinged, and the crack in her throat brought her and her daughter both to their knees. Lloyd continued praying, barely flinching at the disturbance.

Rebecca brought her face to the earth. Up and down, her body wracked with violent sobs. Fingers clawed at the soil, splayed in front of her, fingertips and nails turning black. She slammed her head into the dirt. Came up bloody. Again. She screamed. She looked the most devout of them all, giving up body, blood, and sanity to whoever she prayed to.

"Not God. Not him. Not you. No no no no. Not again. I cain't do it again. Not God. Not him. Not you," she cried over and over.

"Mama," Evelyn whispered, "what's happenin' to us?"

"I couldn't stop him again. And again. I cain't live it out any longer."

Evelyn watched her mother flatten herself on the dirt and begin to drag herself forward, nose dripping snot and blood as she heaved over the earth and collapsed in the entryway to the church.

Chapter 13: Lloyd

Lloyd, on his knees before the altar, gazed down at his wife in the dirt. A supplication he was not familiar with. She looked as if she was praying to him.

Heavenly Father, he imagined her saying, please give me peace. Please, Lord, let me rest my soul. Let me know the touch of your grace, the comfort of deliverance. She would be so beautiful when she begged the Lord for forgiveness, when she knelt before Him, confessing and professing. Lloyd saw little beauty in the woman before him, but the unsaintly piece of him twinged at seeing Rebecca on her knees.

Above all, Lloyd prayed every night that his own faith was enough to save his wife. That his twofold dedication could make up for all the permafrost hate he felt in her. He had tried so many times for so many years to lead her to the truth, but his own strength of will and body had had no effect on her stubborn hate. He did not understand.

He watched as her wounds wept blood like the juices of a ripened fruit, sickly sweet and past its prime. It seeped deep into whatever it touched. The dirt beneath her face bloomed as she dripped beads of blood from her mouth and nose, leaving divots like freshly planted seeds. Nothing would grow.

Lloyd looked back to his altar, looked up to the handmade cross above his head. He continued his prayer.

Lord Almighty, I pray You give me guidance. Show me how to lead my family, Lord. The time for treadin' lightly is long gone, an' You made that clear enough, God. Your will, Your son, an' Your spirit belong in this house, an' I want You to use me to help an' save

my wife an' little girl from a fiery eternity. A holy vessel imbued with Your will to right the wrongs of this unholy house. We need it, Lord. Amen.

Lloyd opened his eyes to Rebecca meeting him in the doorway to his chapel. Her mangled face looked up at him, and he pitied the godless savagery. As he stood to close his homemade bible and finish his ritual, Rebecca reached forward, grabbing for his wrist. Her nails, caked with chicken mess and garden filth, dug in enough to break the skin.

“Goddam—” the curse emptied from Lloyd’s mouth as fast as it had crawled up his throat. “You gotta get up, Rebecca. C’mon inside and we’ll wash you up.” He wrenched his wrist from her grasp, rubbing over the tender fingernail idents with his other hand. Rebecca splayed an arm out for balance, standing slowly on her uneasy feet. Her eyes flicked up to the cross, lips still mouthing the words to some unanswerable prayer. Teeth parting, her bloody tongue flicked in and out of her mouth with each word, painting her lips red. She spoke louder now, eyes wide and tongue lashing, rabid with the words of some other deity.

Oh, Jesus. Help me now. Guide me.

Lloyd stumbled backward, catching the small of his back on the edge of his makeshift altar. Rebecca lunged forward, sacrilege foaming from her wild mouth. She spoke in a tongue neither he nor his religion could recognize, and he feared God had abandoned this home.

Help me, God. Help me to protect my family from this rot. Unholy, festering rot. Give me the strength, God, an' I know I can save 'em for You.

Lloyd spun around, pulling his cross from atop its brackets, and swung it blindly over his shoulder. The arms of the cross met the side of Rebecca's face with a nauseating crack, and she hit the floor of the secret chapel before Lloyd had finished the follow-through of his swing.

Easy, Rebecca. Lean easy into the warm sweet touch of grace. Thank me 'an thank God, 'cause we're gonna find you some peace.

Lloyd placed the cross back onto its bracket and turned to Evelyn. "Come'ere, an' elp me carry your mama inside 'an lay her down in bed."

"Is she gonna be okay, daddy?"

"I hope so," Lloyd said, picking at the flaking blood that peppered his hands.

Evelyn stepped inside of the chapel with unease and bent down to unfold her crumpled mother, grabbing her by the ankles. Lloyd picked up the rest of her weight, and they walked back up to the house.

Chapter 14

Lloyd and Evelyn carried Rebecca into the house and laid her down atop the bedsheets. Lloyd looked down at his wife with unease. She was breathing, and the trickle of blood had all but clotted, tangling in her matted hair. Viscous drops slowed like melting candle wax down her cheek, where they rested until Rebecca came to and began rolling her head from side to side, feverish and lost. Each lash of her neck stained the pillowcase with another bloody tear until the stain dried up and darkened to near black.

Evelyn stood beside her mother until she was fully conscious, reaching around either side of her cheek to dab at the blood, trying to get a look at the wounds. She was afraid to touch her. Afraid whatever hateful curse her mother was under would be contagious. She tiptoed around the bed, fingers wrapped carefully inside a wet wash rag that had long since cooled and began to dry, and leaned down to brush a mat of congealing blood and hair from Rebecca's cheek. She pulled the rest of Rebecca's hair to the side and tied it into a loose braid so it could be out of the way of the gash. It peeled up to reveal a bruise blooming behind a shallow gash just above her ear. Rusty flakes littered the parted lips of the wound, and Evelyn had half a sense to lean in and kiss it. The sun had fully set before Rebecca opened her eyes. Lloyd paced the front of the house, muttering. He looked up from the tracks he bore into the floorboards to peek through the doorway at his wife and daughter. Evelyn, dodgy and frightened as a fawn, held the wash rag in her hand, now dyed a sweet and delicate pink. No matter how many times she'd run to the bathroom to wring it out, the blood persisted. Lloyd had watched her scratch frantically with her fingernails. Watched her bring the rag to her mouth and consider

biting and sucking at the blood until it was loosed from the white rag's threads. Evelyn had closed her mouth and looked around, and Lloyd turned to continue wearing down the old floorboards.

As Evelyn sat herself on the bed, Rebecca woke with a start and began wailing. She cried like she was grieving. Her face turned a blotchy red and the vein in her forehead bulged out and writhed like an earthworm had burrowed under her skin. She muttered to herself, unintelligible and low, and Evelyn didn't dare lean close enough to hear her better. She wasn't sure what could set her mother off, but she feared any wrong move would push Rebecca past her breaking point. Evelyn wasn't sure she hadn't been pushed to it already.

"You raped her. Goddamn you, Lloyd Goddard," Rebecca anguished as she rolled about the bed.

Evelyn dropped her wash rag, mouth dropped wide open to her chest. Lloyd halted in his tracks, ears pricking from the other side of the doorway.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you. She said she didn't want to."

"Mama," Evelyn whispered, "I think you're confusin' things." She walked over to Rebecca's side and reached down to check her forehead for a fever. Rebecca swatted her away and moved to pull herself onto her elbows. Heat radiated off of her, and her forehead was slick with sweat.

Lloyd called from the entryway. "Rebecca? Is everything all right?" He peered into the room. "Evelyn?"

Evelyn whipped around to her father, face pink with shame. "Yeah, daddy, everything's fine. She just woke up, is all."

“You’re a lousy man, Lloyd, an’ I mean it,” Rebecca said from behind her daughter. “You raped her an’ she’s jus’ a little girl. Goddamn you all the way down to hell. There ain’t no praise comin’ for you. Ain’t no salvation for a boy that touches a girl like that when they cryin’ for it to stop.”

Evelyn leaned down. “Mama it wasn’t like that.”

Rebecca unfurled herself, bedding her spine, arms shooting out from her lap and reaching for the braid in her hair. She grabbed at it and began to rip and tear at it. She gaped and gasped, all the while staring Lloyd down as he stood in the doorway, hands clasped and face steady.

“Damn you, damn you. I said I didn’t want it.” She shook her bed back and forth, knocking it against the pillows. “I’d rather you killed me than make me keep livin’ this again an’ again. I cain’t stand it anymore.”

Tears poured down her cheeks now, and her words came out like she was choking on them, spitting them out before they had the chance to crawl back in and keep suffocating her. Lloyd moved deeper into the room. His clasped hands were white hot with rage, knuckles burning and tendons flexing. He eyed his wife laying in the bed, trying to pull herself up to meet his eyes. She was a furious creature, maimed and near-broken, but she still fought like some villainous thing sent to tempt him. But Lloyd knew his holy order and saw her as the final test of his faith—his final triumph over the sin of this place. He wanted to scoop her up and dump her into the bathtub. Wanted to dip her under and see what came back out when she submitted to Him. Only then, when she saw how fruitless it was to fight back with her devilish hate, when her grip on his forearm weakened and her hand slipped into the water, when she saw that inky black closing in

and knew nothing would save her from it except a righteous surrender, would he pull her from the bathtub and cradle her like a child being held for the first time in her renewed life. But Lloyd knew she would not be so easy anymore. He looked to Evelyn stooped over Rebecca, taking care of her like she was her own, and turned on his heel.

After he left, Evelyn turned to her mother and cooed, “He left to go out back, mama. It’s okay. You’re okay.” She stroked the woman’s limp hair and patted her dampened forehead with the pink rag. She hushed her mother’s cries, subdued and pitiful now.

Rebecca looked up, chin quivering. “I always been told that God never lets anything bad happen to good people. What kinda God is he prayin’ to that lets this keep happenin’?”

Evelyn stilled, biting at her raw lip. “I don’t know if we are good people, mama. An’ if we are, I don’t know if he’s prayin’ to a good God.”

Chapter 15

Evelyn did everything she could to maintain the house as both of her parents retreated from their duties. Cook for three, wash the dishes she could rescue from either parents, if they took to their plate at all. The only tasks she was free from were dusting the house—Lloyd took great care to keep his Holy relics spotless—and tending to the chickens, as Rebecca had taken to roosting with them most nights, preferring the filthy ground and splintering coop walls to the paltry cathedral Lloyd had turned the homestead into.

She could not bring herself to clean out the congealing mess in the kitchen, and she didn't dare go near the table still standing at a lopsided attention in the side yard. She propped open as many windows as she could find paint sticks, and she once considered using the unfinished family photo album to hold open the window above the sink. In the basin sat meat, still left to thaw for over a week. Turning gray and then green, shriveling and puckering at the afternoon sunlight that shone through the window. The flies continued to gather, coming in through the growing number of open windows. They hovered over the meat and fruit bowl in a throbbing black mass, each waiting their turn to shit and lay eggs in the rot.

Evelyn knew she would return to school in less than two months. Would have to face Danny, have to look him in the eye and pretend she didn't mind that he stole the only thing she could ever really lay claim to in her life. But now? She would welcome the encounter if it meant her father would stop praying and her mother would be her mother again.

A few days later, in the early August evening, Lloyd came to Evelyn.

“The sky’s turnin’ some ugly sorta gray. You might want to call your mama in so she can stay dry tonight, just in case it rains.”

Evelyn nodded and headed out back, steeling herself against whatever she may find waiting in the henhouse. The temperature had already dropped a few degrees, and the linens Evelyn had hung were rippling in the wind like fish swimming upstream. She opened the henhouse door to a flurry of chicken feathers. Her mother was already up, pacing, biting her nails. Her hair, usually shoulder length, was matted in the back, making it look short, boyish. Evelyn imagined that her mother looked something like this as a dust-covered country child, romping around her family’s property, farm cat under her arm and chicken scratch lining her pockets. Rebecca was muttering to herself. *Mama, mama. I cain’t do it no more.*

Evelyn cleared her throat and peered deeper into the small room. Rebecca stopped abruptly, as if she hadn’t noticed someone else had joined her.

“The weather’s gettin’ kinda nasty, and daddy asked me to bring you inside just in case. You know how the henhouse roof can get kinda leaky.”

Rebecca eyed her and straightened to match Evelyn’s posture. She lifted her hand to mimic the same outstretched position Evelyn held her own hand out at, both women beckoning the other to join them. Both stepped forward and met at the center of the dingy coop. Evelyn reached for her mother’s hand and clasped it tightly, wincing as Rebecca’s nails dug in. She didn’t know if it was an act of aggression or if she was holding on for dear life.

“Come inside, mama,” she whispered. “Please?”

The wind picked up and rattled the shingles, and both women jumped at the noise, clutching each other a little tighter. They walked hand in hand back up to the house, barely pausing in front of Lloyd's shed. His sermon was drowned out by the rising winds and the birds calling their babies back to their nests, but they knew he was in there, praying to God for redemption or ease or *whatever bullshit keeps him sleepin' through the night. As if he'd get into heaven on servitude alone.* Rebecca knew good and well that *you cain't placate or play God an' still have a shot at bein' saved.*

They made their way inside, and split at the doorway to the master bedroom. Rebecca entered and settled herself under the bedsheets. Evelyn watched until her mother looked comfortable enough, and then she tiptoed out of the doorway and into her own bedroom.

Sleep came fitfully after a few hours. Evelyn tossed and rolled like a loose can in the bed of a beat-up truck. For a while, she'd stared up at her ceiling, watching as the corners of her eyes darkened and the spiders crawled inside and blurred her vision. The growing dark pulsed in her periphery like teeming daddy long legs on a cave wall.

Sleep never found Rebecca. She lay in the dark until Lloyd came inside, hauling something into the room and leaning it up against the side of the bed. He settled in next to her and whispered against her ear, "It's nice to have you back." He curled around her, and Rebecca couldn't breathe. Couldn't see in the dark and couldn't feel her way out, all wrapped up in his arms. His hand slid down her waist, trying to find a place to grip. His touch felt like fire on her cold skin, and Rebecca jumped up from the bed so fast Lloyd thought she might've taken flight. She tried to get her balance once she was on her feet, but she took a step forward and kicked the bulky object Lloyd had brought into the room.

It fell over with a crack, and, in the moonlight sifting through the clouds, Lloyd's homemade cross shone bright white against the aged floorboards. Rebecca turned to face Lloyd, who now sat up straight in bed. He shrugged.

“I thought it might make a nice touch above the bed. Don't you think?”

Rebecca lunged for him, her hands wrapping around his throat. Still reeling from how fast Rebecca had left the bed, Lloyd could only sit and watch. Her whole body made contact with him all at once, knocking him back against the headboard. He slumped sideways into the pillows. Rebecca leaned over and covered him with the corner of the quilt, watching to see if his chest would rise again. It did, and Rebecca turned on her heel and left the bedroom.

Her expert feet skipped over the creaking floorboards on her way to her daughter's room, a lifetime in one house having taught her at least that much. She *don't dare give 'im another chance. Cain't risk it.*

Rebecca reached the foot of Evelyn's bed. Sleep had found her, but not without a struggle. Her forehead was slick with sweat, and her sheets were twisted around her legs. There wasn't anything peaceful about her sleep. She just looked tired, aged. She looked like Rebecca. Like some twisted mirror, reflecting and multiplying their grief until neither one knew where one's ended and the other's began.

“Shhh, sweetheart. This is the real salvation. This holy, holy freedom.” She reached into Evelyn's desk and pulled out the scissors that had been missing from her sewing kit. She ran her finger along the blade, feeling for when it bit into her. It took only a little pressure, and a small bead of blood slipped down the side of her finger. She stuck

the finger into her mouth and sucked the blood from it, then dropped her arm to her side, shielding the scissors from catching the moonlight through the gauzy curtains.

Rebecca's whisper barely passed her lips. "I won't be shackled any longer. Not to any of this." She walked over to Evelyn. Leaning down, she pressed a dry kiss to her daughter's forehead.

Her hands shook as she brought them above her hand. Clasped like a prayer, with the scissors held tightly between them. She looked to heaven. Looked for guidance.

Evelyn blinked her eyes open, feeling the weight shift on the bed. Her mother kneeled above her, her hands lifted high above her head, the whites of her eyes a halo all the way around her irises. She brought her arms down hard.

Evelyn remembered only the mangling of their two screams, intertwined and harmonizing. Rebecca wrenched the double blades out as fast as she'd pushed them in, covering her hands over the throbbing wound. Her daughter's blood boiled over the cracks between her fingers, and she fell over herself, clamoring to the girl's bathroom, opening and slamming cabinets as she hunted desperately for something to stop the blood.

Evelyn held herself tight. She was burning and freezing cold. Her vision blurred. She couldn't let her look at the gore. Out of the corner of her eye, all she saw was a black stain blooming under the strap of her nightshirt, seeping out with each heartbeat. If she closed one eye, she could see herself split open, simple and clean and deep, just beside her collar bone. Below her shoulder, the spiders crawled over her, pricking her skin with whitehot ice. Deep black soaked into her bedsheets, into her nightshirt. Her throat was

coated with sickly bile, and she held both it and her screams inside her mouth with all she had.

Rebecca returned from the bathroom carrying a white shirt with a small, rusty streak on the back and packed it into the gaping mouth of the wound. She sobbed into it, pressing her forehead in to stop the bleeding. It came away anointed with Evelyn's blood.

"It's okay, it's okay," she whispered, and Evelyn didn't know who she was speaking to. She could barely hear her own thoughts, let alone her mother. Rebecca scooped her daughter into her arms, still holding the shirt against the wound, and began to rock her in her arms, cooing softly, humming a lullaby. She held her until the blood clotted and a deep ache set over Evelyn, washing over and smothering the sting that had lit her veins on fire. Each wave hit her like the lake lapping at her feet, ushering her into the water, deeper, deeper, until her toes could barely brush the silty bottom. Evelyn gave in and sunk into her mother's arms.

Chapter 16

August 1943

Rebecca busied herself with the buttons on her blouse and straightened Lloyd's unruly tie. She smoothed herself in front of the mirror.

"Evelyn", she called back into the house, "Go ahead an' get dressed an' meet us out front." She turned back to Lloyd.

"Sweetheart, would you mind?" she asked, holding a small gold necklace out to him. He smiled at her and reached forward, moving behind Rebecca and pulling her hair from the back of her neck. He fastened the chain at her nape and patted her shoulder.

"All done", he smiled. Rebecca turned to face him, her smile as starchy as Lloyd's good jeans. Lloyd's gaze fell to the necklace. A gift he'd given Rebecca early in their marriage. Settled just below the notch in her throat was a small gilded cross, catching the sunshine from an open window beside the mirror. Lloyd cleared his throat and swallowed. He felt a prick at the back of his head and reached a hand up to rub at the ghost of a bruise still leftover on his scalp.

"You—you look real nice, Rebecca." He closed his eyes and sent a silent prayer to the Lord. This small profession of her faith set him at ease, though he hadn't yet settled. He was still nervous to sleep with his back to his wife, but sleeping facing her felt like a violation that he'd pay for dearly. Lloyd exhaled and let his wife usher him out the front door and into the yard.

Evelyn stood fixed in front of the bathroom mirror. Her hair, now brushing her collarbones, was swept to one side, out of the way of her small bandage on her left

shoulder. Leaning in, she brushed a gentle finger over the white wrappings, tracing the lines like a whisper. Tender, but no longer gaping and weeping its slick, oily blood. She reached around to her back and lifted her shirt, running a finger up her spine. Having long since scabbed over, only a scar was left to remind her of her heart-shaped rock. The bump on her head had receded with the summer days, and the blood had since been scraped from under her nails. Evelyn moved to raise her left arm, but a persisting twinge kept her from raising it past her waist, so she tucked it back into her makeshift sling. She shook her head, eyes closed tight, and took in a sharp breath.

Only hours after that night, Rebecca had become her mother again, had seemingly broken the curse that held her. She had held her until Evelyn fell asleep and had rocked her even after her brows unknitted themselves and the adrenaline wore off into pure exhaustion. Evelyn had woken, muscles coiled tight and her left arm dead weight at her side, to her mother brushing her hair, whispering sweet nothings to her closed eyelids.

Her father was still wary, still led with a prying eye around each corner, still spent the hottest hours of the day in his chapel, rewriting the gospel into something he could digest. Pencil lead still dusted the side of his hand from the hours he spent pouring over his moleskin. Still, he'd begun to work on household repairs, had even tilled the shriveled garden for Rebecca to plant her next batch. Evelyn had watched him peck at the chalky dirt, feeding the hungry earth with more sweat than it had rained in the past months.

Evelyn reasoned that she'd paid a small price to rebalance the household, and, had she the ability to raise both hands to the sky, she would have sent praises to God for letting her off so easy. And so Evelyn laced her shoes and walked down the front steps to meet her parents in the yard.

The table sat at a steep angle, one side plunging into the muddied ground. The tablecloth was caked with fat, shining like an oil slick in the sun. Putrefied and soaking, seeping like blood into the cloth. Clouds of flies hovered over the rot, waiting their turn to land on it and revel in the filth. Moldy scum had hardened onto the china plates. Maggots swarmed and writhed in every dish. The ham had grayed, almost disintegrated entirely. The table buzzed, a deep hum sung by every creature feeding off of the decay.

Evelyn didn't make it ten feet closer before she gagged, doubling over and heaving into the dirt. Rebecca skipped over to her, holding two glasses, now more flies than liquid. She smiled at Evelyn, holding a glass out to her. Evelyn looked up, saliva dripping from her lips, and waved her mother to the side. Rebecca shrugged, held her own glass high, and toasted. She lifted it and drank deeply, swallowing the contents of the glass. She smiled down at Evelyn. Caught between her teeth were drunken flies and ants, distilled from soaking in a bath of wine. She sucked at them, working each insect out with her tongue and then swallowed. Evelyn heaved again, sweating now in the late August heat. She was lightheaded but wouldn't let herself breathe deeply this close to the table. She stumbled forward, grabbed a chair, and pulled herself onto it, gasping like a fish hauled out of the river.

Lloyd stood behind his chair, eyes glazed over, face red. Teams of ants marched on, carrying hardened crumbs on their backs. A mosquito danced around Evelyn's throat. Rebecca eyed Lloyd, and he quickly found his seat. Evelyn held her chin high, trying desperately to escape the stench. Flesh and blood and rot. Hot and wet and raw. Sickly, sickly.

"Lloyd? Would you do us the honors?" Rebecca asked.

“Th-the what?”

“Say grace, dear.”

“Oh,” Lloyd faltered. He paused, waiting for Rebecca to motion that she did indeed want God to witness this table. She picked up her great carving knife and motioned for the plates before Evelyn and Lloyd. Evelyn puffed at a beetle that landed on the plate before her and handed the plate to her mother. Smiling, Rebecca took it and set it before the ham. She dug into what remained of the putrid, bloated meat and began to saw at it. It sunk in on itself at her knife’s touch, and Rebecca had to scoop each helping onto the plates with her fingers. It slipped between her fingers and ran down her forearms.

Rebecca moved to the potatoes, then greens, and then rolls. She made up each helping with love and care, humming as she circled the table. At last, she craned her neck to look at Evelyn’s pie, sagging in its tin. It sat atop its rack, the pinnacle of their glorious meal. Rebecca shoveled a slice onto each plate, barely able to crack the cemented crust. Parasites squirmed in each helping, wriggling like bait on a hook. Rebecca handed a plate to Lloyd and then Evelyn before sitting in front of her own.

They all took hands and bowed their heads, Lloyd muttering his thanks for a bountiful meal. Rebecca leaned to her husband and kissed his cheek in gratitude. She left a small bug streaking his cheek as she removed her lips.

Rebecca looked upon her household. “Be grateful an’ eat up, dear family. I made this all for you, an’ it would be a terrible shame for it to go to waste.”

She lifted a bite to her mouth, a maggot dropping from her fork at the last moment. She swallowed, closed her eyes, and smiled.

“Oh, Lloyd you’ve got to try a bite,” she said, licking her lips. “I think I’ve really got it this time around.” She motioned for Evelyn to pick up her fork and take a bite.

“Dig in, my daughter! It won’t stay warm forever.” Evelyn’s gaze fell to her plate. A fly landed and tended to its eggs. Beside them, a colony of maggots burst forth, feeding their way out of the rotted dish. Lloyd took to his glass of wine, swirling it around between his fingers. In it swam drunken and drowning ants, writhing in the glass and filling it up nearly to the brim. Silence save for the sound of Rebecca dining. Mouth full, she motioned with her fork piled high with rot. “I mean it. Try a bite. Mama would be proud of this supper I made y’all.”

Evelyn and her father traded frantic eyes. Evelyn reached down to her fork, clenching her jaw, and picked at her plate blindly. She did not look at her fork as she raised it to her lips. Her mother, lips peeled back with a smile, cheered as Evelyn shoved a bite past her tongue and deep down her throat. A small spider crawled out of her mouth and dropped onto the tablecloth. She forced the bite down, holding her hand in front of her mouth to keep the rot from coming back up. She gagged but forced herself to swallow.

Evelyn turned to the fence line, wishing for a shining moment that she could run from this place. Until Las Vegas or Albuquerque or Tijuana. She turned back and looked down at her plate, readying herself for another bite. Her fork scraped the china plate, picking up another mouthful of decay, as she closed her eyes and began to pray.