

CHAPTER TWO

The house was silent, sapped of the thousand noises, the openings and closings, the coughs and steps, that announced another human body. Sitting in the living room in her stiff black dress, Hannah felt gnawed by loneliness.

All the mourners were late. The cremator's wife had called early that morning to confirm the guests. "So, we'll send the bill to you, then?" Manny's wife asked, her rasped voice betraying years of chain-smoking.

"Yes, and thanks for doing this."

"Oh, we do all sorts of things, honey. Callum's the boat captain. He'll be ferrying in the mourners, and," she lowered her voice, "the urn with the remains. He's going to bring along some business cards as well. Just fan them out on a table there, if you don't mind."

The doorbell chime echoed through the house.

Hannah rose and took one flat look at her sharp-boned face in the mirror, pinching color into her cheeks. Her collarbone peeked out above the boat neckline of her dress. Her strawberry blonde braid made her look like a teenager, and her eyes were red-rimmed. Sighing, she opened the front door.

“Hannah, sweetie?” The large, huffing woman was a stranger. “My goodness, how you’ve grown!”

Hannah let herself be wrestled into the woman’s perfumed neck, who sobbingly introduced herself as an old friend of Mae. “Here I am!” She brandished a photo frame off the mantel, her every sentence ending in an exclamation.

Some were like that. Old friends, coworkers, and admirers of Mae. James arrived in a gray dress shirt, his dark brown hair parted to the side, and offered her a neat bouquet of daisies. “I heard that lilies are the thing, but these have some cheer to them.” Hannah fingered the papery edges of the blooms and smiled.

James touched her elbow. “I need to talk to you about something, but I’m not sure this is the place.”

A tall man bore a platter of food into the house, which was suddenly thumping with footsteps and voices. Hannah raised her eyebrows at James, but he shook his head at her, mouthing the word “later.”

“I’ve got some deviled eggs and cornbread salad,” the tall man said. “There’s nothing that’ll go bad too quick, but you’ll want to keep them cool. And little sandwiches, too. Do you have plates?”

Hannah gestured toward the kitchen. She spied a thin stack of business cards on the edge of a cellophane-wrapped

platter, the words “funeral home” and “catering” nestled beneath the petals of a pixelated flower.

The last guest caught Hannah’s eyes instantly. His white collared shirt, with sleeves rolled to the elbows, stood out like a beacon in the swarm of black. Fibrous was the word, Hannah decided, for his body. Sinews and muscles stood out on his arms as if his skin were inches thinner than most.

“Hi there,” he said. His light blue eyes showed sympathy. “I know we’re late. I had a bit of trouble finding the place.”

“We don’t get many visitors.” Hannah stared down at her pointed black flats. There was no *we* anymore.

“Sorry,” he said, and touched her hand lightly. “Could I trouble you for something to drink?”

“I made lemonade,” she said, and led him into the kitchen. James grabbed the man’s arm, and whispered something in his ear, but the man only shrugged and pulled out of James’s grip. He took the tall glass from Hannah and emptied it. “Thanks,” he said through puckered lips. “I like it sour. I’m Callum, by the way. My condolences.”

“Hannah,” she said, suddenly conscious that the kitchen was full of watchful faces. “We don’t have much, but help yourself to whatever looks good.” Hannah’s eyes fell to the ceramic pot nestled in his armpit. Markings had been carved along the mouth of the urn.

Callum followed her gaze. “Sorry, this is yours.”

Hannah wormed her hands under his arm and grasped the urn. A tremor went through her. Mae was inside the squat pot, reduced to ash. It didn’t seem possible.

Martha, who lived in the next house over, put a long

arm around Hannah's shoulders. In her fifties, Martha was statuesque. The local men claimed she was the only lure needed to make her living as a fisher. Her motorboat returning to the next dock over was a noonday chime, fishing tack and hooks glinting like an hour hand. A long, elegant line of scar tissue ran down one cheek and she smelled, as always, of briny fish. "You should eat something, dear."

"I have."

Martha narrowed her eyes and slid her hand around Hannah's wrist. Her fingers latched. "Eat more, then."

Over Martha's shoulder, the locals were beginning to spin tales. Young Mae standing vigil all night during a storm, or making poultices out of herbs and greens. Mae's singing as she hung the laundry to dry.

Hannah swallowed hard and turned away. Every mention of Mae's name was an incantation, every story a failed resurrection. Then, as if she'd willed it, a hush fell over the room. James stepped forward, his hand reaching blindly for a holstered gun that wasn't there. Hannah watched mouths tighten and eyes narrow around her. She turned and blinked in surprise.

Christobelle stood just inside the back door, her eyes trained on Hannah. She was swaddled in a heavy wool sweater and thick cable-knit scarf, in stark contrast to the mourners in their dresses and light shawls. Hannah took a pointless step forward as if to push her out. The woman didn't belong in the house. *My house*, Hannah thought, with a ferocity that startled her.

"She's hiding," Mae had said of Christobelle. "She doesn't want to be tracked and she's got no last name I

know of. Christobelle can make up whole rich histories for herself this way.”

“What’s her *real* history, then?”

Mae had snorted. “Who knows. She came from Alabama to have you, I know that much. Back then, she was just a young, frightened woman who needed help. Everything else—the church, the hoodoo—grew out of the powers she was just then discovering.”

“What powers?” Hannah had asked, worming her foot into Mae’s lap to be massaged. Mae’s nails felt like cattail husks, tickling her toes.

“Some abilities invite people into your life, others push them out. Hers do the latter. It’s been a lonely life, and loneliness, in great quantities, has a way of eclipsing one’s God-given morals. If you ask me, I think she stayed here because she knows the people, knows how to needle and mold them. And, of course, to keep an eye on you.”

When Hannah frowned, Mae had given her a hard look. “Child, the only connection you’ve got to that woman is that you came out of her. The rest is your own making.”

When she’d first found out who her real mother was, Hannah hadn’t slept for weeks, panicked that Christobelle would want her back. She’d told Mae about that side of her fear but kept quiet about her deeper worry—that someday, Mae might choose to give her up. But Mae had stayed, until death took her.

Conversation in the room had stilled, and the mourners busied themselves with folding their cocktail napkins and moving the stuffed eggs across their plates. Callum turned on the kitchen faucet in a gush, prompting a scatter of startled giggles, and he winked at Hannah.

Christobelle noted this exchange, then nodded her head toward the back door and glided out.

“Mae was an amazing nurse,” a woman said as she drifted back from the bathroom, her hands clapping together as if in animated prayer. “I saw her heal injuries in less time than it would’ve taken someone to diagnose them.” She fell quiet and covered her lipsticked mouth. “Are we having a moment of silence?”

“Excuse me,” Hannah muttered as she squeezed past the sandwich-holding throng. She tucked the urn into a nook between the toaster and a rotating spice rack, patting it on her way out the door.

Christobelle waited by the water, tall and frail, her voluminous skirt heavy through the grass. She seemed to track the fog with her eyes as it crept over the bayou, alighting on the tips of ferns. It moved like a spirit, sly and slow, parting to either side of cypress trees. A lone heron, standing rigid on one slender leg, watched them from beneath his mantle of speckled feathers.

“Why did you come?” Hannah asked, rubbing her arms against the cold.

Christobelle turned, her joyless smile like a pasted cut-out. “I wasn’t exactly invited. But yes, someone let it slip. Naughty of you to overlook me. You remember Samuel?” Christobelle gestured to the man, who rose out of the boat and moved unsteadily onto the dock. Although already quite skeletal when Hannah had first met him, he seemed almost mummified now. His skin had a sick, moist tint to it as he arrived at Christobelle’s side, his arm winding around hers.

Hannah shrugged. “I didn’t think Mae would want you here.”

Christobelle’s smile faded, and her face became eerily androgynous. The dappled sun played tricks with her lips, her eyes. She was man and woman all at once.

“Don’t lie to me, child. You didn’t want me here, although that wasn’t your decision to make. Mae and I were close once. I did something for her, something she may have neglected to tell you about. She was *indebted* to me, and now she’s passed.” The word came out sibilant, snake-like. One hand suddenly shot straight to the side, all the tendons in her wrist tensed to vibration. “But not gone.”

Hannah’s mother closed her eyes and leaned her head back. Her lips parted and she sighed from some deep crevice inside herself.

Some glint of consciousness entered Samuel’s eyes, and he imitated Christobelle. He let out a groan. Christobelle opened her eyes and calmly removed his hand from around her arm. “I’ve told you before, Samuel. Don’t pretend,” she chided him. “That’s the surest way to block it. You have to accept it entirely. Its presence and absence, and the pain of both.”

The man’s mouth dropped open, and color rushed into his gaunt cheeks. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Hannah watched this exchange, a choking anger rising in her. “Don’t,” she snapped. “Call on the dead in your own church. Do your song and dance. But not here, not for Mae.”

“The dead are everywhere, child. No structure can contain them, or keep them out, forever. They are blessed by the patience that comes with existing outside of time.”

Hannah's heartbeat pounded in her neck and thumbs. "Do me a favor and spare me the theatrics." She turned to leave.

"You'll stay here," Christobelle commanded. "Samuel, give us a moment."

Hannah remained frozen until Samuel disappeared around the edge of the house. Steeling herself, she turned back. "What do you want?" The woman gave off a musty smell. It was the scent of things chewing under the surface of water or brush.

Christobelle's head was cocked back unnaturally. "I came to pay my respects. After all, she protected you, didn't she?"

"She did, after you left me."

"Then she did as I asked, girl, but I was not as absent from your life as you'd like to think. And now there are certain dangers I can't control, some forces I can't guard you against. Some things have noses attuned to find you, no matter how deep in the trees you hide." Christobelle's gaze descended slowly, her eyes filmy and amphibian-like. She knit her fingers together over her stomach. "People will come into your life," she said, as though declaring that the earth was round. "You'll be tempted, but they'll make you vulnerable. You mustn't bend."

"You can see the future now, as well?"

"I know that you're out of my hands, child, and unprotected. There's a whole flurry of them circling you, hungrier than ever now that Mae's passed. You're a dandelion seed spinning in a storm."

Hannah's jaw locked, and she balled her hands into fists. "Don't think I don't know the parish's opinion of

you. As long as we stick to our land, they've left us alone, and there's no reason to think they'll do differently now."

"There are many things to fear that aren't done by the hands of men," Christobelle said, bitterness in her voice.

Hannah rolled her eyes and turned again to face the house. The white exterior was broken by small windows, and the black roof shone like onyx. She spied the bright red feathers of a tanager as it traipsed over the shingles. Hannah could visualize the wood floors, the old eggshell-colored tiles in the kitchen, the walls that warmed with an apricot hue at noontime, and they were an antidote against her mother's disquieting words.

"That used to be my house. Our house." Christobelle sidled up to Hannah. "You were born here, twenty years ago. Right in there." She pointed to the large windows of Mae's bedroom. "Sixteen hours, and you took a full minute before you screamed. The longest minute of my life, which has been full of long minutes."

Hannah imagined being nursed by the bay window, mother and child encased in light. The thought of Christobelle tracing Hannah's just-born features with her lips was almost painful. "Mae never told me."

Christobelle sniffed. "I expect there's much Mae didn't tell you, but everything she did was in the hopes of keeping you safe. I believe she loved you. That was the important thing."

"I loved her," Hannah said simply, and felt no regret saying the words in the presence of this woman. They were nothing to each other. "Was my—" Hannah hesitated, and scanned the shadowed windows. Had there been laughter tinkling through the hallways? Had there

been a man who'd lifted her clear off the floor and spun her around? "Was my father here as well?"

When Hannah glanced back, Christobelle's face was filled with raw ache.

"We were all here, at first. The three of us, although you were just a kicking in my belly then." Christobelle's gnarled hands, knuckles like the knotted roots of trees, covered her face for a brief moment. When they lowered, she was expressionless.

My father, Hannah thought. She wanted to ask how he'd died, but a stab of sympathy stopped her. She wondered whether there was a grave she could visit. But Mae had always avoided the question, and Hannah knew better than to ask now.

Christobelle straightened. "Come stay with us. After all, I am your family. Your only family."

Hannah laughed in surprise. There was a singular stillness on the property, as if all the creatures that shared it, the heron and the gators and the crickets, were rapt. "You couldn't fill an hour with the words we've said to each other, and still I've spent my whole life hiding from people who blame me for your actions and beliefs. So, no, I won't come with you. What kind of life would that be?"

"Better than what you'd have here, and safer. This house is not right for you. Loneliness has a way of changing you. Of infecting you."

"I've had practice." Hannah had trouble reconciling the unsettling tales she'd heard involving the woman standing beside her. Stories of men who'd left their houses for milk or a glass of rye and were next seen weeks later, looking as

though they'd been ravaged by decades, and unwilling to speak of what had happened to them. Stories of men who never returned to their families.

"Not like this, child. Our people are," Christobelle looked up, searching the sky, "predisposed, you could say. We invite things in, sometimes without even knowing it."

"I am not your people," Hannah said, spitting out the last word.

"Care to gamble on that, child?"

Hannah examined her mother. "I've spent my whole life here, between these walls, between these trees. It's been as good a home as any. You said this was your house—is it still yours to give?"

"What?"

Hannah cleared her throat. "You gave this house to Mae while she cared for me. Do you want it back, now that she's gone? Or could I stay here?" It was all she had left of Mae. It was all she'd ever known. The silence would be painful at first, but the memories would keep her company. "Could it be mine?"

Christobelle watched her hawkishly, all signs of her earlier vulnerability wiped away. "It will be a different house now, child. The murk will seep. That life that Mae made for you—she took it with her when she went."

"I'll make my own, then," Hannah retorted.

Christobelle's eyes narrowed. "What makes you think that *your* gift is life? Have you ever considered that you were kept here not only for your protection but for theirs as well?" She swept her arm toward the house and the laughter that sounded from the kitchen.

The fog that lay low across the water had reached them. The cool touch of it made Hannah's body tighten. "I'm not like you."

"Maybe not." Christobelle was silent for a long moment. Her head moved languidly from side to side, swerving from the house to the muddy water and back again. She smiled at something she saw there. "So it is," she said softly. "The house is yours, child. Consider it a belated birthday present. We will wait and see what you make of it."

The memory of Mae's chocolate cake made Hannah ache. It seemed impossible that only a week had passed since it'd been set before her, bright with birthday candles. "Thank you," Hannah said, the words strange in her mouth. She didn't know whether to feel relief at the small victory of remaining in her childhood home or worry that now there was something owing.

Christobelle gestured to Samuel, who had returned and waited patiently by a nearby tree. "I should be going." Hannah recoiled slightly as Christobelle took her hand and kissed it lightly, her lips dry and feathery as lichen. "You rest now, and eat up. Then we can talk about income. You should know that the congregation is well connected."

Hannah shuffled uncomfortably. She hadn't even begun thinking of how she would support herself. Their needs had been few, but there'd always been food on the table. Hannah had never seen Mae's patients, who stepped tentatively into their house but left strengthened in some ineffable way, pay with money.

Christobelle seemed distracted. "How did she die?" she asked, as Samuel came to stand by her and offered his arm.

“Her heart gave out, they think.” Hannah paused. “Why do you ask?”

“No matter,” Christobelle said, looking askance at the house. “Keep safe, Hannah. Keep yourself closed, no matter how good it might feel to open. There are many who don’t have your best interests at heart, and you don’t know enough to spot them. Goodbye, child.” Samuel inclined his head as he passed, and Hannah wondered if somewhere a family still awaited the man’s return.

“Goodbye.” Hannah watched her mother step gracefully into the small wooden boat tied to the dock.

As Hannah headed toward the back door of the house, an avian cry pierced the silence. She whirled around to scan the waters, but the ripples left by her mother’s boat were already fading. The bayou was a cathedral, light washing over the ancient moss-coated roots, and she, slender and trembling, was the pulpit.

Doug opened the back door and raised his eyebrows in question. “Everything okay?”

“Thanks for coming,” Hannah said, squeezing his arm.

“Of course. Anything you need. Mae was a saving grace after my little girl passed on. I wept at your kitchen table more times than I can remember, and Mae always knew which memory of Abigail would cheer my heart.” He cleared his throat. “That Ellis girl dropped by, too,” Doug said, fingering his beard. He didn’t notice Hannah’s smile fade. “Shame what happened there. She left the bayou so soon after, I never expected to see her again.”

“It’s nice that she came.” Hannah tried to keep her voice normal, but found herself thinking of Sarah Anne’s periwinkle blue eyes. Blonde curls so perfectly formed

that Hannah always expected them to be plastic, each time she fit her finger into them.

Somehow she navigated the outstretched hands in the kitchen, all of Mae's mourners clamoring to share their grief with her, and headed out the front door. She scurried down the gravel path, looking left and right, until she saw the woman. Hannah recognized her from the back, although her hair was straightened, her curls ironed to a faded white-blonde.

"Sarah Anne," she called out.

The woman turned, a hesitant smile teasing at her mouth. Her body had lengthened, and her face, once sweet and round as peaches, was angular. "I wanted to give my condolences," Sarah Anne said. "I'm so sorry, Hannah. I know how much you loved her."

"Thank you. It was a shock." Her voice sounded strained to her own ears. "I didn't realize you were back in town." She wondered what it'd be like to hug Sarah Anne's adult body, even as she wanted to push up the scalloped sleeve of Sarah Anne's dress and see her right arm, the one she'd ruined that day, so many years ago. Hannah shook her head to clear her nose of the smell of charred flesh, pale hairs flashing like a comet's tail then dissolved. The guilt, which had felt overwhelming in the years after and then slowly dulled, felt fresh again.

"I've moved back for a bit." Sarah Anne pulled at the sleeve of her trench coat as though reading Hannah's thoughts. "My uncle has some business in the area, so he's renting a house. The real estate agent insisted it was a coup—I was expecting a hole in the wall, but the price got slashed. Someone died there apparently, but it doesn't

really bother me. Look back far enough, and someone's died just about everywhere."

"How are you?" Hannah asked, the words a paltry substitution for all she wanted to ask.

Sarah Anne shrugged. "It's slow as ever around here, but I've managed to find a distraction or two. I'm just happy to see these fine Southern boys haven't changed a bit. Still dumb as posts but gorgeous as the risen sun."

Hannah laughed despite herself. "You haven't changed, either."

"Everything changes," Sarah Anne said, her voice faint.

Hannah searched her old friend's face and saw the evidence of her words. There was a heaviness there, as if she rarely smiled and only with effort. She wondered if it was the memory of that day, or the years since, that had eaten into her. "Come have some lemonade," she offered.

"Nothing reminds me of this place quite like the offer of drinks," Sarah Anne said. "Sweet tea, lemonade, or a stiff drink if you look like you've had a day." She kicked at something in the long grass, overturning the flattened body of a sparrow.

Hannah immediately bent down to touch the bird, but Sarah Anne held up a hand. "It's dead." Sarah Anne's dispassionate voice startled Hannah, and when she looked up, Hannah saw that her eyes were guarded, lashes like shutters. "I should go."

The tightness in Hannah's chest coiled and her breath caught. She had the sense that her one chance at making amends was slipping away.

"This is my address," Sarah Anne said and passed Hannah a folded piece of paper. "No telephone yet, but

drop by anytime.” Their fingers touched over the paper, and Hannah felt a static shock.

Hannah opened her mouth, wanting to atone for everything that had happened. But there were too many words, too many apologies.

“Take care of yourself,” Sarah Anne said as she turned away, and Hannah heard the echo of her mother’s earlier warning.



Sleep eluded Hannah for most of the night. The trill of laughter seemed to hide just beneath the wind chime’s ring, and she could make out a deep moan as trees swayed laboriously outside her window. There were creaks on the stairs and at first, she thought it was Mae lighting candles and leaving food on white china plates as she’d been doing for years. It took just a few seconds for her to remember.

When sleep finally came, it pulled her down deep and hard. Hannah woke at dusk, after a long night of flailing in bed like a landed fish. She’d lost a whole day, but even when her eyes opened to fast-fading golden light, she remained in bed. There was nothing and no one to lift herself up for. She held the reins of time and it was horrible.

But yearning sounds came from her belly and drew her to the kitchen. She pulled out the heavy load of casseroles from the fridge. There was a bland-smelling lasagna, a mess of beef spaghetti, and a diluted gumbo with three crawfish curled meekly into commas.

She remembered Mae’s blackened catfish, seared in

paprika, garlic, and thyme and slathered in butter, wine, and lemon.

“You sear it first,” Mae had told her, lifting up the black iron skillet to waft the smoke. The kitchen turned hazy with it. “Go on, pick out the spices.”

“Garlic,” Hannah said, covering her mouth. Her eyes felt like they were leaking curry.

“That’s easy. What else?”

“Thyme,” Hannah said, coughing.

Mae smiled, unperturbed, and put down the skillet. She lifted a bouquet of crackling dried thyme and cupped her hands around it. “Smell that. Remember it. It’s a generous herb, flavorful but not overpowering. It does a dish good. Put it in a tea and it’ll cure a cough. The Greeks said it gave people courage.”

Hannah looked up into Mae’s dark eyes. “Is that why you’re always putting it in everything?”

Mae pressed her warm lips against Hannah’s forehead. “Don’t read too much into it. It’s just tasty.” Then, “The Egyptians used it to embalm their dead” whispered against her skin.

“I’m gonna die if I don’t get out of this kitchen,” Hannah moaned.

“Now watch,” Mae instructed. She dropped a chunk of fresh butter into the pan, then drizzled white wine over it. The sizzle filled the room. “Squeeze a lemon. Go on.”

Hannah did as she was told, leaning in to smell the trickle of citrus.

“But take it off the heat quickly. You just want to warm it up a bit. Then pour it over your catfish. The sauce is like a balm over the wound.”

“The wound?”

Mae held out the skillet, the catfish dark and pebbled as if it'd been tarred. “Look for yourself.”

Hannah poured the warm salve over the fish, and it settled between the cracked black skin with a sigh.

“It's all about balance, child. Cooking's like a science. You have to temper the spice. That's why it's best to serve something cold with this dish.” She brandished a colander brimming with vinegary vegetables. “Pickled root vegetables. Or a chilled gumbo. Are you listening?”

Hannah smacked her lips. The air tasted like black pepper. “Why do I have to learn all this stuff?”

Mae turned off the burners and the kitchen quieted. “This is how it's done, passing on knowledge. My momma taught me, decades ago, and now I'm teaching you. Someday I'll be gone and you'll have one of your own.”

“One what?”

“A child.”

All she had left were memories. Crouching in every cubby, latent in every scent. Hannah thought she could busy herself with them for years. “That must be how madness starts,” she whispered. She was utterly alone, and yet she had the sense that there were eyes in the walls, watching her. Maybe the madness had started already.

She must have heard the sound minutes before she recognized it. It sounded like the slow thud of Mae digging preserves out of the back shed.

The shed was half-sunk into the ground and filled with shelves of aluminum cans, bottles of water, and canning jars full of pickled cabbage and cauliflower. Mae kept all the non-perishables there, behind a heavy wooden door.

Graydon slunk into the kitchen, his yellow flashlight eyes scanning her. The shed door slammed again and he let out a mewl. “Ignore it, little guy,” Hannah said, reaching for him. “It’s just some baby gator mucking about.” Graydon’s ears were pushed back on his head, nails peeking through the dirty gray fur of his paws. He shrank from her hand.

“Okay, okay,” Hannah muttered and stood up. She peeked out the window, half-expecting to see some staggering drunk looking for beer. But beyond the tall bushes, the shed door winked like an eye, swinging back and forth on its own.

Graydon leapt onto the counter beside her and sunk into his haunches.

“I’m going,” she grouched, and pulled a long knife from the drawer. “Some guard cat you are.”

Outside, the grass was arid and crackled underfoot. “Anyone there?” she called out.

The chirps of birds answered, and she looked down at herself. Her black funeral dress was askew from sleep, the long knife shook in her fist, and she was glad to be the only witness to her insanity.

Then she saw it, hunched down in the grass. It took her a moment to place the terrible ribbed back of it, white as a maggot. She drew a shuddering breath and gripped the knife harder.

How many times had she seen it skulking out of the corner of her eye, or half-submerged in the grassy swamp? Its back was singular, fracture lines like a roadmap across the carapace-like surface. She’d always attributed it to the lasting fragments of some recurring nightmare, something meaningful but harmless, and as a child, she’d always

been able to burrow into Mae's skirts and rely on the scent of turmeric to right her.

But the sweat that drained down her back didn't feel like a dream, and there were no more skirts to hide behind.

Down in the grass, it released a wet, phlegmatic sound, and she saw its eye roll toward her. It had seen her. "Oh," she breathed, and backed away.

The phone began to ring inside the house and she focused on the sound, stepping backward. She clasped her hand around Mae's copper bracelet, the knots firm against her palm. "There's nothing there," she told herself. "You're still half-asleep." She willed herself to believe the words, and found that she was picturing Mae speaking them.

The shed door slammed shut with a splintering crash, and remained closed.

Her whole body trembled with the urge to run, but she forced herself to walk evenly until she was back in the kitchen, where she clutched the counter for balance. Graydon's eyes were still on the shed, his fur standing on end.

The phone began ringing again, and she fumbled with the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi, Hannah? It's James Robichaud. How are you?" James's voice brought her back into herself.

She tried to swallow down the fear with each gulp of breath. "I'm alright, thanks. You?"

There was a pause. "Are you sure? You sound strange."

Hannah cleared her throat. "Yeah, everything's fine. I'm still a bit shaken up, I think."

"I'm sorry. How are you holding up?"

Hannah felt the silence like a presence, pressing against her, muffling her own urge to speak. She shook her head but answered, simply, “Fine.”

“Listen, that thing I wanted to talk to you about? It’s Mae.”

“What about her?” Hannah glanced at the urn still squirreled away on a corner of the kitchen counter.

“We’ve received the results of the autopsy.”

Hannah’s hand closed into a fist. She’d forgotten that in the confused haze of that afternoon, she’d given consent. Her Mae, cut open like a fish at market. “And?”

“There was arteriosclerosis, and her heart was weakened. It could’ve easily been that. There were some small clots in her leg, too.” James’s voice changed. “But that mass wasn’t a tumor. She might’ve choked, but she would’ve choked on feathers.”

Hannah thought of the cat catching the canary. James’s words sounded like the punch line to a joke. “I don’t understand.”

“Black feathers, looked to be hens’, and quite a few of them. Dr. Kinney looked rightly spooked, and said it was like she’d swallowed them. They were far enough in her stomach that she would’ve either done it on purpose, or had it done to her.”

Hannah shook so hard she almost dropped the receiver. “Jesus. What are you saying? That someone might’ve hurt her?”

“No, it’s absurd. I mean . . .” He hesitated. “I don’t know what it means, but did Mae rub anyone the wrong way? Some people in town think black hens’ eggs are pretty

powerful. You run them over your body to cleanse it of evil, or you can crack them open at one end and sprinkle in sulfur to—”

“James, that’s ridiculous.”

“Just covering my bases, that’s all. There’s no one you can think of? Or maybe Mae was working out a remedy? Some kind of tincture?”

Hannah traced the row of Xs carved deep along the lip of the urn. They looked as forbidding as barbed-wire fencing, and Hannah wondered who had ordered the design. She wanted to ask if the feathers had been removed, or if they were mingling with Mae’s ashes. She stayed silent.

James’s voice sounded wooden. “Right. I thought you should know. And while I have you on the line, I was wondering if you’d want to get out of the house for a bit? There’s a band playing in town tonight, and, well, given Mae’s death, I don’t think it’s the best idea for you to be by yourself right now.”

Hannah braced herself before she looked out the window, but the shed door was closed. The long grass around it billowed harmlessly, and she held a shaking hand to her head. “I haven’t even showered,” she said, trailing off.

“Great. It’ll take me a half hour at least to make it over.”

“How . . .” Hannah sighed, running a hand through her hair. “How should I dress?”

“However you’d like. I’m sure you’ll look good.” James’s voice was soft as cotton in her ear.



Hannah took a step back at the door of the bar.

“What’s wrong?” James asked, leaning closer. He smelled like cedar wood, and she wasn’t used to the scents of men.

“Are there always so many people? It’s so loud.” She laughed suddenly. “God, I sound ancient. I don’t really get out much, in case you couldn’t tell.”

“We can always leave if you don’t like it, but I think it might help for you to get out a bit. Be with other people.”

“Other people,” Hannah echoed. “Right. Because that’s always gone over so well.”

James rubbed the nape of his neck. “Look, I remember how it was for you, and how maybe I . . . contributed. But I was just a kid then, we both were. I’d like to make up for that. Truce?”

Hannah studied the serious set of his face and how he shifted his weight from foot to foot. She took his outstretched hand.

Hannah found a seat on a barstool along the back and tried to make herself small. The walls were dark wood and peppered with mounted fish. A middle-aged woman, her auburn hair cut in a choppy bob, raised a glass to her from a nearby table. Hannah smiled tentatively, and looked down at herself. She’d found an old red dress of Mae’s, slightly too big for her, and donned it like some exotic skin.

She’d tried on her own dresses, turning from side to side until she was dizzy, but they seemed childish, designed for a body she’d outgrown without noticing. Sweet Peter Pan collars and flower-printed cotton didn’t go with whiskey and cigar smoke.

“What’re you drinking?” James asked.

“Water. Last I checked I only just turned twenty.”

James shook his head. “No, ma’am. With the week you’ve had, you’ve earned something harder. I insist.”

“Are you always so footloose with the letter of the law?” James only smiled, so Hannah thought about it. “How about rye and ginger beer?”

“Coming right up.”

Hannah pasted herself to the wall, studying the crowd. She was on the outskirts, as always, and watchful for the hate-filled glances she’d grown accustomed to in childhood. But there were none, and she felt herself relax a bit.

The dance floor was a living organism, animated hands like antennae. The women were sipping from short glasses, glancing around at whoever might be watching. Hannah could recognize the married men, their paunches and mugs of foamy beer, gathered together in huddles. She found herself wondering what they’d go home to later that night. Soft wives that smelled of lavender detergent, maybe, or avoiding their woes with some young girl like her.

Hannah coughed to clear her throat of the bar’s perfumes just as the house lights went down, and four tall shapes took the stage. “This first one’s called ‘Been Tearing Me Open,’” the singer breathed into the microphone. He smiled and Hannah’s heart somersaulted when she realized it was Callum. “It’s for all the sad men out there tonight.” Scattered claps rang out.

He closed his eyes and Hannah studied him as she moved up toward the stage. Some new feeling squeezed her. He was tall and bearded, with cracked sneakers on his feet. Skinny in his checkered shirt, but strong and sure-footed before the microphone. His face was expressionless,

and there was only a slight wrinkle in his brow to betray that anything was stirring underneath. Then his guitar let loose an aching twang. His fingers alighted across frets as a vein began to pulse in his neck. As he played, his chin drew figure eights, outlining melodies.

The blues he played was dirty as week-old rainwater, streaming from his fingers, pooling in the whorls of her ears. In the small of her back. Sluggish bodies came alive around her, nodding at every chord he struck.

Behind Callum, the drummer's grin was ecstatic. When the drummer's eyes met Hannah, he lowered them humbly toward the silver of his set, consumed by the joy of rhythm.

Hannah felt herself moving forward through the crowd, taken by some new confidence. She wanted to be closer to Callum. She felt like someone new, someone unburdened by her mother's reputation.

"He's good, isn't he?" James handed her a glass.

Callum was backlit, but even so, when he opened his eyes, Hannah felt that they were resting on her. She was sure she'd never been studied quite so intently before. He had her pinioned.

The songs melted into each other, and Hannah drank quickly, grateful for the pleasant haziness that was taking over. James took each empty glass from her and replaced it with a fresh one. Soon, her head was spinning, and what she'd seen that afternoon was blurred.

She let herself entertain possibilities in the safety of a sweaty crowd. It was natural, she thought, to feel fragile after a death. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that the creature in the grass had somehow been more *present* than it ever had before. More real.

But there were ways to explain it. An albino gator, maybe. She'd read somewhere that they existed, and it didn't seem such a stretch that years of crossbreeding had carried the mutation into the Louisianan swamp.

"God's garden is wide and varied," Mae used to say during Hannah's teenaged years, usually in response to the reports of violence and prostitution that trickled in from town. While she fished deep-fried oysters from her browned, bubbling pot of oil, Mae would tell Hannah about young doe-eyed boys whose hearts burst in the throes of ecstasy tablets. "And that's why I want you here, where you're safe."

Hannah was just beginning to bite at the bit, to yearn for the nightlife that frightened Mae. "So I'm not allowed in God's garden?"

Something had flitted across Mae's face and she'd turned away. "Making your own decisions might seem wonderful now, but when you're in the thick of it, you might feel differently. There'll be time enough for you to go wherever you want after I'm gone."

Callum's last note faded smoothly into silence, overtaken quickly by claps and cries for an encore, but he raised a slick hand toward the audience and hopped off-stage. "Band needs a beer, folks," the drummer whispered into the microphone. "Y'all stick around, though."

Hannah shrank back as Callum headed straight for her.

"You came. I asked James to bring you," he added, nodding at James. Callum accepted a beer and a chaste kiss from a lipsticked waitress. She ran her thumb across his cheek to wipe off the red mark.

“That was great, man,” a heavily bearded man said, elbowing his way between them.

A delicate-featured woman with thick black curls clasped her arms around Callum’s neck. “Totally great,” she echoed.

“Hannah, these two are Tom and Leah. They’re my whole fan club.” A passing group of twenty-somethings raised their glasses toward him and Callum lowered his eyes.

“He’s too humble, don’t you think?” Tom said, bowing to Hannah with a flourish. “Nice to meet you.”

Callum shared a private glance with Leah, so intimate that Hannah looked away. He undid Leah’s hands and brushed his lips across her knuckles as she smiled.

“Nobody likes a show-off,” Callum said, as the crowd lost interest in him and began to talk amongst themselves.

Tom rolled his eyes and tapped his beer bottle against Callum’s. “Oh, fuck off.” He thrust his chin toward James. “Fill me in on the goings-on, man. Let Callum and Hannah get a bit better acquainted.” He winked at Hannah.

Hannah rolled her shoulders back. Leah still stood near Callum, mouthing the edge of her glass.

“How long have you lived by the water?” Callum asked Hannah. He leaned in close to her but gazed out at the crowd as they spoke.

“My whole life.” His skin smelled like moss and cool night air, and his breath was sweet with rum. “Born and raised.”

“So, are the stories true? Are y’all soothsayers, alligator hunters, and shut-ins?” Hannah smirked to hear the

intonation of an old Cajun man. He was older than her. She could tell from the slightly tired look of his skin.

“Only if you’re all chip-on-your-shoulder alcoholics.”

Callum laughed. “Judging by my grandpa, sure. Me, I’m Irish in name only.”

“Fancy that,” Hannah muttered. She noticed his hands, large-knuckled around the bottle’s neck.

Someone bumped her from behind, and Callum pulled her toward him, shooting a stern glance at the underage boy who retreated with arms raised. “Some of these people aren’t my ideal audience,” he murmured. “But you take what you can get, right?”

“I’ll admit that I don’t know much about music, but I thought you were amazing.” She said it quietly, evenly, although inside her the sentiment boomed.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Leah was looking at them with a strange, rhapsodic intensity, pulling on her ropy strands.

“Why is she staring at us?” Hannah asked in a low voice. Immediately, she scanned the room for its exits. She felt like an intruder whose disguise was wearing off.

“Who?” Callum followed her eyes, and immediately took a step away from Hannah. “Oh, Leah. She’s on E, habitually. It hasn’t kicked in yet, or not enough for her. She’s always a huge grump when she’s sober.”

“You want some?” Tom appeared behind them.

James snapped his fingers. “I’m off duty, but I’m not deaf.”

“Brother, as I remember it, you might be a cop but you’ve never been a saint.”

James took a step forward, but Leah, her pupils dilated

to a drowning black, grabbed his hand. “Come dance with me,” she said, sweetly. James hesitated, glancing at Hannah.

“Go on,” Hannah said. “I’m fine.” She felt Callum’s hand rest gently on her shoulder, felt the heat pulse through her chest. Hannah’s skin was beginning to crawl. Every female set of eyes seemed to be on them, and every girl that walked by cast her a chilly, considering look. Callum was unconcerned, but Hannah had learned long ago that anonymity was safest.

“You and Leah,” she began, and he shook his head, anticipating her question.

“Friends. Good friends, maybe, but if there’s longing, it’s not on my side.”

Hannah chanced a glance at his steady eyes. She wondered if she knew enough to recognize sincerity.

“You should drink it neat.” Callum gestured to her glass. “It’s a waste of good rye, mixing it with that sweet shit.”

“I like the spice of it.” The music flooding through the speakers had a fast, thudding beat, and she felt her feet moving of their own accord.

“Drink it down quick,” Callum urged, his breath warm on her neck. Leah had begun to dance with James, her hips moving like a gyroscope. Her body, outlined in colored fluorescent lights, was mesmerizing in motion. Hannah wondered where the girl had learned to sway like that.

She emptied her glass.

“Your hair is beautiful,” Callum said. One finger traced her hairline so slowly she could feel each root flex at his touch. “Like the sky at dusk.” His eyes lingered thoughtfully on her lips.

“Lines like that work, I guess,” she whispered. She

realized that they were working, and that she wanted them to. His fingers slid like drops of water down her sides, grazing her hips.

“It’s not a line.” He drew his head away. “That’s not what I’m bringing to the table.”

She tasted acid in the back of her throat. “Excuse me,” she croaked. She sensed him try to grab her arm as she fled toward the bathroom.

Hannah threw up until she was hoarse and spent, until the stench of it made burning tears pool in her eyes. A terrible pressure welled up in her cheeks and behind her eyes, and she felt close to bursting. She thought suddenly of hens’ feathers packed into her throat, and could almost feel their tickle.

“Not a big drinker, then?” Callum’s voice behind her, tinged in amusement, made a fresh wave of vomit crest in her.

“Hey, do you know that this is the women’s restroom?” She dabbed at her face with toilet paper. Then she gave up and rested her forehead against the wall of the stall.

“At this time of night, people don’t pay much attention to which restroom is which. There, now.” He rubbed circles between her shoulder blades. “Poor pet.”

“Is it over?”

He chuckled. “There’s no way of knowing. You should enjoy this moment, though.”

To her mortification, she began to sob. “Oh God, why did I even come here? I can’t face a boat right now.” The tiles beneath her knees were already rocking.

“I live five minutes away. You can clean yourself up there.”

Hannah let herself be hoisted up against his shoulder. “I have to get home to Mae,” she murmured, then stood up straight. Remembrance speared her.

“No. You don’t.” He kissed her forehead and his lips were full and cool. “Come on.”



His apartment was the third floor of a walk-up. Hannah glimpsed a wooden balcony through glass doors in the back, its banister faintly lit by Christmas lights.

“Sit down. Put your legs up.” Callum cleared a gray sofa of clothes.

There were framed black-and-white photographs on the walls and upright wine crates brimming with books. It wasn’t quite what she’d expected.

Hannah glared at a chipped Tiffany lamp on the glazed coffee table and groaned. “Even the light hurts.”

He threw a red silk scarf over the lamp and the living room became anatomical. “Better?” he asked.

Hannah nodded and lay down warily, aware that she barely knew this man and trying not to wonder if the scarf had once been wrapped around Leah’s neck or her thin wrists. Trying not to wonder how often he found souvenirs between the cushions of his couch. Hannah let her eyes close for a moment, and she was instantly visited by the phantom sensation of Mae’s palm on her forehead.

When she was startled out of sleep, her nausea had subsided and the sky was lightening outside. Through the lingering headache, she didn’t recognize the room at first. The smell of aftershave and unwashed laundry was foreign.

Callum was sitting in a nearby armchair with his ankles crossed, sipping slowly from a glass. She noticed that he'd taken his shirt off. He turned his head toward her sleepily. "Feeling a bit better?"

Hannah's foot bumped the coffee table covered with sheets of music and brandy snifters as she sat up. She nodded. "Thanks for letting me stay here." A black knit blanket, flecked with crumbled chips, was spread over her legs. "I think I'm almost ready for the boat."

"It's five in the morning," he said, sounding amused. "All the boats are tied and docked."

"Still," she said, then trailed off. "I hate to ask, but you've got a boat, don't you?" Ribs showed through tanned muscles. "I'm missing my bed right now."

"I've had a few too many drinks." He shook his head. "Besides, certain animals prefer to ache on their own, but I'm a big believer in grieving in the company of others."

"It's not how I was raised. I don't think there's enough comfort in the world for what I'm feeling right now."

"This won't heal overnight, and you can't expect it to. It's going to take time, and you'll always miss her. But I promise that the sting of it, the feeling that you can't bear it, will fade. You just have to take it one step at a time, and the first of those is a bit more rest. Come on, I'll take the couch."

Hannah smoothed the red dress over her thighs. Looking around the apartment, at the photographs, the greeting cards, and the water-stained magazines, she realized she felt comfortable. At ease. She took a deep breath.

Callum sat down on the couch. "What is it?"

"I'm not tired anymore," she said, holding his gaze.

“It’s really too bad,” he said.

“What is?”

“That we met like we did. The things I would do, otherwise.”

Hannah’s breath sped up. The sense of being on the verge of something inevitable was almost pleasurable. “What would you do?” she asked in a small voice.

His face was an anchor, holding the spinning room in place. She saw desire in his dilated eyes, and unexpectedly, it made her feel powerful. “I’d like to say that I’d hold your hand, make you breakfast, pick up a handful of wildflowers,” he said, smiling. “And truth is, I’d like that. But those are daytime things, and we can still rightly call this night.”

“And what would you do, with this rightly called bit of night?”

“I’d lay you down,” he said, his eyes suddenly serious. He leaned in over her and his tongue touched her like a butterfly’s, tracing nectar along the inside of her arm toward her shoulders.

She’d so rarely allowed anyone to come this close to her, because she’d learned early that after the initial burst of pleasure came pain, and doubt, and regret.

She hesitated but didn’t move away.

He slid down the straps of her dress. She moved instinctively to cover herself but he blocked her gently. His tongue flicked along her clavicle, down the subtle dip between her breasts.

“I think I’d let you,” she said.

He pulled away to strip off his jeans, smiling, and she felt rudderless on the plush couch. He tugged at the bottom

of her dress and she felt it slide down from beneath her. Inch by inch, her body was revealed, its hills and valleys. A terrain she hadn't had cause to examine for years was suddenly exposed. She sought his eyes for some sign of how she measured up, but they moved up and down her legs, her belly, and her shoulders like he was sating some thirst.

Slowly, he ran his hand over the pale peach cotton of her underwear. "Is this okay?" he breathed.

"I don't do this," she said. "I haven't done this in a very long time. But yes." She studied his body in the faint light. When she was seventeen, she'd had a brief flirtation with a boy from town. Toby, whose skin glistened in his parents' bed. His full lips and precious smile, his brown eyes peering expectantly up at her from between her thighs. That was before his parents had discovered them kissing in their boat. His mother's face had changed from confusion to anger to pure fury in seconds, and she'd chased Hannah down the street in bare feet. "You stay away from our boy!" she'd screamed. That was before Mae had discovered the condoms, and sat heavily, speechless, in a chair. Mae's arms crossed so tightly over her chest that her shoulders seemed to tremble with effort.

Hannah's legs wrapped loosely around Callum's waist. He pressed his thumb into her, and it felt firm and as sure as ringing a doorbell. Slowly, he pulled out his finger and licked it.

And then he moved into position and thrust, with a humming growl that elucidated every blues riff she'd ever heard. It rose to a fever pitch as she dug her short nails into his back. He answered by hoisting forward, his hand

fitting against her neck. She let out a cry, suddenly panicked.

In that moment, she heard every nook and cranny of her windpipe. She thought again of feathers tangling in her trachea, and shadows began to stir at the edges of her sight, crowding in. Something flashed in the mirror, milk-white even in the room's red glow.

She tried to sit up, just as the creature disappeared behind the couch. "Callum," she breathed, and thought she saw a chalky claw stretch toward Callum's foot. How had it found her?

"Something's wrong," she tried to say as his fingers mapped the long cords of her neck, but a low vibrato started in her pelvis. He shoveled deeper, a steady spade. And then it happened. He struck ore, and they both wailed. An interminable note that made up for her many years of silence.

He stayed there, his arms trembling, gazing down into her eyes. With a tender smile, he licked her lips as she wheezed herself back to earth. Then he toppled to his side and nuzzled into her breasts, wrapping himself around her body. Beyond him, the room was empty.

"I'm going to hurt tomorrow," she said.

His wide eyes turned to her, sheepish. With hair matted in scrolls to his forehead, he looked impossibly young. He looked wholly himself. "I don't know what came over me. I got swept up in the moment, I guess."

She laughed, and pressed him against her shoulder. "Baby," she murmured. The dizziness had left her, but already she knew she would never again be painless.