

CHAPTER ONE

In the dark crept something darker, but I dismissed it as merely shadows. A swaying branch perhaps, or a deer tensing until I finished stuffing the can with garbage. Something abnormal never crossed my mind, not even with my scalp prickling and my heart pounding. After all, excitement in this town meant the first gunshot of open season, and battered morels sizzling in oil. Muggings were rare here, murder nonexistent. Crimes occurred behind closed doors, and often by a man who swore he loved you.

I started back up the walkway, but froze mid-step when I entered the porch light's glow. It flickered, then dimmed, and I didn't feel the security I normally did. I felt *exposed*, as if the light was an agent of the shadows, highlighting my position for all the night to see. Behind me, wind chimes dinged in the gnarled oak tree. Woodsmoke drifted on the breeze. I released a shaky breath, but the cloud of mist didn't leave my lips; it *fled* with my body-heat, as if the night was a singing siren, her music luring my warmth away. Dread seeped into my marrow. Unseen eyes bore into the back of my skull. I rubbed my arms and summoned the courage to glance over my shoulder.

The sky was clouded, the darkness beyond the oak tree expanding into infinity. The world seemed empty. Hollow. If I listened closely I might have heard the shadows echo. But still, it was only blackness.

Stop being a goose, Miriam. The night is just playing tricks with your imagination, I told myself, unaware the dark would soon make me tremble more than any nightmare. But right then, in a nowhere town in rural Appalachia, shivering on a cement walkway in flannel pajamas and fuzzy penguin slippers on a cloudy, winter night, I did not believe in magic or mystical creatures. I did not believe monsters lurked beneath my bed or in the woods around the farmhouse, and I *certainly* did not believe they lurked as neighbors or strangers or things darker than the darkness.

The backdoor's knob creaked in my hand. A shadow struck from the gloom and brushed my cheek, softer than a whisper. I recoiled as if a fist had swung. A moth fluttered up to the porch light and I cursed my foolishness, fear's bitter tang in my mouth. The moth circled the lightbulb twice, then rested upside down on the rim, its antennae twitching. I tilted my head. *Have I ever seen a moth so calm beside a light in the darkness?* I wondered. It was no larger than a half-dollar, and brown. When I stepped closer it spread its wings, exposing the yellow eyes on its back. My fingers itched to hold it, to feel its soft feet tap my skin. I reached up, my hand cupped. The powdered eyes on its back widened.

A chickadee buzzed my head; its wingtips scraped my wrist. I jumped back with an: "eek," yanking my hand away as the bird snatched the moth with its beak and zipped off into the night.

The porch light flickered. I darted through the backdoor and latched the

deadbolt behind me.

"Damn, woman. You look like you've seen a ghost," my husband, Sam, said as I scurried into the living room from the kitchen. He was perched on the couch in a sweatsuit, his back stiff, the television remote in one hand and an iPhone on his thigh. He looked like the general of the living room, the commander of gadgets. His crewcut perfected the picture.

"No ghost," I said. On the flat screen the newscaster with the birthmark on his forehead reported about American soldiers injured in the Middle East. I clicked on the Christmas tree and slid the chain on the front door. The tree's lights shifted lazily from white to blue to green, and my heart began to steady. "A chickadee buzzed my head. It just startled me, is all."

"Chickadee? At this time of night?"

"It snatched a moth off the porch light."

Sam lifted his cigarette from the empty beer can on the coffee table and tapped off a stalk of ash. "Don't be stupid. It's too cold for moths. You're jumping at shadows again."

"I know—" *what I saw*, I almost said. My lips pressed tight as my mother's voice scolded me inside my head. *Never make waves, Mir. You already cause enough trouble. Don't cause any more. My poor heart can't take it.*

My face muscles relaxed and hung off my skull, heavy as dough. "You're probably right."

"Did you lock down the can's lid?" Sam asked, his eyes on the newscaster.

"Yes."

He spared me a glare. "Are you *sure*? I don't want raccoons spreading trash everywhere again. Makes us look bad to the neighbors."

That had happened once. Three years ago.

"It's locked. I tugged on the lid like you showed me."

He nodded curtly, my answer deemed acceptable.

Most nights I left the curtains open to display the Christmas tree, but tonight I pulled them shut to hide our home from the darkness. My right penguin slipper stared up at me, its stitched smile now pleading. A button eye had fallen off, probably on the walkway near the garbage can. Stuffing protruded from its socket. I glanced at the backdoor, remembering the hollow darkness, the heat-luring night.

Sorry, little penguin. Surgery must wait until daylight.

I headed for the stairs, then stopped on the lower landing. "Um, Sam?"

Smoke leaked out his nose. "What?"

My brow furrowed. *How do I ask for comfort without acting like a child who is afraid of the dark?* I leaned against the banister and traced a finger seductively along the wood. "Come to bed with me?"

Sam groaned as if I had asked him to re-shingle the roof. "I'm watching the news."

"I know. But we haven't seen each other much lately and—"

"We *live* together." His iPhone buzzed. He glanced at it, a ghost of a smile touching his lips. He tapped a quick text and sent it off, then noticed I still

lingered. "I'll come up when the news is over, all right? *If I'm tired.*"

Sam's iPhone buzzed as I headed up the staircase. "Can I get you anything before I go to bed?" I asked.

"Nuh-uh," he grunted.

"Love you." I stopped on the third step when he didn't answer. His fingers tapped away at the iPhone's screen. "Goodnight," I said.

When he didn't hear me the second time I crept upstairs alone.

I kicked off my slippers and clicked on the bedside lamp. Wind tapped the windowpane, and the floor vent whirred, straining to fight off the cold. A moth flittered out of the closet and circled the light, the shadows of its wings fluttering on the ceiling like a frightened heart.

"Don't you know it's too cold for moths?" I said, crawling beneath the blankets.

The moth perched on the lampshade, preened its antennae, then fluttered into the hallway as if eager to deliver a message.

CHAPTER TWO

The chickadee stood on the windowsill, staring in at me with its black, beady eyes. It had been there every morning since my incident with the moth three days ago, as if we had some prearranged appointment. I believed it was the same chickadee from that night as well, but had no proof. Instead, I dismissed its behavior as humans often do. *It is cold outside and it's seeking warmth through the window.* Nothing peculiar. Nothing odd. Life was normal, so carry on.

"Good morning, chickadee," I told the bird from across the bedroom, even though the sun wouldn't rise for another two and a half hours. The chickadee stared at me as I dressed for work, an intelligence behind those eyes beyond my comprehension. Inside, the window-frame was strung with bunches of dried flowers I had collected the year before—lavender, roses, yarrow—colorful reminders of warmth and sunshine, promises of spring. Outside, a gust of wind sprayed the chickadee with snowflakes. The bird didn't even flinch.

I must remember to buy birdseed on my way home from work. It's so miserable to be alone in the cold.

"Tell you what, chickadee," I said, tucking my T-shirt into my jeans. "If I make it through this day without murdering anybody, I'll bring you a treat. Deal?"

The chickadee stared at me, unmoving.

I fetched my sneakers from the closet. They were old and dingy, and the double bow hadn't been untied since I bought them two years ago. I crammed my feet inside, wiggling to get my heels in. I stood four feet away from the bird, expecting it to flee from my sudden movement. Instead it watched me, feathers rustling in the wind. I crouched to its eye-level and inched closer to the window. Three feet away, then two, then one. The bird stood its ground. Brave little thing. I held my breath to keep from fogging the glass. If the bird hadn't blinked I would have thought it was dead, frozen on the windowsill. I admired its black cap, its gray body, the hint of tan outlining its wings. "Do you have a message for me?" I asked. The bird lunged at the glass and cursed in its tiny, chirping voice: "*chick-a-dee-dee-dee!*" Then flew up and over the house.

The outburst jolted me to my feet. The chickadee had left footprints on the sill, like two tiny pitchforks pressed into the snow.

I tugged my olive knitted cap over my ears, slid into my favorite overcoat and pranced downstairs, enjoying the weight of the layered, cranberry coattails flailing behind me. I had bought the coat seven years ago, and even on clearance it had been a splurge which made Sam blow his top. It was worth every penny and gripe, however. The satin-lined wool made me feel like a fairytale's winter princess, waiting to enter a ballroom carved from ice and be swept away in a swirl of silk and gold.

"We're out of milk."

Daydreams of tiaras and twirling ball-gowns disintegrated as I entered the kitchen. Sam leaned against the counter, scraping a spoon through a bowl of dry cornflakes. The deputy star on his chest gleamed beneath the fluorescent lighting. His collar was starched and creased. "You know I *hate* dry cereal."

I grabbed a banana from the Longaberger basket on the table. "I'll pick up some after work."

"And how exactly does your lack of foresight help me now?"

I leaned against the refrigerator, tracing a brown spot on the peel with my thumb. "It doesn't."

"Speak up. I don't understand mumbling," Sam said.

"It doesn't! I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean to upset you."

Sam nodded, my apology acknowledged. He dumped the bowl of dry cornflakes into the sink and left to check his e-mail. I tossed the banana back into the basket, no longer hungry.

Computer keys tapped in the living room. My eyes narrowed as my blood-pressure rose. I wanted to march into the living room and tell Sam I was *not* sorry; his attitude was hurtful and unfair. But my mother's voice scolded me inside my head, insisting how *lucky* I was to have a husband with a respectable job; how *lucky* I was to have such an attractive man when most ignored my straggly brown hair and boyish figure; how *lucky* I was to marry a homeowner; how *lucky* I was he didn't beat me or cheat on me or mooch away all I had.

You're too damn sensitive, Miriam. Be grateful for what you have. I could almost see my mother in her wicker chair. A delicate gold cross hanging from her thick neck, her second glass of scotch in hand. *Be a good girl. Don't make waves.*

"Be grateful for what you have. Don't make waves," I mumbled with a sigh, then glanced out the window above the kitchen sink. The chickadee stood on the sill, glaring in at me. It shook its head, as if disagreeing with my behavior. But that was ridiculous. Songbirds didn't understand English, let alone the complexities of human relationships.

"Odds are looking bad for your treat, bird."

The chickadee glared in response.

I scurried into the living room, away from the creepy bird and its accusations I imagined. Sam commanded the couch, his laptop on his thighs. He snapped it shut as I entered the room.

"Mad at me?" I asked as he shoved the laptop into its case and stood, slinging the strap over his shoulder.

"Stupid mistakes happen. I understand." He kissed my cheek, then murmured into my ear: "Although, you can always make me lasagna tonight to prove you're sorry."

"Tonight?" I had worked nearly every day for the last three weeks to earn time off for the holidays. Dirty dishes and cigarette butts cluttered the coffee table, junk mail was scattered everywhere, grime darkened the floors and baseboards, the laundry had developed a summit, and the whole house had the

stale stench of smoke and neglect. "I planned to clean tonight," I blurted. "And I need to make the pie. And I need to wrap your family's presents. And I—"

A shadow passed over Sam's austere face. "If I'm not worth the extra effort, just say so. But I honestly don't see the difficulty in some extra cooking. It's not like we have children to take up your time."

My heart winced. "You *are* worth the effort," I said. The shadow on Sam's face lingered. I forced a smile. "I'll pick up the noodles with the milk after work. You know I love making your mother's recipe."

Sam smirked and the eclipse passed. "Not as much as I love *you*," he said, and grabbed his truck keys off the hook on the wall.

A chickadee flapped off the porch when he opened the door.

CHAPTER THREE

My heart sank when Sam dropped me off at the shabby gas station, its square windows blazing like the gates of hell in the pre-morning gloom. Knowing I didn't have to return after my shift for five days helped to drag my feet through the door. I punched my timecard, tied my tacky, orange apron around my waist and said a quick hello-goodbye to the puffy-eyed night clerk who practically sleepwalked out the door. I had to survive eight hours today. Just eight hours. I plopped onto the stool behind the cash-register and watched the clock. Only seven hours and fifty-nine minutes to go, seven hours and fifty-nine minutes, seven hours and—Oh!—fifty-eight minutes, until freedom.

I gritted my teeth as the day dragged. Most people bought gas from the pumps and I never dealt with them. Winter was a bit of a treat since I didn't have to refill the squeegee buckets outside; the water just froze into a blue brick, anyway. Christmas Eve brought in excess out-of-towners, but the majority of customers were locals. Locals I served two to six days a week for the past three years. Locals who did not know my name despite the obnoxiously large *Miriam* stamped in caps across my heart. They stared through me as I rung up their gas and cigarettes and lottery tickets and booze. I asked them how their day was. How was the family? Any plans for the holidays? Are you sick of the snow yet? It was a rarity when I received more than a one-worded response.

I doodled roses and gnomes on discarded receipts during the lulls, and numbed my feelings of inadequacy like an alcoholic, with inflated truths as my drink of choice. I silently praised myself for working steadily in a county with one of the highest unemployment rates in the United States. My minimum wage helped pay the mortgage and Sam's student loans, his diploma stashed somewhere with my box of oil paints and canvases, collecting a marriage's worth of dust. *Everyone* needed gas, I reasoned, from emergency workers to families. Thus my work helped America thrive and I had no reason for embarrassment or shame.

And yet, at the Sheriff's Christmas party this year, I had hid in the bathroom for twenty minutes after Sam gibed about my *monkey job* to all his snickering coworkers as they refilled their plastic cups with spiced wine.

At 1:59 P.M. I tugged my olive cap over my ears and buttoned my overcoat. Sixty-seconds later I waved goodbye to my relief and darted out the door, coattails flying.

I ambled down the rural, woodland roads, smiling. The F-250 was our only vehicle, and since Sam worked twelve hour shifts and hated relying on me to pick him up, I had a two mile hike home. I never minded, though. My step bounced as the gas station grew smaller behind me, leaving only the road and trees and the air's faint scent of woodsmoke. I could have gone to the Kroger in town for the lasagna noodles and milk, but I headed toward Keith's Corner Shop

instead, a small mom-and-pop on the way home. The fifteen-percent markup was worth avoiding the Christmas Eve crowds.

The flurries had stopped hours ago and the sun broke through the clouds, making the weather brisk but pleasant. A thin blanket of white covered the ground, and other than a few oaks clinging onto clumps of brown leaves, the trees were bare, watching the roads like skeleton guards. Cardinals darted between the branches, but otherwise the world was still, with the loud silence winter creates. During spring these woods breathed in shades of green, leaves dancing to a choir of songbirds. But for now their songs were a memory and a distant anticipation.

Except for one.

I had heard the birdsong before, but didn't know which species sang the four, crisp notes. High, low, high, low. The notes followed me for a full mile, the soloist hidden somewhere in the trees. *One of the cardinals, perhaps?* High, low, high, low. Do, bee, do, bee. The music rang in the winter stillness, sweet and tender, as if trying to coax the leaves from their buds.

A cowbell clanged against the glass door as I entered Keith's Corner Shop. Keith stood behind the beat-up wooden counter as always, wearing a faded OSU ball cap and a Realtree jacket, a lump of tobacco behind his lip. His weathered face smiled when I entered. The smile didn't touch his eyes, though. It never did.

"Mornin." Keith's voice crackled from decades of cigarettes and his sentences always trailed up, as if he was in a constant state of suspicion. "How's Sam a-doin'?"

"Good. I'm making him lasagna tonight," I replied, emphasizing my wifeliness. The star on Sam's chest had granted him instant acceptance from the community when we moved here, but I was merely an accessory on his arm like a cufflink or a watch. I had no status here or friends or roots or blood. I was not a church member; I had no children despite years of trying; and I occupied a job which could have been given to a *local*. Everyone was polite to my face, but I often caught people—like Keith, as I rounded an aisle corner—staring at me from the tail of their eyes. I often felt like an exotic animal, a gazelle perhaps, caught munching flowers on their grandmother's grave.

I wish I could blame the small-town atmosphere for the glares and unease, but growing up had never been any different. All my life an inner voice whispered I was an outcast, that I somehow didn't belong. *You always act as if you are hiding something*, my mother used to say. *Stop being so damn quiet*. Yet I knew people's unspoken dislike of me was more than my muteness. It was deeper. An unseen deformity, like that puppy all the litter-mates try to kill even though the breeder finds nothing wrong with it. Most days I ignored the stares, but some days it was so painfully obvious I ducked into public restrooms to make sure nothing was stuck to my face.

"Any plans tonight?" I asked Keith.

Keith sniffed. "Family," he mumbled, then flipped open a hunting magazine.

I sighed and wandered to the rear of the store. Shopping at Keith's reminded me of an archeology dig. I never knew what I would find or how long it had waited to be discovered. Metal shelving stretched across his small shop, crammed with everything from basic groceries to office supplies to children's toys to wigs to car fluids and car parts to deer gutting kits to greeting cards to tools. He also had an intimidating display of knives near the cash register, a small fridge of wilting fruits and vegetables, a small deli counter, and three floor-to-ceiling whirring refrigerators packed with bait and booze, namely Bud Ice.

I grabbed a half gallon of milk beside a small wall of beer cubes, then headed to the middle aisle. Pasta nestled between canned soups and bags of generic cat food which had probably been accumulating dust since the Kennedy assassination.

Cat food. That reminded me of the chickadee.

I grabbed a box of lasagna noodles, checked the expiration date (I still had eight days left, yippee!), and headed to the counter. "Do you sell bird seed?" I asked.

"All out."

I should have gone to Kroger, after all. I had told the chickadee that no bloodshed today meant a treat, and even though Sam would scoff at me for making a deal with a *dumb animal*, I intended to keep my promise. Beside the cash register was a basket of individually wrapped carrot cake slices. *Do chickadees even like carrot cake?* Apparently I would find out. "I'll take one of these, too."

Keith rang up my order. I headed out of the shop, plastic bag of groceries hanging off my wrist. The cowbell clanged as I opened the door. A brown moth fluttered inside and disappeared above the fluorescent lighting.

Do, bee, do, bee. Do, bee, do beeee.

"Hey, Keith?" He glowered at me, as if wondering why I didn't vanish from his town in the puff of voodoo smoke I most likely arrived in. "Do you know what species of bird makes this song? I've heard it all day."

Keith's face softened. He came around the counter and joined me in the doorway. "Aaaaah," he said, his smile touching his eyes. Apparently Keith was a bird man. I made a mental note for future conversations. "That there's a Carolina chickadee that is."

"Chickadee? I thought they sang their name."

Keith nodded, keeping his ear to the outside, listening to the high, low, high, low. Do, bee, do, bee. "Ah yup, their *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* is how they got their name, all right. But that's just one-uh their songs. The *see-me-I'm-here* is the other."

"See me I'm here?" I asked.

"That's the trick to rememberin' it. The notes kinda sound like those words if ya use yer 'magination some."

High, low, high, low. Do, bee, do, bee. See, me, I'm, here.

My eyebrows jumped. Once he pointed it out I couldn't *not* hear it, crisp and distinct.

See-me-I'm-here. See-me-I'm-here.

"I once heard an old Indian story bout them chickadees," he continued. "Said they're the strongest spirits in the wood, and I believe it."

I never would have related a tiny chickadee to strength. I turned to Keith, eyebrow raised. "Yeah? Why is that?"

"Cuz it don't matter how bad the winters get, those lil birds don't just survive, they *thrive*. Most other birds fly to warmer weather. Even big, tough bears will hide and sleep 'til the snow melts. But not chickadee. He's a brave'un. Heck, when the weatherman forecasts a nasty snowstorm it's hard a-keepin' my shelves stocked cuz we humans get so scared and crazy. But chickadee braves the storm, survives as if it were his playground, and keeps on a-singin'."

I glanced at Keith from the corner of my eye, a smile tugging at my lips. He seemed filled somehow, as if talking about birds ignited warmth beneath his Realtree jacket. I had always thought of chickadees as background noise, easily taken for granted, easily forgotten. Keith's story was like a map into a secret world. Maybe my chickadee friend was more special than I realized. Maybe it offered me a way to connect with this community, with something as simple as birding.

"A chickadee has visited my window every day for the past three days," I said.

"That's nice," Keith grumbled, and shuffled back to his counter. "Tell Sam hello."

My shoulders slumped. "I will," I mumbled. The cowbell clanged. "Merry Christmas."

I never saw Keith again.

CHAPTER FOUR

The remaining walk home was wooded, with a few houses and trailers tucked deep into the trees. My grocery bag's handle had snapped a quarter of a mile back and I now cradled the noodles, milk, and carrot cake in my arms like an infant. I had been scrutinizing my awkward interaction with Keith since I left his shop, trying to decide at which point I appeared the biggest idiot.

A narrow creek meandered along the roadside, but it wasn't the picturesque vision the local campgrounds touted in their brochures. The water was bright orange and acidic, cutting through the landscape like a blood-poisoned vein. Even after nine years of living near the acid mine drainage my heart sank at the sight. I thought about the hibernating fish that should have been nestled in the creek's pebbles, the frogs that would never bask on its summer banks, and the eggs that would never hatch. I thought of all the life that would never happen thanks to this toxic land, a byproduct of coal mining, desperate workers risking their lives, and good old corporate greed. The locals called the polluted waters Yellow Boy, but I secretly called it Agent Orange. Everywhere that water flowed brought destruction and death.

The poisoned creek snaked around overgrown slag piles which had merged with the forest during the past century, creating unnaturally shaped hills and valleys. I scanned the roadway, making sure I was alone, then followed the orange water into the woods. Bare branches scraped against my clothing as I pushed through a grove of paw paw trees between two slag hills and into the hidden clearing beyond.

I had never told anyone about this secret place. *And God forbid my husband finds out.* Sam would sneer and gibe and roll his eyes at the decomposing log blocking the abandoned mine shaft, dusted with snow. But, to me, this recess was more inviting than feather beds or day spas or stone hearths crackling with flame. It was my sacred haven, a time-out from a mundane life.

The mineshaft yawned from the hillside as if it had dozed off awaiting my return, waking to greet me with open arms. It blew a constant fifty-five degrees, warming me on my winter rests and cooling me in summer's heat. I set my groceries beside the paw paws and sat on the log, listening to the orange creek trickle faintly past the grove. Deer prints cut across the opening and disappeared into the brush; raccoon prints ran beside them. I never found human tracks, however, except for the ones I had left from the days before. Discarded bottles or food wrappers never littered the scenery. Nor was there graffiti spray-painted on the rock or carved into the trees. My shoulders relaxed. It was always just me, and it was the one place in the world where I believed that was enough.

See-me-I'm-here.

I guess today it isn't just me, after all. The sweet, crisp notes greeted me from the branches overhead. A chickadee stared down from twenty feet up. I

doubted it was the same bird from my windowsill—I mean, what were the odds?—but I decided it was a good opportunity to see if carrot cake was chickadee-approved.

I fetched the carrot cake and unwrapped the cellophane, the warm scents of cinnamon and nutmeg tempting on a chilly Christmas Eve. I took a bite, moist and spicy, the frosting making my molar's cavity ache. "Do you like carrot cake, chickadee?" I asked, and threw a chunk to the ground.

The chickadee tilted its head, bounced on the branch, then flitted down and pecked eagerly at the morsel, shaking its head to rip out the carrot pieces. As pets went, this was the closest I would ever get. I had begged Sam for years to adopt, but he refused adamantly, insisting dogs were too much responsibility, cats were too snobbish, and birds were filthy rats with wings.

"How brave are you, spirit of the wood?" I crouched and held out the rest of the cake in my hand. The chickadee flew onto my wrist and pecked eagerly. I froze, my heart beating enthusiastically as I gaped at the wildlife at my fingertips, its tiny nails prickling my skin. The carrot cake had become a keyhole, a glimpse into a secret, untamable world. An unexplainable sense of home and belonging overwhelmed me. Tears pricked my eyes. I swallowed hard, feeling like a child again. A scared, lost child, who had finally collapsed into her father's arms after wandering aimlessly for so long. I let the tears drip off my chin, too terrified to wipe them away, too terrified any movement would scare away the chickadee, even though it seemed braver than a thousand armies armed to the teeth.

I don't know how long I crouched there or how long the chickadee pecked. Enough for my right foot to fall asleep, but not enough for the bird to fill. A brisk wind whipped the hair off my shoulder. A tear grew frigid on my cheek. The creek trickled outside the grove, its orange water flowing through the forest like a never ending funeral procession.

"Nature's veins are filled with poison, her flesh is rotting, and all the faeries are dead." My somber voice startled me. I hadn't intended to speak and had no idea where the words came from, or what they even meant.

The chickadee peered up at me. "The faeries aren't dead, Miriam. They just left the area."

My spine stiffened. The mineshaft puffed a gust of warm air. The chickadee stared at me and blinked its beady eyes.

"Did ... did you say something?" I asked.

The chickadee nodded. "I said the faeries aren't dead. Otherwise I would be unemployed."

I opened my mouth to speak, then closed it. My body tingled with excitement. My chest hummed as if ready to burst from holding in all the secrets of the world. Throughout my life I had felt like a stain on a carpet, an unwanted embarrassment the world tried to ignore. But in the span of a chickadee's tiny, chirping words, everything changed. Wildlife obviously didn't talk to just *anybody*. I must have been special somehow. I must have been—

The blood drained from my face. "Oh ... Oh my God." Wildlife did *not* talk

to anybody. Chickadees didn't speak and faeries didn't exist. I was having a break with reality. I was more of a freak than anyone ever believed. I stood up slowly, every muscle tense, as if the chickadee had sprouted fangs and a rattler. "I'm going crazy."

The chickadee tilted its head. "How do you—*tweet!*"

I yanked my hand back; the chickadee tumbled into the snow. "I-I'm stressed about Sam," I muttered, "and working too much, and having to visit the in-laws tomorrow. The stress has made me snap."

"You aren't crazy," the chickadee said, shaking snowflakes off its tail. A tiny down feather seesawed in the air. I snatched my groceries and charged through the paw paw grove, branches snapping against my coat. Eyes felt everywhere. *People* felt everywhere. Hidden behind trees where people had never lurked before. I could almost hear them laughing and mocking. *There goes Sam's stupid wife. As crazy as she is worthless.*

The chickadee flew after me and landed on my shoulder. "You are different, Miriam."

I hugged the groceries against my chest, as if protecting my last shred of sanity. "You're not there! La! La! La! You're not there!"

"You *must* realize you are different," the chickadee continued, bobbing on my shoulder in rhythm to my stride. "Don't you feel lost? As if you can't find home?"

I fought back tears, refusing to allow this psychosis to manipulate my emotions. I was already Sam's odd wife, which had been fine when we were two outcasts in high school. But Sam was now well respected and determined to be elected Sheriff next election. He would kill me if I damaged his reputation and ruined his dream.

I raced past the slag piles and back onto the street. Gravel and road salt crunched beneath my sneakers. A brown mud-truck roared past us, smog billowing out the tailpipe, plastic testicles swaying beneath its hitch. The chickadee waited to speak until after it disappeared over a hill. "I am sorry I scared you, but how else was I supposed to communicate?" I pressed my lips tight and ignored the talking songbird on my shoulder. The *hallucination*. The chickadee sighed. "Fine. I will give you some time. But do me three favors: Avoid the moths, trust the spiders, and do *not* go out after dark."

"What is all that supposed to mean?" I cut the last word short, realizing curiosity had tricked me into joining this psychotic conversation. It didn't matter. The chickadee had already disappeared into the trees.

That was, if it had ever been there at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

I latched the deadbolt, shoved the milk in the refrigerator, then went straight to bed. Naps made me feel guilty, as if I was behaving lazy and disrespectful since Sam worked twelve hour days, sometimes six days a week. *The public appreciates hard workers*, he always said. *I need to prove I have what it takes if I want to be elected Sheriff.* I had a ton of chores and obligations to finish before Sam got home, but I would be utterly useless if my brain snapped and he found me comatose and dribbling in the corner.

Besides, I didn't need a *nap*, just a chance to rest my eyes, recollect myself, unwind. Chickadees did not speak English in the real world. That only happened in fairytales and nervous breakdowns. I was obviously sick, possibly in the early stages of schizophrenia. I remembered a talk-show which had said schizophrenia was most severe if it started in the late twenties. My psyche was prime breeding ground for the crazies.

I froze halfway up the stairs. *What if this isn't insanity? What if I'm having a stroke?* I sucked in my lips. I didn't dare go to the emergency room. Sam would be humiliated if the public saw his wife raving about birds insisting she was special and relaying secret information about moths and spiders. And if my ramblings spread through the county? I cringed. *The waves I'd cause would destroy his reputation.* I couldn't do that to Sam, not after all the time and hard work he put into his career. Who would elect a Sheriff married to a lunatic?

I couldn't remember if aspirin was for strokes or heart attacks, but I took two anyway, then grabbed the cordless phone from the dresser and placed it beside my pillow so if I was on the verge of dying I could call 9-1-1. I tried to sleep, but the vision of the chickadee peering up from its carrot cake, a crumb stuck to its beak, repeated relentlessly in my head.

The faeries aren't dead, it had said.

My stomach knotted. My hallucination had spoken about imaginary creatures existing. That had to be a new record for insanity. I pushed the memory aside and visualized things I *knew* existed. The bed's brown and white striped comforter. Sam's gray-green eyes and crooked smile. The gold cross around my mother's neck.

When I opened my eyes I was calmer. Not rested—an enormous Brillo pad had somehow invaded my head—but the chickadee and the carrot cake seemed like a fading dream. I shuffled into the bathroom, rubbing my eyes. My heart jumped into my throat when I noticed the digital clock on the counter. *I slept over two hours? Holy crap!*

I bolted down the stairs, the clomps reverberating in the farmhouse. I needed to bake the pie for tomorrow, the in-laws' presents were still unwrapped, we had no clean clothes, and downstairs resembled a natural disaster. Sam typically strode through the door around 6:20, and I had promised

lasagna for dinner.

“Okay, okay. You can do this. It’s a matter of time management.”

I cranked on the oven and started the first load of laundry. The skillet clanged against the burner. I set a stock pot to boil. Several minutes later noodles plopped into rolling water, and ground beef and chopped onion sizzled in the skillet. I popped open a jar of spaghetti sauce and prepared my cheeses. Thirty minutes later the oven door slammed shut on a raw lasagna.

Thankfully, I had made the pie crust the night before. I squinted, trying to read my mother-in-law’s handwriting. *Cut sugar pumpkin into chunks. Simmer, covered in an inch of water for thirty minutes...? Or does that say twenty?* I had never made a pumpkin pie before, or had been allowed to help with Christmas dinner for that matter. God knew why my mother-in-law relented this year. Sam believed she was starting to trust me. I suspected it was a trap.

I boiled the raw pumpkin, mashed in the sugar and spices, filled the crust. I had twenty minutes until the lasagna finished baking and the pie went in. Perfect. I swapped the wet clothes for the dryer then scrambled upstairs and collected laundry for a second load, stomping on the remaining dirty clothing to make the mound appear as small as possible. Next I setup a gift wrapping station in the living room. The timer dinged as I taped the second gift closed. I yanked the lasagna from the oven and threw the pie inside. I glanced at the clock. 6:19. One minute to spare. I smirked, feeling smug about my efficiency.

My domestic panic grounded me, allowing no time to worry about talking birds or faeries or other such nonsense. I glanced occasionally out the living room window, but I never found a chickadee on the sill to glare or greet me. I never found a chickadee because the chickadee did not exist. Something must have been wrong with the piece of carrot cake I had eaten. Maybe it had expired, had mold spores which induced the hallucination and made me ill enough to sleep more than two hours when I needed to attend to my responsibilities.

I set the kitchen table with mismatched dishes and fetched the lasagna from the counter. When I turned around a wolf spider the size of a small tarantula stood on Sam’s dinner plate. My throat clenched. Her shiny black eyes glimmered from four feet away with all the seeming knowledge of early predators and ancient gods. I set the lasagna cautiously back onto the countertop, my sight never leaving the spider. She stood as still as stone ... then lifted a single foot, as if choosing me from a crowd of one.

I reached for the plate with my fingertips, leaning my body and face as far back as possible without toppling over. I stretched my arms in front of me as if the plate smelled of rot and death, then slipped out the back door. My skin crawled. Something about spiders felt primeval and threatening, an instinct inherited from ancestors who had whispered warnings around campfires in drafty, soot-stained caves.

The wolf spider stood motionless, her shiny eyes on me, my wide eyes on her. Her leg remained up and pointing. “Enjoy your spider life but stay away,” I said, and flung the spider into a shrub twenty feet away from the backdoor. I

then hurried inside and rewashed the plate, scrubbing harder than probably necessary.

I clicked on the Christmas tree lights and continued wrapping presents. At 7:30 the driveway remained empty. My brow furrowed. I set the wrapped gifts beneath the tree. The dryer buzzed. I went to swap loads and stopped mid-step. I sniffed the air. It smelled like something was—

“No!”

I yanked open the oven, coughing as a dark cloud billowed into my face. The smoke detector screamed its high pitched *ree! ree! ree! ree!* The pie was black. Charred. *Ruined.*

I growled at my stupidity and flung open the kitchen window. I had forgotten to set the damn timer. Was this the trap I had suspected from my mother-in-law? Proof I was an incapable moron, over something as simple as baking a pie? I slammed the oven door closed, my eyes watering from smoke. I was several miles from the closest grocery store in rural Appalachia without a car on the night of Christmas Eve. How the hell would I get another sugar pumpkin?

The smoke detector pierced my eardrums with its shrieking *ree! ree! ree!* I climbed onto the table to reset it, my lips pursed. I *couldn't* get another *sugar* pumpkin, but I *did* have another pie crust in the freezer and canned pumpkin in the pantry. My mother-in-law would surely taste the difference, but I preferred she mock me for my inferior baking skill than mock me for being an incompetent wife.

The can-opener whirred. By eight o'clock a new pie baked in the oven, the timer set and ticking. Sam still wasn't home. Normally he called when he was late, often from paperwork or election schemes. I scratched the back of my neck. *The station would call me if anything bad happened, right?* Of course they would. I was his wife, after all. Yet instincts nagged at me, insisting something was wrong. *What if he is hurt and no one knows?* Maybe he had rolled his truck off a hillside. Maybe a drunk driver had plowed into him and sped away. Or maybe—

[something darker than the dark]

—a paroled felon he had arrested in the past now exacted revenge.

I gnawed my lower lip. Sam insisted personal and professional lives shouldn't mingle, and unless I was raped or murdered I should never call him at work—and even then I should only call the 9-1-1 line. I needed to relax, to trust Sam to be the responsible adult I knew he was. A daddy longlegs scurried across a cobweb above the sink. I wrung my hands. I needed to be a good girl and not cause waves.

Don't make waves. Don't make waves. Don't make—

I grabbed the living room phone and dialed Sam's cell. It transferred straight to voicemail. His office line rang four times, then greeted me with another recording. I clenched the useless phone, my insides swirling with anxiety ... and a repressed, burning anger trying to claw through the emotional storm in my gut.

I went to return the phone to the living room table. A gray spider sat inside the cradle, one leg up, pointing at me. My breath caught in my throat. What the chickadee had said during my hallucination barreled back into my head: *Trust the spiders.*

The deadbolt unlatched with a triumphant *clack* and Sam sauntered through the front door. A wave of relief washed through me as I set the phone on the coffee table.

"Sorry I'm late." Sam pecked my lips, then shrugged off his jacket and tossed it onto the couch. "It is an absolute nightmare at the station. Bugged down with reports thanks to Thompson's idiocy."

"Sounds terrible." I grabbed Sam's jacket from the couch and hung it in the coat closet. The gray spider faced me, its front leg still up and pointing. I opened my mouth to mention the spider to Sam, then closed it. If I was hallucinating, Sam would know when he saw nothing there. If I was sane and the spider existed, then he would squish it. Schizophrenia was a terrible fate, but I assumed squishing an agent of a magical world brought worse repercussions.

Sam unbuttoned his deputy's shirt. "I thought you planned to finally clean this sty," he said, frowning at the dusty baseboards and the papers cluttering the coffee table.

"I got a late start," I said, as we both drifted toward the kitchen. "I think I'm coming down with something."

Sam glared at me from the corner of his eye. "Are you trying to get out of seeing my family for Christmas?"

"No!"

"Good. Cuz—" He saw the set table and stopped short. "You made lasagna."

"Of course. You wanted me to," I said.

"I completely forgot." Sam checked the refrigerator, making sure I had remembered the milk, and grabbed a Bud Ice. "I'm full on Wendy's, so freeze it for when we get back," he said, and cracked the can's top.

My stomach muscles clenched as if expecting a punch. "But I—"

"Did you burn it or something?" He slurped his beer. "The whole house smells like a goddamn crematorium."

I took a deep breath and fetched the freezer bags from the pantry. "No. I burnt the pie."

Sam gagged. "*What?* Jesus Christ, Miriam! My mother entrusted you with her recipe. *The recipe!*"

"I know! I'm sorry!" I said. "I made a second, but I had only canned pumpkin, so it—"

"My mother *never* uses canned *anything*," he snapped. "*It's tradition.*"

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's Christmas Eve. What was I supposed to do? All the grocery stores are closed."

"You should have known you'd screw up, *like always*, and bought another pumpkin beforehand."

I glared at him, hurt. Sam rolled his eyes. "You are too damn sensitive," he

said. "You know it's *true*. How hard is it for you to understand that—" My insides cringed, retreated, hid. Sam's gibes blew through me, leaving me standing like the naked stem of a dandelion. He kept talking, but his words floated around me like a burst of seeds on the wind. *Stupid. Wrong. Think.* My anger lunged at these taunts, but I caught its tail and shoved it down into my lowest darkness. Victory awarded me with a sinking sensation in my core, as if my suppressed resentment had turned to tar and everything good in me was drowning.

I focused on the lasagna as diligently as an agent defusing a bomb. On some level I acknowledged the sauced noodles, the knife and spatula breaking the melted cheese, the crispy chunks in the corner, the smoothness under my finger as the ziplock *clicked*. Yet numbness engulfed me, deadening my nerves, deadening me. Sam prattled about his patrol, but I registered no details. My dead hands placed two bags of lasagna in the freezer. My dead eyes regarded him vaguely, as if he weren't real but an image projected onto fog.

Of course I am crazy, I thought. What sane person functions like this?

"Are you even listening to me?" Sam asked.

"Of course." My heart bobbed in the tar, and I knew its only chance for freedom was if that inner darkness overflowed and devoured me with it. *And then what will be left to love?*

Sam finished his beer, showered, and plopped onto the couch with the evening news and a pack of Camel cigarettes. I curled up next to him in old flannel pajamas and my penguin slippers, its stuffing still protruding from the eye-socket. I sipped on a steaming mug of apple cider, distracting myself from burnt pies and chickadees and hallucinations and white-padded rooms.

A yellow spider crept onto the couch's armrest during the first commercial break. It lifted one leg, as if pointing me out. I leapt to my feet. "I'm going to bed."

"The news isn't done yet."

"Well, as I said, I felt lousy earlier and we have a long drive tomorrow." The yellow spider stared at me, pointing. I slinked behind the couch and trailed my finger seductively across Sam's shoulders. My voice dropped. "You can join me, if you *desire*."

"Maybe when I get tired," he said, and shrugged off my hand. The gray spider was still in the phone cradle, and still pointing. I sensed eyes everywhere, watching me from hidden crevices in clusters of eight. And I didn't know if they were real.

The faeries aren't dead, the chickadee had told me. They just left the area.

I shuddered as I hurried up the stairs, feeling that the spiders were pointing to the direction they had gone.

CHAPTER SIX

Dread woke me with a jolt, my heart pounding hard enough to hurt. The nightmare faded like steam when my eyes opened, leaving me feeling exposed and vulnerable without remembering why. I hugged a pillow to my chest, waiting for my breathing to steady. Warmth hummed through the floor vents. Downstairs, the kitchen clock faintly ticked. I watched Sam's shoulder rise and fall with his shallow breathing, illuminated from the light pushing through the crack in the bathroom door. My dread grew heavier, gouging a hole in my stomach, making me lonely, depressed. Homesick in my own home.

I rolled out of bed. My fuzzy socks swished across the bedroom's floorboards. The farmhouse was creaky, drafty, and as cold as the dead hands which had built it a century ago. I used the bathroom quickly—wincing against the toilet's cold porcelain—then left the door open wider than usual. *Maybe the extra light will scare away the monsters inside me.*

I huddled back beneath the blankets, warm with Sam's body-heat. He always slept as if his plug had been pulled, the lucky duck. I watched his shoulder rise and fall, wondering if his dreams were pleasant and adventurous or as dark as mine. I rolled onto my left side. Dread swirled in my gut. Worry tapped my bones. I flipped onto my stomach, back to my left side, then my right. I sighed, frustrated, then rolled onto my back and faced the ceiling.

Hundreds of powdered eyes stared down.

Blood drained from my face; my entrails turned to juice. Moths filled the ceiling like a powdered canopy, their numbers disappearing into the shadows. They stood motionless in the bathroom light, their yellow eyes staring down at me without a speck of white paint between. *Dear God. Do they fill the entire bedroom?*

"Sam!" I squeaked. He remained still and I took a deep breath. *The moths are another hallucination. If you wake him, he will know you are crazy. And then what?*

The moths' wings stretched. Their yellow eyes widened and glared. *We know who you are, they said in a silent language I felt in my bones. Your secret is exposed.*

I jumped from the bed and bolted out the bedroom door.

The unmistakable slap of cobwebs smacked my face when I hit the stairs, the strands crackling in my ears. I clawed my way through the dark; cobwebs grabbed my hair, my arms, my nightshirt, my feet. It didn't end, only thickened. I screamed and screamed and screamed.

"Miriam!" Sam called. "What the hell?" I heard the confused rustle of blankets and sleepy feet padding the ground. The stairwell flooded with light. "Holy shit!"

Cobwebs filled the stairwell from floor to ceiling, so thick it was as if I

stood inside a solid fog. The cottony threads had filled my mouth when I screamed, sucking up all moisture and making it impossible to spit them off my tongue. Thousands of spiders scurried through the mass like eight-legged birds migrating through a cloud. Their feet tapped my flesh as they crawled up and out of my shirt, through my hair, over my pajamas and socks and face, racing up the stairwell toward the bedroom.

I pushed through the webs and stumbled into the living room, brushing spiders off of me, my chest heaving. Spiders scurried from beneath the front door, and through cracks in the floorboards and walls that I never knew existed. I froze, wide-eyed, as hundreds stormed the stairwell.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

The slapping snapped my attention back to Sam. *Sam!* Sam was in his tighty-whities smashing spiders with a shoe. Sam saw the spiders. *I'm not crazy. This is really happening.*

I heard the rustle of a thousand moth-wings take flight. Sam yelled a stream of confused curses as a brown cloud swarmed through the bedroom door. Moths flooded the stairwell, tangling themselves in the webs. Spiders lunged on the fluttering horde, some spinning them with silk. Hundreds of moths pushed forward. Their bodies piled. The cobwebs began to break and fall as the moths broke through the barrier. More spiders raced from the living room, the kitchen, scurrying up the steps. I realized then that I stood in the middle of a war. And I was the objective.

I wheeled around and fled out the kitchen's back door.

It was the middle of the night, but the sky was clear and the moon a few days from full, illuminating the world in silhouettes and grays. I sprinted down the gravel garden path in our back yard, past the tree-line at the edge of the property. My fuzzy socks and pajamas were a shoddy protection from the elements, but my blood pumped fiercely and shielded me from the cold.

I stopped beside a young tree to catch my breath, feeling guilty for abandoning my husband, silly for fearing insects, and relieved Sam saw them too. *Can an army of spiders defeat an army of moths?* I wondered. The lights upstairs illuminated the house. I watched Sam's silhouette throw open the bedroom window, and a flood of moths billow out.

My heart galloped. Frantically I scanned the darkness, seeing nothing, but even worse, *feeling* nothing. Night's siren had returned, luring away my warmth, withering it in the gloom. The moon no longer seemed to shine; instead the night sky encroached on its light. My breathing didn't send puffs of mist into the air; it abandoned my body to betray me to my enemies.

In the dark crept something darker, and it was hunting. It was hunting *me*. Ice water seeped into the marrow of my bones. I pivoted on my heel, unsure where to run, unsure what to do, unsure what was *happening*.

See-me-I'm-here.

A wave of relief rushed through me. The sweet notes sung behind me, somewhere in the trees. I hurried toward the music, tripping over branches, kicking snow, acting like the least graceful prey animal to ever flee through the

woods. It took all of my willpower to restrain myself from running and risk snapping an ankle. For I heard the message—*see-me-I'm-here*—and knew answering was my one hope.

I panted at the base of a hill, surrounded by the shadows of skeleton-trees, and the cold, hollow chill of winter. The warmth from my breath and body had returned, as did the familiar glow of the moon. But I had no idea where I was. The woods were silent, filled with the crisp scents of frozen leaves, icicles, cedar. I hugged myself and trembled.

The chickadee landed on my shoulder. "You are safe for now."

"You're real," I told the bird. My voice was monotone. Stating a fact.

"Yes."

My face scrunched, then I dropped to my knees and started bawling. Shock, relief, bottled emotions, and repressed beliefs bubbled out of me like searing tar. Monsters, miracles, *magic*. All became validated in that instant, proving I stood on something bigger than myself and the reality I had always known.

Fairytales had taunted my imagination throughout my childhood. They made me believe anything was possible, from talking animals to granted wishes to flying carpets and candy homes. But as I aged, those adults who had seduced my imagination with these tales ripped them away. My mother insisted they were *just stories* and berated me for clinging onto them, for allowing my beliefs to run rampant down the road of impossibilities and dreams. I nodded and agreed to appease her, then skipped through the city park searching for enchanted castles and faerie rings among the bushes, and waited for our cat to speak every midnight on Christmas Eve. I wished on every shooting star, planted coins, kissed the frogs in the creek. Magic was everywhere. I *felt* it, humming on my skin like the wings of working bees on early summer flowers.

My mother's lectures had grown heavier with age, though. Classmates berated me as well. Already isolated for inherent differences I never understood, I openly rebuked anything fantastic ... had even accepted it after a time. But in that moment, with a house of warring moths and spiders and a talking chickadee on my shoulder, I realized fairytales weren't *just stories*. They used to be reports, essays, eyewitness accounts.

Once upon a time, fairytales were warnings.

I wasn't crazy. Magic existed. Faeries were real. Animals talked and schemed. My instincts had been correct, and my body lightened with validation.

Then dread overcame me.

That also meant monsters existed. Magic could be used for evil. Insects had dangerous intentions, and the darkness prowled for prey. Sanity meant I was in danger, and I didn't know which fate was worse.

I knelt in the snow, trembling with all the passion of an abandoned child. Branches rattled overhead in the breeze and I realized I was too far out to hear our wind chime's ding. The chickadee snuggled against my neck, preening cobwebs from my hair. My gasps soon shifted to hiccups, and the tears stopped pouring down my cheeks. Adrenaline's heat left me; winter drilled into my

chest. The snow had soaked through my socks and made my feet feel like sacks of burning sand.

"Go home," the chickadee said. I wondered vaguely if it was midnight, if it was still Christmas Eve. "You are freezing and your husband will worry."

My body stiffened. Darkness stood between me and Sam's protective embrace. It felt like a cruel, nighttime trap. A shooting star streaked across the sky and I wished I was insane, that there were no talking animals or things darker than the darkness. *Insanity is safer.*

The chickadee sensed my unease. "No darklings will hurt you tonight," the songbird said. "The spiders made sure to send their spies in the wrong direction."

"Darklings?"

"That's the polite name for them."

"What are they?" I asked.

"They are part of the Earth's magic. The *bad* part." The chickadee casually observed the sky. "Morning will be here in a few hours and darklings hunt only at night. The spiders have everything under control for now, but more of its agents are coming. *It is coming.* You must leave town."

"Why? What does this darkling want with me?"

"That is ... complicated. What's important is you leave."

"Me and Sam are going into the city for a few days tomorrow, but—"

"That will do," the chickadee said. "Your guide will arrive with more options."

"Guide? Who else is coming?"

The chickadee scratched its head. "I'm not sure exactly. A sudden change in the ranks has caused some issues. A raven in Kansas received orders from a golden eagle from the Sierra Nevada, ordering me to fly in from Indiana to find you."

I blinked. "Wait." I stood up, my feet numb with frozen fire. "Are you saying a bunch of talking birds flew across the United States to tell you to watch me?"

"Of course not. That's ridiculous," the chickadee said. "Eagles can't talk."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I had a thousand questions to ask, but the whole idea of black magic and traveling messenger animals seeking someone as mundane as myself seemed so absurd I had trouble deciding where to begin.

The chickadee spoke before I formulated a thought. "We will talk more tomorrow. Now hurry back to the house before Sam calls a rescue squad." The chickadee flew up into the branches. "And don't worry. I'll watch out for you."

I started back through the woods, Keith's story about the chickadees' strength replaying in my mind. Perhaps it was foolish to trust my wellbeing to a songbird, but I trudged through the woods without jumping at a single shadow. The blood had settled in my veins, killing the heat and making me shiver. The way back seemed farther than when I was in a panic, but I soon found the farmhouse. It was impossible to miss. Every light inside glowed.

"Where the hell did you go?" Sam snapped as I slipped through the backdoor.

"S-sorry," I stammered, my teeth clacking. "I-I was covered in spiders and freaked out. I ran outside, brushing them off me, and got turned around in the woods."

Clumps of cobweb hung from the stairwell's ceiling, but Sam had cleared away most of the mess. Other than some smashed carcasses on the walls, no spiders or moths were in sight. "What was all that?" I asked, pretending confusion as I peeled the soaked socks off my feet. I never believed the farmhouse's floorboards would feel warm against my skin in December.

"A goddamn infestation." Sam rubbed his forehead and groaned. "I managed to scare the swarm away, so it will probably leave us alone for tonight. Let's go back to bed. You can finish cleaning the mess in the morning."

As we climbed the staircase I noticed the scores of smashed spiders—their blood smeared across the wall's paint, their bodies mashed into the crannies of the horsehair plaster. My heart sank as I realized it wasn't just a mess. It was a deserted battlefield, stained with blood for a cause I didn't understand, yet was somehow its catalyst. The steps creaked beneath my weight, and my heart grew heavy with guilt. I was passing the corpses of my murdered heroes.

I changed into dry pajamas and crawled into bed with Sam, waiting for his breathing to deepen, wondering about the future and chewing on my lip. Sam would be at my side for the next three days braving family obligations, but what about afterwards? Would my husband prove to be my knight in shining armor and stand against the supernatural if needed? If the darkling lunged, would he fight or faint or flee? He held his ground against moths and arachnids, but could he stand against black magic? Was my husband as brave as a spider?

Sam started snoring. I crept downstairs and fetched paper towels and a spray bottle of cleaner from the kitchen cupboards. By the light of the upstairs bathroom I removed the dead spiders from the floors and walls. I wrapped each body in its own strip of paper towel—the only palls I had to offer—and thanked each one for their sacrifice.

Thanked each one for my life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Will ya *hurry up?*" Sam said, our luggage slung over one of his shoulders, a gift-filled Hefty bag clenched in his fist. The boxwoods beneath my in-laws' front window were lined with wooden candy canes and strung with colorful lights, their bulbs dark in the daylight. Two blowup snowmen grinned and swayed on the grass, freshly dusted with snow. "Dinner was supposed to start at two o'clock."

"Isn't that technically still lunch?"

"Don't be a smart ass, Miriam."

I shut the truck door with my hip, clenching my scandalous canned pumpkin pie with both hands. I glanced both ways before leaving the truck, as if I was readying to cross rush hour traffic. Vehicles didn't zip along the suburban sidewalk, of course. Or, more importantly, darklings. (At least I didn't *think* there were any darklings here, since I hadn't the slightest idea what one looked like.) I scurried up the front walkway to catch up to Sam. Even in the daylight I felt shadows stalking me, waiting behind corners, creeping along my skin. The chickadee had said darklings hunted only at night, but it didn't specify if they *could* or *would*. Nocturnal predators hunted during the day if starving. How long until a ravenous darkling tracked me to the doorstep to tear the flesh off my bones? Instincts screamed for me to flee, but I couldn't abandon my husband without a word or trace. Nor could I tell Sam something evil hunted me in the dark—he would insist I was insane. *But what if Sam sees the darkling, meets it face to face?* I wondered. *Surely he will stand with me and fight and—*

"*Watch it!*" Sam caught my forearm as I stumbled over an uneven paver. The pie leapt into the air and landed precariously on my fingertips.

"It's a damn miracle you've lived this long with your clumsiness," Sam grumbled, hoisting me to my feet. I clenched the pie dish, imaginary shadows nipping at my heels.

"Good thing you're here to protect me, huh?" I said, shamelessly testing his loyalty.

Sam snorted, amused. "Someone's gotta."

Plus one, I thought, and smiled slightly.

"Merry Christmas!" Sam hollered as he flung open the front door. Cheers and dog barks trumpeted from the rear of the house. The home's warmth embraced us like a hug, swelling my heart with the scents of roasted ham and peppermint, apple stuffing and pine. Every year my mother-in-law's decorations made my heart glow. Frosted green garland spiraled around the banister, Santa figurines populated the shelves, velvet bows dressed every doorway, and crystal snowflakes dangled from the ceiling, reflecting beads of light from the Christmas tree's twinkling glow. Her decorations reminded me of every Christmas I never had in my childhood, with the shrieking mother, the empty liquor bottles, the

cat piss rotting in the carpet. I had abandoned that life in search of a place where I was wanted and belonged, a place where I was allowed to be *happy*. At the tail of each year I sensed my quest had finally ended. I felt home seep from the spacing between my in-laws' glossy floorboards, and float along Elvis's drawl as he sang Silver Bells. The spiraling garland seemed to whisper everything in the past was gone, buried, forgotten, and promised it was time to start anew.

"You made it!" Sam's mother called from the kitchen. My muscles tensed. I remembered these decorations were temporary, the aromas a trick. These twinkling Christmas lights were like those of an anglerfish, luring prey in a deep sea abyss. *The comfort here is not meant for you*, I reminded myself, and started the dance around the angler's jaws as Sam's mother, Charlene, waddled into the foyer.

"We almost started dinner without you." She hugged Sam as if he had just returned from war, the sleigh bells hanging off her sweatshirt jingling.

"Sorry, mama. I left a message on Rich's voicemail. I got called into the station for an hour this morning."

A Lhasa apso circled my legs like a beige mop, toenails clicking excitedly on the tile. "Hi, Ginger! I'm excited to see you too!" I said, and knelt to scratch her head.

Sam's mother cast me a strained smile. She reminded me of a gnome—short and squinty and most likely came from a hole in the ground. "Hello, Miriam."

I forced a smile and a "hello" in return. I had been dreading this visit since ... well ... last Christmas. But what better place to test Sam's protectiveness than in an angler's hunting ground?

"I'm so happy you made it," she said, her words meant just for Sam. She smirked. "Has your mother spoken with you yet, Miriam?"

"No." *Not since she kicked me out on my eighteenth birthday and I moved in with your son, as you already know*, I didn't say.

"How does a mother ignore her own *child*? Especially on *Christmas*?" Charlene said with a melodramatic sigh. I released a slow breath, knowing what she *meant* was: *What makes you think you're good enough for my son when even your mother hates you?* I looked to my knight in shining armor and watched him say nothing.

I scowled and drowned my annoyance in my inner tar. *Minus one*.

"Such a shame *you* can't be closer to *your* family," Charlene said to Sam. "You really must move closer."

"Sorry, mama," Sam said, dropping our bag of gifts and belongings at the bottom of the stairs. "I finally have a shot for Sheriff next election."

Charlene sighed loudly. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, reminding myself her guilt trips were fruitless. Everyone knew Sam dreamed of being Sheriff since toddlerhood. He wanted nothing more. My brow furrowed as I scratched Ginger's rear, her back foot thumping. *But does that mean Sam wants it more than his marriage, too?*

"Is that my brother?" Sam's younger brother, Rich, hollered from the dining room, his voice as large as his barrel-chest. "Tell him to hurry up! I'm freakin' starving!"

We entered the dining room and were greeted with a jumble of Merry Christmases, hellos, and tardiness jibes. We seated ourselves at a table crammed with roasted ham, stuffing, creamed corn, green bean casserole, cranberries, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet rolls, egg nog, sparkling cider. Sam's scarecrow of a father sat at the head of the table, quiet and brooding as always, eyeing the ham like a mongrel. Rich, and Rich's very pregnant wife, Cathy, sat to his left. Their chubby four year old daughter, Haley, squirmed in her chair between them, begging to turn the television back on, as if the blank screen was somehow suffocating the Grinch. I balanced my pumpkin pie on the edge of the table, its pan hanging halfway off the corner.

Sam's father grumbled about China made materials as he sliced the ham with an electric knife, then sat and stuffed his face with meat. Eggnog and cider poured into glasses. Utensils clinked against plates, food passed around the table. Discussions about work and politics and neighborhood gossip drifted from everyone's lips, but I was too focused on my meal to pay any attention. I sat stiff, as if my limbs were wood, and concentrated on every jab of my fork, every cut of meat, every lift of my glass, each chew, trying to act perfect and invisible, afraid any sudden movement would provoke the anglerfish into striking.

How do they see me? I wondered. Quiet? Rude? Aloof? I felt guilty for avoiding conversation, and hated my inability to be outgoing and joyful despite Charlene's quips and glares. *Her hatred of you should not matter*, I told myself. Yet it *did* matter, and I was too weak to fake any different. Too many times I had been bitten for reaching out during the last thirteen years. Too long I had been reminded I was tolerated in this family, not accepted.

A daddy longlegs scurried between the wall and ceiling and disappeared behind the valance. Rich accidentally caught my eye from across the table and gave me a strained smile, his lips pressed tight. *I don't know what to say to you, but I don't want to appear rude, either*, his strained smile said. I returned the pressed smile, then poked a green bean with my fork.

Near the end of dinner I grabbed a roll from the basket and slathered on a lump of butter. Sam's mother cast her stare on me. I stiffened. *Did I grab the roll too fast?*

"I'm glad you remembered to make the pie," Charlene said, in a tone suggesting otherwise. My insides clenched. "It looks ... nice."

"I bet it tastes fantastic, too," Sam said. "She slaved most of last night on it." He winked at me as he spooned mashed potatoes into his mouth.

I smiled and bit my roll. *Plus one*. Some tension melted off my neck. *Why am I fretting? Of course my husband will stick with me if the darkling attacks*. Vying for Sheriff wasn't just a career move; it was a natural drive. Protectiveness stirred his blood, so why not do whatever was necessary to save his own wife?

How special you think you are, my mother mocked inside my head. *You're not the only thing in this world he loves, you know*.

My brow furrowed. This was true. Sam loved his work, his friends, his family, his truck, himself. Of course, none of those things had ever been threatened, either. But maybe ... *maybe* ... his family was an asset. If the darkling attacked during our visit, then Sam had more reasons to fight and defend. Safety in numbers, plus a home field advantage, had their benefits. *And if the darkling manages to take out my mother-in-law in the process?* I smirked as I daydreamed about Charlene disappearing forever into the darkness, then slipped Ginger a piece of ham beneath the table.

The chickadee flitted onto the windowsill and shook its head, as if answering my thoughts about staying to fight. *Is the guide out there, too?* I wondered, and quickly looked away.

"Getting excited?" I asked Cathy, addressing her stomach with my eyes.

"More nervous than anything else." She was a sandy-haired woman, like Sam's mother, with a long torso and a freckled moon-face. "I slept hardly a wink with Haley. I can't imagine how I'll manage *twins*."

"That's what grandmas are for," Charlene said proudly, slicing pieces of pumpkin pie for everyone. "Anyhow, twins are a blessing in this family." She cast me a frosty glare. "How else will I get any grandchildren?"

Maybe if your son was half as interested in sex as he is in his career, I didn't say.

"Have you two thought about checking your fertility?" Cathy asked. Sam's father grumbled about medical costs and insurance scams and illegal immigration. She ignored him and continued: "My friend's husband had a low sperm count, but the doctors fixed it and they had a baby boy thirteen months later."

"*Hmph!*" Charlene said. "No need to waste your money on tests, Sam. Thatchers are breeders. Always have been."

Rich guffawed and patted his wife's stomach. "Damn straight!"

Charlene lifted an eyebrow at me. "It's obvious where the issue lies."

Sam sighed. "Mama ... "

Charlene shrugged, passing small plates with pie pieces around the table. "I'm *just saying*, that's the problem with not knowing a child's father. No way to tell how many bad genes got through."

I turned to Sam, my mouth gaping. *Say something!* I tried to scream at him with my mind. *Defend and protect me!*

"If it isn't meant to be, it isn't meant to be." Sam yawned. "God, we had such a rough night. Strangest thing. We got infested." He chuckled. "You should have seen Miriam, screaming like it was the end of the world."

My lips pressed tight. Wind ruffled the chickadee's feathers on the sill.

Charlene lowered her fork. "Infested? Infested with what?"

"Spiders and moths," Sam said. "The swarm was *massive*. Unnatural. I smashed spiders and moths nonstop for at *least* an hour."

More like ten minutes, tops, I thought, and slipped Ginger more ham. I wondered if Sam emphasized the swarm because, on some level, he had sensed its supernatural element. Or maybe he was just boosting his own importance.

“That’s because of bad housekeeping,” Charlene said. “Learn how to keep a proper home and the problem will go away.” She smirked at me. “I will give you tips if you need them, Miriam.”

My blood simmered. I stalled for Sam to defend me. When he remained silent I smiled politely and said: “I’m happy to hear them.”

Charlene made a *mmmmph* sound—her mixture of acknowledging what I said while still dismissing me—and bit a piece of pie. She coughed lightly, swallowed with a wince, and set her fork on the table. “Well, *this* is an interesting take on our family’s recipe.”

I took a bite and my mouth puckered. Rich gagged and spat into his napkin. The bells on Charlene’s sweatshirt jingled as she puffed her chest out triumphantly, behaving as if she had won a battle I never knew was declared. “Though, next time, *Miriam*, I’d suggest remembering to add the sugar.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The wrapping paper had been torn and tossed, and the tree lights twinkled in the corner. Haley pressed her nose against the television as Rudolph proved his worth to the North Pole. The rest of the family lounged around the living room, gabbing relentlessly for hours. I yawned on the couch, my head on Sam's shoulder as he babbled about college football with Rich and his father, and finished another Bud Ice. A chickadee occasionally darted past the window.

Charlene waddled in from the kitchen with an eggnog, her sweatshirt bells jingling, and plopped back into the recliner. "Christmas feels so strange without pie," she sighed for the fifth time since dinner. She would most likely continue for the next twenty years.

I gritted my teeth and pretended not to hear as I ripped the itchy care-tag off my new pajamas. They were as red as a throbbing headache, with obnoxious cartoon polar bears skiing down the stiff flannel. I despised them, but I knew to never slight a gift from Sam's parents, unless I wanted to be giped to my grave. Besides, Sam's present had more than made up for it. A shiny silver bracelet encircled my wrist, a rose etched into the silver heart dangling off the chain. A stark contrast against the flannel with its loose threads and faint smell of chemicals. *It's not Tiffany's, but it still cost a whole paycheck*, he had said as he handed me the black velvet box. I beamed, loving his effort as much as his gift, for I knew that effort was the same he would use to protect me when the darkling showed.

"Wow! It's almost ten o'clock," Cathy said, struggling to push herself up from the couch. "We better go to bed, Haley. We have a big, big day tomorrow!"

"I don't wanna go to bed," Haley whined.

"Your nana will join you shortly, sweetie," Charlene said. "My blood sugar is just ... it's just so low."

I rolled my eyes and scratched beneath my waistband.

Haley slapped the carpet with her hands. "Noooo. I don't *wanna*."

"Aw, duckling," Cathy soothed. "You get *another* Christmas with Grandma Ingrid tomorrow. Won't that be *fun*?"

Cathy clicked off the television and Haley shrieked like an air-raid siren. "Noooo! I hate Grandma Ingrid!"

I clenched my teeth, wanting to scream with her. *Grandma Ingrid* was actually Sam's grandmother, Charlene's mother. Every year the whole family took the three hour drive into West Virginia to visit her, but because of her Alzheimer's she never remembered. Last year she smeared Charlene's brownies across the wall and kept trying to slap me, insisting I was Margery, her late husband's mistress back in the sixties. The nursing home had cut our visit short and Charlene refused to speak to me for the remainder of our trip. It was the best

Christmas I ever had.

Rich threw Haley over his shoulder and headed for the stairs. "No! No! No! No! No! AAAAAH!" she shrieked, pounding her fists on his back.

"Are we taking separate cars this year?" I asked Sam.

"Don't be ridiculous," Charlene snapped. "We will all squeeze into Rich's minivan."

"And we will listen to your new Wiggles sing-along CD the whole way there," Cathy said as she followed her husband and daughter upstairs. "Won't that be *fun*, duckling?"

"Nooooooooo!"

I smiled wanly. "Sounds greeeat."

Haley cried herself to exhaustion forty-five minutes later, and soon after everyone else crawled off to bed. Sam clicked off the light and bellyflopped onto the guest mattress. I laid beside him, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, fidgeting with a button on my new pajamas.

"Sam?"

"Mmwha?" he groaned into the pillow.

"If ... If I was ever in trouble and had to leave town fast, would you come with me?"

He snorted. "You a fugitive and never told me?"

I smiled in the dark. "No. But what if some bad guys try to kidnap me? Will you follow me? Fight if needed?"

"Of course. No one takes my girl." He yawned. "Now go to sleep."

I stared at the ceiling long after Sam started snoring, keeping my ears tuned to beyond the door, listening for creaking floorboards, latching bathroom knobs, water filling glasses. When I was positive the house was asleep I stuffed my feet into the wool socks Rich and Cathy had bought me for Christmas, and crept downstairs.

The Christmas tree illuminated the living room in a soft, white glow, as if the branches were made of moonlight. I prepared a mug of cocoa, cracked open the curtains, and curled up on the couch, grateful for the solitude. The overhead vent purred and poured out warmth, protecting the house from the thin blanket of snow on the world. I absentmindedly rotated my new bracelet around my wrist as I gazed out the window. Outside appeared serene, a deception deeper than the garland's promise of comfort and home. I now knew the night was alive and plotting, conjuring strategies in its shadows. Hidden strangers vied to reach me, each with different wants, ideas, schemes. I chuckled at the silliness of it all. *Me*. A nobody girl in a nowhere town with a future promised to be as dull as my past.

I sipped my cocoa. *Well, why shouldn't a nobody like me have an adventure?* I wondered. *Even pawns can checkmate when played in the right hands.* I set the mug on the coffee table and stretched, knowing these thoughts were pointless. I would have no adventure, unless my husband was a part of it. I had said my vows to him, not to any talking bird or *guide*, whoever they might be. I chuckled, bitterly. All my life I had sought attention and acceptance, and

now that it was coming I wanted it to go away.

The chickadee fluttered onto the windowsill and pecked the glass. *Tink!* I opened the backdoor and it flew onto my shoulder with a joyful *chirrup*. *Did the guide come too?* I wondered. I scanned the backyard, but found only patio furniture and shadows.

"Merry Christmas," I whispered, locking the door. "Want some leftovers?"

The chickadee nodded and danced on my shoulder. I let the bird choose from the Tupperware in the refrigerator, then prepared it a saucer of cranberry sauce, stuffing, and green bean casserole, and set it on the kitchen counter.

I sat on a barstool as the chickadee pecked a cranberry. "I feel terrible I didn't get you a Christmas present," I said.

The chickadee made a high pitched *tee! tee! tee!* and I realized it was chuckling. "The food makes a wonderful present. I can't get this foraging in the woods." It tore off a strip of green bean and inhaled it in three swallows. "I have some good news," it said. "I learned that your guide will arrive tomorrow or early the next day."

I clicked my fingernails together. "Yeah, about that," I said. "I've decided not to meet them."

The chickadee peered up at me, cranberry sauce glinting on its beak. "You *have* to meet them! Only they can help you."

"I have a husband, you know," I said. "One who wouldn't appreciate a stranger sniffing about."

"He'd appreciate them a lot more than a darkling, I'm sure," the chickadee said, sharply.

I shook my head. "Sam is a cop; defending people is in his blood. He'll stand with me against anything. *Including* darklings."

"This isn't a common criminal, Miriam. Sam has never fought anything supernatural."

"He fought the moths and spiders," I retorted.

The chickadee snorted. "You can't stop a darkling with a shoe. Or a gun for that matter."

"We can try."

The chickadee exhaled with frustration. "Will you at least hear me out?"

"It won't matter what you or some *guide* says. I'm staying with my husband."

The chickadee stood on the counter, glaring at me. Water dripped from the kitchen faucet with a dull *plink*. I crossed my arms defiantly over my chest. Sam's iPhone buzzed in his coat pocket on the neighboring barstool, making me jump nearly out of my skin. I rolled my eyes, embarrassed. The chickadee kept glaring up at me, unflinching. I pressed my lips tight, then tossed up my hands. "Okay, *fine*. Who is this mysterious guide and why is it so friggin' important I meet them?"

The chickadee pecked and swallowed a piece of cranberry. "They're a faerie. Think of them like a consultant of sorts."

"A *faerie*?" I snorted. "You mean like Tinkerbell, with gossamer wings and

glittery dust and pom pom shoes?"

The chickadee chuckled. *Tee! Tee! Tee!* "Not exactly. Although, to be honest, I'm unsure *who* is coming. Adena passed away unexpectedly and someone new from the border sentry has been elected to take her place." The chickadee shrugged its wings. "Regardless, all they want is to give you information and options. What you do with it is your choice. And Sam will never need to be the wiser."

I lifted an eyebrow. "What kind of information?"

"That's not my place to say."

I glowered. "Why so—" Sam's iPhone buzzed. "Gah! Who friggin' calls at this time of night?" I fished the phone from the coat pocket. "Why so cryptic?" I asked the chickadee, unlocking the phone's screen. "Are the darklings some—?"

My mother's voice crowed delightedly inside my head—*I told you! I told you, I tooold youuu!*—and my heart landed in my stomach with a nauseating thump, as a stupid text message tore my life into shreds.

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