

Part One
The Grieving Mother

Chapter One

The Thing swam out of the magma in the Earth's core, and clawed its way up through the San Andreas Fault, on the night that a chunk of the California coast sank into the Pacific. Whether it was woken from an ancient hibernation by the earthquake and driven mad by its hunger, or whether it had been placidly swimming around in an ocean of fire - and subsisting on God knows what else is down there- when it saw its opportunity, or whether it got bored and caused the rift in the first place, no one can know.

I think the last is true. The rift in that fault should not have been possible, not the way that it did happen. That's what scientists have said. That massive divide that formed, the vibrations shaking structures and toppling them, supports snapping like twigs. The lava surging up from between the two plates, and the western one shifting so fast that buildings that did survive became watery graves for so many. All because that Thing decided to come up. That's what I think, although at the end of the day it doesn't matter how and why it happened. All that matters is that millions died, including my children. Two little girls, Astrid and Josie, too little to look after themselves in the panic, left with a nanny who was qualified and highly recommended but who ultimately was not their mother, and who broke for the surface the second that the water came crashing in, driven by instinct. She probably thought only of getting back to her own child, as I would have.

It was chaos those first few days. I was in Helena, Montana on business; I couldn't get a seat on a flight that would bring me anywhere

close. The government had the coast on lockdown, enacted a no-fly zone and sent in the National Guard and the Navy. They weren't sure what else might come out of the rift, which was still spewing orange lava rolling into the sea and cooling, turning black, dyeing the coast. There was even speculation of them planning to nuke the area, in the beginning.

So I had to hire an amateur pilot with his own bush plane. We were stopped for fuel somewhere in the desert when I got the call from Regina the nanny. She was sobbing as she told me that the children were in bed, of course, when the rumbling started, the earth shifted in huge slabs and the waves came shattering through the windows. My own body went cold. My voice came out level as I asked, "Are my children dead?"

Of course I had been running through the possibilities. Would it be better if they had been crushed, or drowned? People like to say that drowning is peaceful, but I almost drowned once, as a child, and I remember the fear and the pressure I felt before my mother scooped me off of the bottom of the swimming pool. Of course I had needed to believe that there was a chance. And Regina's call, her inability to say the words, her apology so strained and simpering had made everything come crashing in, just like that Thing had dropped a building on me, or flung me into the ocean. I wished that it had. Or that my mother had not noticed me at the bottom of the pool until it was too late.

It became clear to me that my children were not among those who made it to the surface, were rounded up at the shore, waiting in tent cities or on Navy vessels. They were dead.

I acted harshly. I screamed at Regina that she was supposed to be watching them. She was responsible for their deaths. I think I even said the words, 'You killed my children', to a woman clearly falling apart with guilt. I collapsed in the dirt alongside the air strip and sobbed for a long time. I don't even know how long.

Losing a child is like losing a limb. Worse. It's the kind of pain that makes a whole life seem like a cruel joke.

The pilot approached me after some time. He was a northwestern farmer in his fifties with a large gut, red in the face and kneading his

CAT baseball cap in his meaty hands as he crouched beside me. His name was Tommy. “The plane’s refueled, Ma’am, if you’d like to go ahead...”

That poor man, he gave me a tissue to wipe the snot and tears from my face, and helped pull me to my feet. I was in dress pants and kitten heels, a sleeveless blouse. I was supposed to be meeting with the board of directors of the company for which I was the chief mechanical engineer. I had my favorite navy suit jacket in my hands when the phone call came in, and I was content to leave it in the dirt, knowing my time in boardrooms was done, but the pilot scooped it up and carried it back to the plane for me. He set it on my lap and reached across my unmoving body to strap me in.

“Pardon my reach, Ma’am... Safety first.”

“Take me back to Montana,” I heard myself say, before I had even pieced together what I was going to do next.

“Are you sure?”

“There’s nothing left for me in California.”

“Is there someone you could reach out to? Family?”

A mother with dementia back in Reading. A brother I hadn’t spoken to in years. He never even met Astrid and Josie. Then, there was James... “There’s no one.”

We took to the air, a bumpy flight on that little puddle jumper, heading back north. I found myself staring at the ground miles below and hoping that the engine would fail. But the engine did not fail, and Tommy and I landed at his large farm outside Helena. The propellor still whirring out in front of us, the little plane rolled along the bumpy ground and into the open mouth of the enormous barn peeling with red paint.

Once the racket from the engine cut out, everything was too quiet. I was used to city life. Sirens all hours, low riders with subwoofers rolling past. The last few turns of the propellor whipped up dust and hay, then it all started to drift back down, silently. It was all too quaint. It didn’t feel like real life.

Tommy helped me climb out of the plane, and I stood in the square of afternoon light streaming in the open barn doors. I looked out at the

bright day, the rolling land, fields of immature corn, and I did not want to go out there. I looked back at Tommy standing further inside the dark barn. There was plenty of ceiling height, a loft on each side, a large green tractor in one corner and still so much empty space.

I stood in the open doorway for a few minutes. Tommy eventually joined me. I could see my rental car parked in the distance, on the dirt driveway connecting the two-story, white farmhouse.

Tommy touched my shoulder. "Can I make you something to eat, Ma'am?"

"Ceely," I said. "Short for Lucille."

"Ceely. Will you come up to the house?"

"Alright."

We walked up the path and then I found myself on hardwood floors, in a little foyer. Tommy pointed out the first-floor bathroom at the end of the hall, then slipped into a kitchen straight out of the 1950's, where he washed his hands in a deep sink basin before cracking open the fridge. Across the foyer was a traditional dining room.

It took being in the powder room, seeing the toilet to realize that my bladder was full. Washing my hands in the sink put me in a kind of trance state. I soaped and rubbed and rubbed and rubbed, mind drifting to my girls and hardly noticing as the water heated up, then suddenly my hands were red and stinging. I hissed; it hurt enough to bring the tears back up.

My girls were still in our home. In their bedroom. Not hurting anymore. It was some comfort, but I knew that before long they would become fish food, they would be decaying and bloating by the hour in the warm water. Just like that, I knew what to do. It helped me find my way out of the powder room, into the kitchen where Tommy was slicing two ham sandwiches diagonally.

"Not fussy, are you? I gave it the works." He offered me the plate, complete with a handful of potato chips.

"No. Not fussy. Thank you."

Tommy was clearly not used to having guests. "Want to sit in the dining room? I usually eat in front of the tv..."

"I'd like to see what's happening."

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. Through the dining room to the living room, we sat on the couch and Tommy produced tv trays from the seventies. The event was on every news channel. Drone footage played and replayed of the creature’s two-clawed mantis-like forelimbs bursting out of the fault, hauling its massive body out, molten, shaking lava off and revealing its white skin. It didn’t seem to have eyes in its oblong, prehistoric skull. Experts agreed that it would have no use for them in the earth’s core. As it dragged itself further and further out, they estimated it as being almost a mile long. It had no hind legs, finally ending in a massive two-fluked fan of a tail, not unlike a whale’s but much larger.

The president held a press conference in the rose garden. “This is a tragic day for the United States, a day filled with grief and fear for many Americans. My administration is making all efforts to move the refugees of this massive earthquake, to reconnect them with their loved ones, and to recover the bodies of those who lost their lives. We have phone lines set up to contact families of survivors. We ask that you give us time to facilitate safe reunions.

“At this time we cannot allow any civilians to enter the containment zone. We have our country’s best scientific minds determining the physiology of the creature which emerged from the San Andreas Fault, and working on how to track it, subdue it, and potentially kill it. We have troops amassed alongside the boundaries of the containment zone and aircraft monitoring the rift at all times. In the event that another creature should appear, we need to be ready and willing to defend our population by whatever means are deemed necessary. Do not attempt to enter the containment zone. I’ll now take a few questions. Go ahead.”

Tommy changed the channel to another news station. They had a woman on the street holding her phone up, and on its screen was a map of what had once been the California coast, not yet updated to show Los Angeles and other cities underwater. She was midsentence.

“-I saw it moving, and I thought, ‘Thank God, he’s okay!’ He must be on his way home, you know?” Her face fractured, her lips pinched, and she sunk her teeth into them, they were already bleeding. Her big eyes shined with unshed tears which came through in her strained

voice. “But over the next few hours, it drifted out and came back in again. It was too fast for someone swimming, and the boats wouldn’t be taking people back out. I think it’s inside the creature.”

She was talking about her boyfriend’s or husband’s phone, I realized. And of course, those are never far away from us. It was swallowed by the creature when her partner was swallowed by the creature.

“It’s eating the bodies,” I declared. My voice sounded like it belonged to somebody else.

In his green armchair, Tommy’s mouth dropped open. He covered it with his hand, tossing half his sandwich down. He was clearly appalled. I, however, lifted my own sandwich and took another bite, continuing to munch methodically through it. My mind was turning again, forming plans, I knew what I had to do. And once I knew what I had to do, nothing would stop me.

“Do you have any beer?” I asked. “Or whiskey?”

“I have beer, sure.” He grunted as he leveraged himself out of the chair, then lumbered into the kitchen and brought back two bottles. He must have been thirsty, he downed half of his right away.

“Thanks...” I sipped. Waited for it to hit Tommy’s bloodstream. Commercials rolled. I started in gently. “Do you live here all alone?”

“Yes. It’s my family home, I grew up here. Lived here all my life. There’s... there’s plenty of spare rooms, if you’d like to stay for a little while, figure out what to do next.”

I hid a tiny, bitter smile in the glass bottle. He was too eager to not be alone in the big house, for once. I didn’t even need to get him drunk. Pressing the cool and damp bottle to my warm face, I nodded. “I would like to stay, and I have a proposition for you. I’ll pay you five thousand dollars, I’ll be gone in a week, or maybe ten days. Definitely not more than two weeks. I need to build something. I need space in your barn. I’ll have to buy all sorts of material and tools and have them delivered here, and when I’m done, you can keep the tools, you can have whatever is left. How does that sound?”

His brow furrowed, his mouth became a tight, worried line. “What is it that you want to build?”

“A submarine. I need to go down and get my children’s bodies.”
And if I kill that thing while I’m down there, I thought, All the better.

“I don’t know... it sounds dangerous.”

“I’m going to do it with or without you. One of your neighbors will take me up on my offer, if you don’t. Five thousand dollars. At least a few thousand dollars’ worth of equipment. What do you say?”

Still, he hesitated. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Do you have any children, Tommy?”

“No... never blessed. Would’ve liked some, but it wasn’t in the cards. Jessica couldn’t have them. And she died a few years ago...”

“Where is Jessica buried?”

“Out by the pond, under our favorite tree.” His voice sounded far away, his mind wandered out that way, too.

“My girls are Astrid and Josie. I need to go and get them before that thing eats them. I need to know where they’re buried. It’s the only thing that will help me, now. Do you understand?”

Looking at me for a long moment, he slowly nods. “Alright. You can use my barn. You can stay as long as you need. But I won’t take your money. I don’t need it. I do just fine.”

I would find a way to leave him some money. I suspected that I wouldn’t need it, either. It was impossible to plan for a life after losing my girls, but if there was one, it was different than my busy, glamorous, sun-drenched California life had been. I took Tommy’s hand, wrapped it in both of mine. “Thank you.”

Color rising to his face, he nodded, and looked away embarrassed. “Of course.”