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# Skin And Smoke

Kelly Anne Baker

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**SKIN AND SMOKE**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Kelly Baker

July 2016

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## **SKIN AND SMOKE**

English

Missouri State University, July 2016

Master of Arts

Kelly Baker

### **ABSTRACT**

My thesis consists of the first ten chapters of a horror novel, entitled *Skin and Smoke*. My novel focuses on the character of Violet Masterson and her attempts to create her own identity and reconcile with her family's past actions. Violet lives in the small, recently unincorporated town of Nuovita in central Washington. Following her grandmother's death, she must face the paranormal events occurring in Nuovita, while her father leaves on an unknown journey. My thesis addresses themes of loss, identity, and revenge. In Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he proposes that the monomyth ends with the hero returning home with the "elixir of life" and earning the "freedom to live." That is, he is able to preserve a way of life, and learn to master the world he left at the beginning of the journey. Campbell's hero returns to a comfortable, solid place, content in the knowledge he has gained and his place in society. However, as Campbell notes, the time of such heroes has passed. The journey of the monomyth, he believes, is now an internal one: a quest for ordinary individuals to find and master their role in life. In *Skin and Smoke*, I use the structure of a heroic journey to question the feasibility of such an ending. Rather than returning home, the story moves toward postmodern fragmentation and alienation as well as the transcendental homelessness described by Georg Lukacs.

**KEYWORDS:** hero, myth, identity, homelessness, fragmentation, polyphony

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Richard Neumann, PhD  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

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By

Kelly Baker

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Approved:

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Mythology as Compost .....	2
Transcendental Homelessness .....	6
Polyphony, Dialogism, and the Search for Identity .....	7
Possible Worlds .....	12
Conclusion .....	14
Skin and Smoke .....	16
Chapter 1 .....	16
Chapter 2 .....	20
Chapter 3 .....	25
Chapter 4 .....	31
Chapter 5 .....	38
Chapter 6 .....	46
Chapter 7 .....	51
Chapter 8 .....	57
Chapter 9 .....	63
Chapter 10 .....	67
Works Cited .....	75

## INTRODUCTION

Theoretical physicist Sean Carroll wrote for *Discovery Magazine* in 2011 that “string theory predicts that the laws of physics can take on an enormous variety of forms, and inflation can create an infinite number of pocket universes...it’s possible that another universe bumped into ours early on and left a detectable signature in the cosmic background.” His language is typical of scientific reports of the theoretical multiverse: full of “can” and “possibility.” In my view as a writer, science fiction and fantasy live in those same margins. Where science fact ends, science fiction begins, and begins to merge with what has been traditionally called fantasy. Stories which walk the line between the two genres are often referred to with the catch-all term, “speculative fiction.” They follow the classic science fiction belief that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

The fictional worlds made possible by gaps in scientific understanding fascinate me. In my thesis, the beginning of a novel entitled *Skin and Smoke*, I approach North American mythology with the supposition that old gods and spirits have basis in fact. In the chapters that form my thesis, I focus on three main mythological elements: the coyote figure as a trickster spirit, the Five Worlds of Aztec mythology, and the Aztec god, Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror). My novel will take a holistic approach to mythology reflective of the work of folklore scholars such as Joseph Campbell: that there are common mythic themes that are not limited to any single culture or geographic location. I also take the approach that individual stories and characters *travel* across geographic areas. The coyote figure serves a similar role for many North American peoples. The

Aztec Tezcatlipoca shares many qualities with the Mayan god, Tohil. By taking this approach, I can adapt the symbolic qualities from several different versions of a single god or spirit into a single fictional character.

In a broader sense, I use myth to provide a conflict between ancient and contemporary morality, as well as heroic journeys. My thesis focuses on the character of Violet and her attempts to create her own identity and reconcile with her family's past actions. In Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he proposes that the monomyth ends with the hero returning home with the "elixir of life" and earning the "freedom to live." That is, he is able to preserve a way of life, and learn to master the world he left at the beginning of the journey. Campbell's hero returns to a comfortable, solid place, content in the knowledge he has gained and his place in society. However, as Campbell notes, the time of such heroes has passed. The journey of the monomyth, he believes, is now an internal one: a quest to find and master their role in life. In *Skin and Smoke*, I use the structure of a heroic journey to question the feasibility of such an ending. Rather than returning home, the story moves toward postmodern fragmentation and alienation as well as the transcendental homelessness described by Georg Lukacs.

Throughout the ten chapters of my thesis, Violet begins to understand that her concepts of her father, mother, and grandmother are not necessarily true. The use of Bakhtinian polyphony is essential to this end, as well as Bakhtin's theory of dialogism as it can be applied to the creation of individual identity. Violet struggles to create her own identity while becoming more aware of her own ignorance about her own family and the world itself. This is reflective of the cultural anxiety created by information-overload: as

the *amount* of information available increases, attempts at discovering or creating true *knowledge* and gaining control of her destiny seems increasingly futile.

### **Mythology as Compost**

In his “Reflections on Myth,” Neil Gaiman likens his use of mythology to the use of compost in gardening. He believes it a mistake to “impl[y] that these tales no longer ha[ve] anything to do with us” (81). Though he does not literally believe in the myths he writes about, Gaiman “believe[s] in the things they can tell us...in the stories we can tell with them” (84). For Gaiman, myths are expressions of human emotions, fears, and interactions that have simply fallen out of style. They have been replaced by or transformed into other myths. Most myths never truly go away; they simply change, as the human needs that created them still exist. Gaiman cites urban legends and film noir (particularly horror movies) modern expressions of myth. This is not out of line with Joseph Campbell’s belief that ancient myths are an expression of the universal unconscious. In Gaiman’s writing, however, he explores the further possibilities of mythology: the combination, extension, and alteration of myths in order to discover how they might still influence us today. Gaiman’s approach to myth seems to focus on defamiliarizing stories in the same way Viktor Shklovsky proposes defamiliarizing everyday experiences. Where myths are often viewed as static entities, irrelevant to contemporary life, Gaiman believes they can be made useful again by re-working stories in a way that interrupts the reader’s preconceptions.

Of particular interest to my purpose is Gaiman’s novel, *American Gods*, in which he treats mythic characters as embodiments of certain human traits or struggles. The old

gods were created and empowered by human belief. When humans stop believing, the gods become weak. Furthermore, new gods are created as humans come to “worship” concepts like technology, money, or television. Gaiman’s answer to “whether [myths] need us” seems to be “yes” (79). However, I am more interested in the possibility that myths do not *need* people any more than other earthly creatures would. Many cultures have pantheons motivated by very human desires: sex, power, territory, notoriety. The morality of some gods is just as fickle as that of their human followers. Tezcatlipoca may lead a devotee to victory, or quite literally use smoke and mirrors to obscure the right path. Coyote both terrorizes and save the humans he encounters.

This variety of mythical morality has fascinated me, particularly when discussing the romanticizing of so-called “primitive” beliefs. There seems to be a cultural yearning to return to “simpler” times. This “longing to experience...again” is typical of what Frederic Jameson describes as “nostalgia mode” (1852). Rather than mocking the customs of ancient myth-makers, they are taken very seriously, as a “pastiche,” a “blank parody...that has lost its humor” (1849). It is quite common to find a work of fiction predicated on the belief that a world with magic is not only more fun, but inherently better. Magic and a connection to the world of myth is often approached (especially in Gaiman’s work) as an integral but forgotten part of the human experience. A connection to the spirit world is wrapped in ecstasy and destiny; protagonists who experience this connection are transformed into more complete and content individuals. Other writers, such as Chuck Wendig, have approached mythical characters with antagonism: gods are cosmic bullies who terrorize and subjugate humanity. In this approach, the hero fights to preserve the spiritually (and sometimes physically) separate world of humanity, in order

to protect people from their fallen gods. In each type of story, the hero seeks to either return to a previous state of society, or prevent the current status quo from being changed. Both express a fear of change and of the unknown. Both also express a belief that cultural change can be averted or undone.

In *Skin and Smoke*, I extend the Aztec belief in five “worlds,” or epochs of existence (we currently live in the fifth world) to include a sixth world. This sixth world would draw closer two universes, drifting apart (as proposed by some theoretical physicists), and bring magic and myth back into the human reality. This could be seen as either an invasion or regression: an attack by evil or a gift of misunderstood benevolence. My protagonist, Violet, does not have the knowledge or wisdom to tell the difference. Out of fear, she attempts to keep her world as it is. This is demonstrated in the microcosm of her search for her father. Violet desperately seeks to reunite with her father, who she views as good, kind, and loving. She avoids her mother, who Violet has never met, viewing her with suspicion and anger. Over the course of the novel, Violet will learn more about her parents’ past actions, compromising her preconceived view of the world and the identity she has built for herself. In the traditional monomythic form, Violet is a failed hero. In the end, the world is not able to be “saved,” or kept unchanged. Instead, her challenge is to accept the fact of individual powerlessness: that the world is too vast and interconnected to be “saved” (saving for one is destruction for another) and that the progression of time cannot be halted or reversed. Instead of returning home, having mastered oneself, the hero must accept that the concept of “home” may no longer apply.

## Transcendental Homelessness

According to Georg Lukacs, the novel is uniquely suited to expressing the influence of time. The heroes of epic poems or dramas, by contrast, are changed by *events* alone, the effects of which are not lessened or changed by the passing of time. Epic heroes are firmly grounded in a particular period of time; they have a “transcendental locus” unique to the historical and geographic location that produce them (Lukacs 32). It would be a mistake, then, to approach the anxieties and trials of Greek heroes as we would our own, since we have an entirely different relationship with geography, time, and tradition. Lukacs proposed that, rather than asking, “what could we do to produce these forms? or: how would we behave if we had produced these forms? it would be more fruitful to inquire into the transcendental topography of the Greek mind, which was essentially different from our and which made those forms possible and indeed necessary” (32).

Another way to approach this problem may be to “inquire into the transcendental topography” of the contemporary Western mind, and to ask: what forms are now “possible and necessary”? I believe that Lukacs’ idea of “transcendental homelessness,” which he relates to the form of the novel, applies here. Lukacs’ begins his discussion of transcendental loci and homelessness by quoting Novalis: “Philosophy is really homesickness...it is the urge to be at home everywhere” (29). Without being rooted firmly in place and time, without a certain sense of purposeful direction for one’s life, the forms and stories produced will lack a clear unity. This transcendental homelessness is certainly prevalent in the fragmentation and occasional pessimism of literature of the postmodern era and beyond.

The “heroes” of contemporary novels are transcendently homeless. They sway between Jameson’s nostalgia and Filippo Marinetti’s futurist proclamation that “A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes...is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.” They want either to return to a small, simple world, or rush toward the future with disdain for all that has come before. Neither is possible: the past cannot be recreated, and the future cannot be determined with any certainty. The quest of contemporary heroes is not to master the world, but to build their own small place in the vast network of interconnectivity we currently inhabit. By allowing my protagonist, Violet, to fail at her quest, I am embracing the impossibility of Campbell’s monomyth in the contemporary historical and philosophical setting. This is not meant to discredit or disregard the influence of the monomyth. Certainly the heroic form remains relevant, just as all myths remain relevant. However, as Campbell admits, the time of myth-making has passed. Rather, I view myths as Gaiman does: compost to inform and grow new journeys, new stories, but different stories that suit the issues of our current state of transcendental homelessness. A hero may not be able to save the world or return home victorious (or at all), but meaning and identity are still able to be found.

### **Polyphony, Dialogism, and the Search for Identity**

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky was the first author to create characters outside of the “objectified image of a hero in the traditional novel” (7). Dostoevsky’s characters form a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (6). Dostoevsky resists limiting characters to a “single objective world” with a clear, authorial-determined

morality (6). Though my thesis focuses on Violet's point of view, each supporting character is the hero of his or her own story. They fully believe their course of action is best and that their desires are important—this is particularly true of Violet's mother, father, and grandmother. Violet's father leaves her alone in the midst of a crisis for reasons Violet does not yet understand. He likens her desire to understand and participate in his quest to a child's sense of safety while playing in the middle of the road. He asks her to simply trust that he is wiser than she, and for her to do as he asks. The Dostoevskian polyphony Bakhtin praises focuses on a unified event or plot arc, but allows each character to hold their own individually valid opinion on the unifying event. In *Skin and Smoke* I use other voices to complicate Violet's journey. She feels paralyzed by the multitude of possibilities ahead of her. As she progresses through the events of the novel, Violet begins to question the identity she has constructed for herself.

Violet was the victim of intense bullying through elementary and middle school, causing her to have outbursts of anger and violence, and eventually leading to her being homeschooled. Having been homeless as a very young child, she strives to be independent and self-sufficient, but remains attached to her father. She views her grandmother as a comforting and wise figure. She views her mother's absence as betrayal and admittedly conflates the pain and alienation of her childhood with the pain of her mother's absence. Each of these people have had a profound influence on Violet's sense of morality and her concept of the world. However, each of these individuals also has their own unique view of the world, intentions, and desires. Violet's concept of the people close to her is challenged by the introduction of new information that contradicts

her previous conceptions. As she interacts with new characters, she begins to develop a new outlook on the world.

This sort of interrelationship is in line with Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in language. As he uses it, dialogic relationships are the interaction between "whole utterances" and "any signifying part of an utterance, even toward an individual word" (184). Each speech act is inextricably linked to other speech acts, whether as question, answer, or commentary. Language is a collage of signs that play off one another to create new meanings and nuances of meaning. A novel of a particular time, in a particular place, will have a dialogue representative of the interactions between characters in that time and place. While Bakhtin writes about language, specifically, his ideas about dialogic relationships can easily be applied to the creation of each character's identity.

As a person encounters others, her ideas are challenged and altered by each interaction. Every new relationship changes a character's identity. In the opening chapters of *Skin and Smoke*, Violet encounters two new entities: Taylor Bauman and the coyote spirit that killed her grandmother. Taylor shares some of Violet's experiences growing up in Nuovita and was present for the years Violet attended public school, however, the two had never purposefully interacted. Violet is envious of Taylor's experiences attending college in Seattle, and relates to his unhappiness with returning to Nuovita. She is able to share her experiences with Taylor in a way that was previously unavailable to her, and is encouraged to act more on her own behalf.

While Taylor's influence on Violet's identity is largely positive, Coyote is a source of fear and anger. The founders of Nuovita, Washington trapped the coyote spirit, bound it to their orchard, and made it accept human sacrifices to it so that their crops

might grow. Violet's grandmother, rather than sacrificing herself to the coyote, bound it further, so that it could not interact with the physical human world. Because of this, when the coyote is finally freed, it is damaged, enraged, and wants only to harm (and kill) those who bound it, and their descendants (Violet and Taylor being the final descendants of each founding family of Nuovita). In many North American myths, Coyote is either a trickster or a benevolent god-figure. In Nuovita, Coyote has transformed from that positive/neutral persona to a creature of violence and hate.

When Violet consumes Coyote's eyes in the final chapter of my thesis, she also consumes a part of its personality. Not only is she affected by the events caused by Coyote, she is now affected by the spirit itself, as it merges with her own personality. Violet becomes increasingly violent and impulsive throughout *Skin and Smoke*. However, she has already displayed these traits as an adolescent, and believed she had overcome them. Through interactions with Taylor, Violet comes to realize that her personality and that of Coyote are more similar than she cared to admit. Since Coyote had previously interacted with her family as a villainous character, Violet is also forced to question the validity of her moral schema. It was, in fact, her ancestors who were aggressors against Coyote. Similarly, Violet discovers that in her father's past, he too was violent and immoral. As she draws closer to the spirits and gods of her father's past (those of Aztec descent), Violet further questions her preconceptions about her family and her life's path. She must question whether her father's actions toward her can excuse the actions of his past.

Patrick Modiano ponders a similar nature of identity and memory in his novel, *Dora Bruder*. He obsesses over the possibilities of Dora Bruder's life, particularly the

weeks leading up to her death, following her escape from a boarding school. At one point, he reads a report of a young man who was arrested at the same time as Dora Bruder. Modiano imagines this young man as his father, though he knows that to be impossible. He ruminates over the similarities between himself and Dora Bruder, and himself and his father, and tries to find meaning in the events which formed his adult self. Modiano seems to find it difficult to forgive his parents for their past actions toward him, and becomes fixated on Dora Bruder as a sort of proxy for learning about his own family's history. When Modiano questions Dora Bruder's intentions or motivations, he is also questioning those of his father, who went through similar trauma. By sympathizing with Dora, he is attempting to sympathize with his father and, in turn, himself. Since Modiano also draws parallels between his own life and personality and that of his father, the only way to understand himself is to understand his father.

As Modiano wanders the streets of modern-day Paris, he feels haunted by the forgotten memories and events of World War II; he is preoccupied by the silence of those people who remember such events and people, but never speak of them. There is almost a sense that the people of Paris tried to forget the war, to let it disappear and not burden the next generation. Modiano, however, feels that the burden is even greater because of his elders' silence: that Paris is irrevocably traumatized, and that trauma is only exacerbated by the forgetting of its source. In studying the atrocities in Paris during World War II, Modiano also comes to view this act of forgetting is an act of cleansing. People betrayed their neighbors and countrymen, and attempt to ease their own consciences by letting their actions be forgotten.

This is the effect I aim for when Violet begins to learn more about her parents and grandmother. She has only known them from a child's perspective: her father and grandmother are her elders, her protectors, and comforters. Through the events of *Skin and Smoke*, she begins to know them as equals: capable of both good and evil, and able to make mistakes. Violet's reaction to her family situation is integral to her sense of identity, but learning the truth about the events leading up to her parents' separation will force her to question her judgment of both mother and father, and therefore questions her concept of herself and the choices she makes.

Violet's concept of her family is based on half-truths and untold stories. She only knows what she had been allowed to know. Her father can receive respect from Violet and encourage certain values in her only because she is ignorant of his past. As Violet begins to realize her own ignorance, she begins to express a sense of vertigo and detachment similar to Modiano's. She, too, fixates on a proxy mystery. Where Modiano investigates Dora Bruder's life, Violet becomes determined to understand the supernatural events happening in her world.

### **Possible Worlds**

The shifting dynamics of Violet's relationship with her parents represents an agential constellations, such as that described by Lubomir Dolezel: "in the interpersonal network, an individual's intentions and actions necessarily meet, clash with, the coagents' intentionality" (96). Violet becomes overwhelmed with the anxiety of possibilities created by the "indeterminate, and ultimately uncontrollable" intentions of others (97). She wishes to be in control of her circumstances, and to not be subject to the power of

others. Dolezel notes that “power is a means whereby one person—the power holder—controls the intentions and acting of another—the subordinate” (103). However, Violet lacks the knowledge to orient herself in the conflict she finds herself in. Her father refuses to bestow this knowledge on her, in an attempt to control her actions through ignorance. Violet’s grandmother and Sandra Bauman both die before Violet can truly learn from them. The only other character who may have knowledge Violet seeks about her world is Eleanor Redmond, Violet’s estranged mother. However, Violet refuses to put herself in the position of subordinate to Eleanor as a holder of power. Thus, Violet finds herself in a position of ignorance and powerlessness, which she must overcome in order to act.

Dolezel describes a character’s ability to perceive the true nature of their fictional world as an “alethic endowment” (118). A character may perceive and act in her world physically, instrumentally, and mentally. Dolezel references Danto regarding “alethic deprivation,” which “has serious consequences for the person’s existence, since it ‘affects the entire vocabulary of experience’” (118). At the beginning of *Skin and Smoke*, Violet is fairly confident in her own alethic endowment. She believes the world to be physical, stable, and she believes she experiences it in roughly the same way others do. Through the course of my thesis, both Violet becomes aware of her own alethic deprivation. Not only is she ignorant of the details of her family’s past, she discovers that others (her father, Sandra Bauman, and her grandmother in particular), have experiences supernatural aspects of the world. She witnesses her father in a trance, communicating with spirits, and learns her grandmother has interacted with the supernatural coyote spirit.

In this way, Violet becomes aware, not only of her lack of knowledge, but her inability to *gain* that knowledge naturally.

Violet and Taylor Bauman are frustrated and bewildered by their lack of knowledge, and perform a ritual so they may see into the spirit world and enhance their alethic endowment. In the final chapter of my thesis, Violet devours the coyote spirit's eyes in order to gain its sight into the spiritual world. In doing so, she becomes an "alethic alien" in her own world (119). To illustrate the position of the alethic alien, Dolezel gives the example of H.G. Wells' "The Country of the Blind," in which a man stumbles upon a valley of people who are all sightless. In this story, the sighted man has a distinctly different perception of reality from those in the valley, as he can experience the world with senses they lack. As an alethic alien, his "alethic endowment...deviates from the standard of the world" (119). In *Skin and Smoke*, though other characters are more aware of the spiritual world, they cannot experience it in the way Violet now does, having consumed the coyote's eyes. In her quest to overcome alethic deprivation, Violet makes herself alien.

## **Conclusion**

On the microcosmic level, my novel deals with themes of identity creation. On the macrocosmic level, it deals with the anxieties of contemporary society, and how such anxieties shape a new conclusion to the monomyth described by Joseph Campbell. I have chosen to use the coyote figure and Aztec mythology for their symbolic effects. The coyote, in North American mythology, is a trickster, neither good nor evil. It exploits

human character flaws (greed, lust, etc.), but succumbs to many of those same flaws. The coyote character embodies the arrogance and rash decision-making typical of youth.

The Aztec god, Tezcatlipoca, is “the god of ancestral memory...and the embodiment of change through conflict” (Aztec Calendar). He can be either benevolent or malevolent. He created the world with Quetzalcoatl, his polar opposite who is sometime referred to as an aspect of Tezcatlipoca. He is often depicted with a foot made of polished obsidian, or a polished obsidian mirror (a smoky mirror); he confuses his enemies with literal smoke and mirrors, causing them to lose their way or follow the wrong path. He shares qualities from the Mayan god, Tohil, who is often depicted with a snake for a foot (representing knowledge).

These myths are also rooted in geographical locations important to the characters: the Coyote is mainly based on northwestern myths of the Yakima Valley. Violet’s paternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from northern Mexico, in the area from which the Aztecs immigrated to central Mexico. There is a genealogical and geographical homelessness to Violet’s interaction with mythological creatures: though she is of Native American ancestry, her father refuses to connect her to the myths and traditions of his ancestors. It is Violet’s Italian grandmother who shares myths with her, but they are myths from all over—not connected to any sense of family or transcendental locus. Despite (or perhaps because of) these strong themes of homelessness and fragmentation, my novel will conclude with a fairly positive outlook: that it is possible to find meaning and identity in a rapidly changing environment, overwhelmed by possibilities. The final chapter of my thesis sees Violet accepting the monomythic “call to adventure,” and setting off to find her father.

## SKIN AND SMOKE

### Chapter 1

It was that week of fall when the cold finally sets in. The leaves were more brown than orange, the grass was starting to fade, and everyone trailing into the unheated chapel wished they had brought a heavier coat. Violet wondered if her father, Harry, had the same overwhelming sense of vertigo, standing beside her in a surprisingly long assembly line of condolences. She had grown up at funerals. From age twelve, she had helped arrange flowers, make programs, even take inventory of belongings when a person came in for burial. But her own grandmother's funeral, she didn't know what to do with. Everything felt so *routine*. The same black dress, the same threadbare tights. Her thrift store heels had finally broken, so Violet wore the same pair of faded purple sneakers she had for the last four years, held together by glue and determination. She felt as if she'd been practicing for this her whole life. This, Harry had told her years before, was the point of funerals. You do the same thing, the same ritual, for any person that dies, and somehow that makes it less painful.

Violet realized now that it only made things worse. Going about business as usual when nothing would be usual again. No Sunday dinners, no late night phone calls when she couldn't sleep and Grandma Dana swore she was up anyway. No eavesdropping on Dad and Grandma when they drank coffee after holidays and talked about the state of the city. Not that there was much of a city anymore. Nuovita, Washington had been unincorporated the previous year; only about fifty residents remained, most of them either elderly or people in need of cheap housing while they saved up for something

better. This made the turnout for Aldana Abelli's funeral all the more surprising—no less than twenty attendees, most of them near the same age as Dana. Not that she had died of old age. Violet tried to put that thought away. Grandma Dana had been supposed to come for lunch that Tuesday, before Violet went to class. Harry had found her in the old orchard. The funeral was closed-casket, and Violet hadn't been allowed to see her, not even to say goodbye. Harry had begun smoking for the first time in Violet's memory. Every ten minutes while he worked on Dana, Violet could see him out back near the wood pile where he thought she couldn't see him, white clouds rising up like warning signals.

Violet had tried to talk her father out of taking care of Dana's body. There were plenty of funeral homes to the north, in Ellensburg, she told him. Where he should have moved them to years ago, when the last grocery store closed its doors, but he was too stubborn to leave Dana aging in isolation. Harry had told Violet that it wasn't anyone else's responsibility. When she asked if he had called her mother, Dana's only child, he reminded her that it was late and she needed to sleep. Harry didn't like talking about Eleanor, and Violet had only a vague impression of her mother, smiling and cheerful in single sun-bright photograph, the ghost of someone who, in another universe of possibilities, had been a mother and wife and happy as both.

Violet hadn't slept. Neither had Harry, and it showed. His funeral suit had been clean and ironed when he put it on but it seemed to have absorbed the shock of his hunched shoulders and hands that couldn't find a place to rest. Gray stubble stood out against his dark skin and his face seemed to have wrinkled overnight. Violet looked up, not at the ceiling, or anything in particular. If she looked up for long enough, the tears

wouldn't spill down her cheeks. She hadn't cried in public view in ten years. She shook hands and mumbled "thank you" without looking.

The procession was not long—the chapel served as the entrance to the cemetery—but the paths through the graveyard were not made for automobiles, and there weren't many there who could lift a casket without needing one themselves. A handful of barely-able-bodied men volunteered as pallbearers, as well as Taylor Bauman. Violet had to look twice when he offered to help. They had gone to school together, before she withdrew, and before the school itself closed. Taylor Bauman, who never locked her in a broom closet or hid her P.E. clothes and used to run along the outer road by her house. She thought he might have been in the last graduating class of Nuovita High School, but he hadn't been around since leaving for college. He wasn't as tall as the other pallbearers, including Violet, and she was surprised to see him carry the weight so well. She, on the other hand, was struggling. She had barely slept in the last few days. She felt as though her knees might burn up and turn to sawdust at any moment. Her shoes slipped once on a smooth rock, but she didn't fall. She didn't let go. She couldn't if she tried. Couldn't let her dad carry it without her.

The gravestone was simple: Name, dates. No beloved. No parting wisdom. Something to remember her by, but not remember too well. It's what she'd left on the documents in the manila envelope Harry found in the top drawer of her particle board desk. Simple funeral. No music or flowers. Nothing about it reminded Violet of her grandmother. The casket was lowered by a simple hand-cranked pulley. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something. Finally, an elderly woman spoke. She leaned heavily on Taylor's shoulder, but was so thin that it couldn't have been much of a burden. Sandra

Bauman, Violet thought. Her hair was entirely white, mostly fallen out of a clip at the top of her head. She held a thick wool coat closed with her right hand and told a story about Dana stealing apples from the barrels as a child and trying to feed them to an ailing rabbit she'd hidden in a tool shed. One by one, other stories were told. Violet couldn't help but notice they were all childhood stories. No one seemed to know Dana as an adult. Only Marty Cowsert, telling of his family moving to Nuovita so his father could work at the orchard, mentioned "before she ran off with that Indian fellow." Violet supposed that had been the divide: Dana left home to get married just before the orchard began to fail. A lot of people seemed to blame her for that, mostly because once she had divorced and returned to Nuovita following her parents' death, she hadn't done more to save the business.

A cold wind blew up from the valley and Violet looked past the people to the rolling hills below, dotted with small stones. Some were bright marble, others crumbling limestone. Some were so old you couldn't read the names anymore. There were more people buried on this land than living on it, Violet thought.

She was startled out of her thoughts by a flash of dark, darting between headstones like a shadow. A dog, maybe. It wasn't so far away; she should have been able to see it more clearly. She saw Taylor's head turn sharply. He saw it, too. To Violet, it seemed to be weaving slowing in between headstones, but Taylor's eyes became wide with fear. His lips parted and Violet could see his breathing increase. He buried his hand in his pocket, seemingly to keep from interrupting the service by pointing to whatever it was that he could see more clearly than her. It happened in an instant: one knee buckled, then the other followed, like dominoes. Someone grabbed Sandra Bauman just before she

went down with him. Harry leaned over him, tapping his face gently, but Taylor didn't move. After what seemed like an eternity, his eyes fluttered open. He pushed himself up from the ground, startled. Hands pressed at him, trying to get him to relax. He met Violet's eyes and asked, "Did you see it too?"

## **Chapter 2**

Violet sat alone with Sandra Bauman at a kitchen table. It was not the first time she had done so, and Mrs. Bauman tended to be quiet, as though in a constant state of waiting. In the other room, Harry made Taylor lie on the couch, took his pulse and checked his pupils again. Violet was reminded that her father had once almost been a doctor, before her mother left, before he had to quit school to care for her. Before they came to Nuovita, and he began tending mainly to the dead and a few residents who were less trusting of those big-city doctors. The training seemed to inhabit his hands like an old song that might fade to the back of your mind, but it was always there, under everything, three-four time and andante. She often accompanied him to house-calls where he took pulses and blood pressure readings and recommended herbs and teas in lieu of a doctor's visit and prescriptions they would never fill. She did this less often now that she had taken more hours at work and a full course load at the University of Washington in Ellensburg.

Mrs. Bauman's hands shook around her tea mug, tissue-paper skin over sluggish veins and icicle fingers, but she insisted she wasn't cold. She kept her eyes closed and would occasionally mutter what sounded like prayers, lips moving in a secret whisper. Violet hadn't answered Taylor's question, though she was certain he directed it at her.

She didn't know what, exactly, he saw. It could have been anything. Could have been entirely different from the flitting shadow she'd seen. Or maybe she hadn't seen it at all. Maybe she was just exhausted.

"I told him not to come back here," Mrs. Bauman said with sudden clarity. "I told his mother to just stick me in a home or hospital somewhere." Her voice broke, and she took a few deep breaths before sending her mug sailing of the edge of the table.

"Dammit," she said. "I'm sorry, honey. Let me get that."

"No," Violet said. She wasn't sure the old woman could get back up once she bent down. "Just tell me where the broom is, and towels."

Mrs. Bauman pointed to the pantry door.

"I'm sure he doesn't mind coming home," Violet said. She laid a dish towel over the mess to soak up the cooling tea.

"I don't care if he minds," Mrs. Bauman said. "I care that he gets himself out of this godforsaken place and never looks back. You should do the same. This is no place for a young person to be. Especially the both of you."

"What do you mean, especially us?" Violet said. But, before Mrs. Bauman could answer, Taylor was at the kitchen entrance asking what happened, with Harry close behind. Violet lied and said she had dropped the mug, though she wasn't sure why she felt she needed to protect Taylor from his grandmother's outburst. Habit, she guessed. Violet didn't like seeing people worried who hadn't done something wrong to her. She reached down to gather the larger pieces of broken ceramic and gasped. She had grasped too hard and a mixture of blood and tea spilled across her hand. "Shit," she said. "It's

fine, I'm fine." She directed the last part at Harry, who looked about to swoop down with a makeshift tourniquet and suture kit.

"There's a first aid kit upstairs," Taylor said.

The kit was under the bathroom sink, wedged between molded particle board and what looked like a decades-old container of Comet cleaner. There was a crack in the toilet seat cover, so Violet sat on the edge of the bathtub. Like most houses in Nuovita, Taylor's looked like a forgotten museum of mid-twentieth-century design. Forgotten in the way that no one could afford to replace anything, so it was all half fallen-apart, but underneath the rust and cracks you could tell that someone had once put a lot of thought into making their home beautiful.

The hydrogen peroxide stung and foamed brown with the blood still blossoming from Violet's hand. Taylor threw the dirty cotton ball in the trash and fished another out from the bag. "I can do it," Violet said. "It's not deep."

"It's fine," he said. He didn't look up at her.

She wanted to ask him what she saw. She kept imagining different ways to bring it up casually. But when she tried, she ended up asking, "So what are you doing back here?" The question came out accusatory, like maybe he was on the run or couldn't handle it out in the big wide world.

He looked her in the eye, then. "I have to help with my gran," he said. He put emphasis on *have to*.

"Oh. Sorry," Violet said.

Taylor ripped the paper off a rather large bandage. "I was in Seattle," he said. "For school. I had a track scholarship."

“That sounds exciting,” she said. In Violet’s whole life, she had barely been as far as Ellensburg. Her father had always planned trips to the mountains, to California, everywhere, it seemed. But at the last minute, something always came up: a house repair that ate up all their money, bad weather for travel, or someone dying whose family couldn’t pay for a funeral that her dad would do for free.

“It was,” Taylor said. He didn’t say anything more about it, just took Violet’s hand and pressed the bandage to it, hard. “Sorry.” He seemed startled by his own roughness.

“It’s fine, it didn’t hurt,” Violet said. In fact, her hand pulsed with pain, but she wasn’t about to say so. “Are you going back there?” Violet said.

He leaned against the faded floral tile on the wall. “I don’t know,” he said. “I sort of lost my scholarship for taking the semester off. I don’t know what I’m going to do once she’s gone.”

Violet didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t good at being comforting, at least beyond generic condolences. And she hadn’t realized how rote “I’m sorry for your loss” could sound until that day.

She must have let some flicker of emotion pass across her face because Taylor apologized again. He did that a lot, she noticed, like a tic to avert blame.

A knock on the door made them both jump, and Harry was there telling Violet that it was time to go home—that *she* had a long day and *she* needed sleep. He thanked Taylor for the bandage and made him promise to call if he felt like fainting again. The way Taylor shrugged and glanced sideways, she doubted he would. And it was still right

there, a spark on the roof of her mouth, the urge to answer that question: *yes, I saw it too*. But she didn't.

The drive home was loud. The serpentine belt shrieked intermittently in old truck engine. The muffler had a golf ball sized hole rusted through and the shocks were shot. Even in the center of town, the pavement was all cracked in pieces so that it was more like riding in an epileptic raptor than an automobile. Violet's car wasn't much better, but at least it was likely to get where it was going. Most of the time, anyway. The dash lights carved blue and green shadows on Harry's face and Violet could tell he was trying very hard to express nothing. Violet tried to stay just as quiet. Her father was never so somber. He smiled on principle for her, so often she'd begun to associate his weary, tight-eyed smile with a very acute anxiety. Was it Dana's death? Violet pushed the thought aside, kept it in a pocket of her brain where it wouldn't make her lay in bed for days on end. Maybe that *was* it, then.

When it came down to it, Dana was the reason he kept them in Nuovita. She had taken them in without a second thought when Violet was five years old. Harry had called her from the pay phone outside the shelter they were at for the night. Within two days, they made it to Washington. It was the first time Violet could remember sleeping in her own bed, a miniature iron-framed cot that she imagined was built just for her. They didn't need to loop their bags around their feet or lay awake because the covers weren't thick enough. The feeling of comfort after such a long stretch of discomfort was difficult to leave. Harry had apprenticed with Nuovita's previous mortician, and when the old man left to join his children in Florida, Harry and Violet finally had a home of their own. There aren't many places to take on extra morticians, and with Harry's credit history he'd

be able to open his own sometime after the next fifty years. The old funeral home was a godsend, he said. Something in him relaxed around that time. He took care of the dead with the reverence of a priest. Sometimes Violet thought he would refuse to leave until he put the whole town to rest. But part of that safety net was gone now. It wasn't a matter of taking a chance to *leave*. Violet wondered if her father had finally realized how much of a chance it was to *stay*.

### **Chapter 3**

The floor was disappearing under boxes. Boxes of clothes. Boxes of books. Boxes of photo albums. One box entirely full of spiders, which Violet threw across the room with a shriek. Dana had already packed half of her life away in boxes stacked up in the cellar storage room. Violet and Harry boxed up the rest—toothpaste, dishes, bath towels. The only room they didn't box up was her bedroom. Then, they began carrying the old boxes upstairs. Whenever they attempted to throw something away, their hands seized up and they became lost in the metaphor of it: a container of what would be driven to a landfill and buried. Instead, they created a maze of cardboard in the large sitting room. Parlor room. Dana had a lot of different names for rooms in the old farm house. She had grown up there, just like her father. It was a small building, two floors, an attic, and a basement. The doorways were narrow, and the doorknobs were set low. Most of the windows were sealed shut against the draft.

In the front window, Violet noticed a small wooden figure, a sort of fetish doll her father had taken to carving for a few years after they moved to Nuovita. It was an old man with a hunched back, decorated with intricately carved designs. Harry called them

“little angels,” mostly because the first time he made one for her, it had been to scare away the monsters under her bed. When she asked him where he learned to make them, he said his great uncle taught him. Violet remembered pressing him for more of a story—she was always asking for stories—but he never gave her an answer. Violet knew almost nothing about her father’s family, but did know that they had moved to the United States from Mexico when Harry was very young, and spoke neither English nor Spanish. Every now and then, Violet would catch her dad singing or talking to himself in words she couldn’t recognize. As a child, he told her stories about spirits and heroes that she’d never find in Little Golden Books. But as she grew up, the stories stopped. By the time she was seven, Violet would ask for an *old* story, because he always began, “this is a very old story,” and he would get a look on his face like when she asked what happened after people went into the ground.

“Did you make this?” Violet said, cradling the figure in her hands.

“Oh, wow.” Harry took it gently from her hands. “That was a long time ago.” He stared at it for a moment, and his face crumpled like a plastic bag. He sank to the floor, sobbing, clutching the figure in his hands.

Violet knelt down. She touched his arm tentatively, but he didn’t seem to notice. She had never seen her father cry like this before; she didn’t know what to do. He would probably *want* her not to see it. But she couldn’t just leave him alone. She tried to hug him. He didn’t respond. This was normal, Violet tried to tell herself. People break down like this when a loved one dies. Violet, herself, hadn’t. Maybe she was next. Grief catching like a virus. “Dad?” she said. She repeated it, “Dad!” She took him by the arms and gave a strong shake. Finally, he looked up. “Are you okay?” she asked. He only

nodded and seemed to try to catch his breath. He wiped his face with one hand, and kept the doll in the other. “Dad, you’re scaring me,” she said.

“I’m fine. It’s okay.” His voice was thick and raspy. He started to stand up, but changed his mind and sank back to the floor. Violet leaned her head on his shoulder and put one arm around him. She closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was somewhere else. Finally, Harry put his arms around her and held her like she was the one crying. He told her it would all be okay, that she would be fine, and not to be too sad.

After what Violet thought must have been a half hour, Harry seemed to wake up from his grief a little. She rolled her shoulders, sore from carrying things and, now, from so many hugs. Harry took a few deep breaths and looked between the boxes, out the window, like he was looking for something far away. The sun wasn’t setting yet, but it was close. They had been there most of the afternoon. He turned the doll over in his hands, and after a few deep breathes said, “I bet you’re hungry.” Violet hadn’t realized until that moment that she’d neglected to eat all day. “How about spaghetti?” Harry said. “Lots of spaghetti. That’s what we need.”

“Sure,” Violet said. “That sounds good.” She was beginning to feel whiplashed from her father’s shifting emotional states. He had always been such a steady person. He had to be, she supposed, since her mother left when she was a baby. Even when they were living between homeless shelters and camping grounds, he was always so certain, so assured. Maybe it was just her turn, she thought. Maybe it was just for a little while, and then everything would come back into balance.

Harry built a fire in the pit outside, and sat there alone after dinner. When night came, everything else turned black. With nearly no ambient light, the stars were bright and many, but they couldn't illuminate anything on their own. Violet sat across from her father, the heat waves making his face seem wobbly and distorted. Flickering shadows deepened his newfound age lines. He was again holding the small doll, looking at it as if interrogating it for answers.

Violet held her hands just above the flames. The wood settled and broke, sending embers upward. She worked up the courage to finally ask what she had been thinking about since her father called her from Grandma Dana's house while he waited for the ambulance. She had a lot of scenarios worked out—tree trimming gone wrong, heart attack. None were especially convincing, and none explained the fear that had lingered behind her father's eyes since that day.

She asked him to tell her what happened to Grandma Dana. He didn't respond. She repeated the question, louder, more clearly.

He didn't look up, but said, "I heard you." Violet wanted to ask again, until he said something more. But she waited. "Your grandma was...she did something stupid. And she was alone."

"Do you mean she killed herself?" Violet asked.

"No," he said quickly. "I don't think that's what she was trying to do. She just got hurt. And didn't have anyone there to help her."

"You couldn't have known she needed help, dad," Violet said. "If you think it was your fault, it's not." She wasn't sure he believed her. "Why don't we take a couple days before going back to her house?" She said.

“No, I’ll go back tomorrow,” he said. “You stay here. It’s better if I do it alone anyway. It’s not safe around there.”

“Dad, I’ve been around that house my whole life, what’s not safe about it?”

“Violet, I know you’re trying to help,” he said “But I’d really like to not talk about this anymore. Please?”

He looked so tired and defeated. Violet decided she could wait until that look faded. “Alright,” she said. “But you do have to call my mom, you know that, right?”

“What makes you think I even have her phone number?” he said.

“Because there’s an entire page for Eleanor Redmond in your address book,” she said.

“You read my address book?” he said.

“Dad, you have an *address book*,” she said. “If you don’t want people to read it, you should use your phone.” She gave him a mischievous smile. “And then use my birthday as the passcode like you do for your computer.”

He raised his eyebrows, and Violet felt satisfied to see a hint of a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. “You’re grounded,” he said.

“I’m nineteen, you can’t ground me anymore,” she said.

He just shook his head. He lifted up the doll again, looking at its plain wooden face, tracing a finger over its hunched back.

“You should keep it,” Violet said. “It watches over you, right?”

He looked up at her, and gently dropped the doll into the fire. Violet was a little stunned. She fought the urge to reach in after it. Harry said, suddenly very serious, “Those things don’t protect you. You need to be careful Violet. Promise me.”

The doll's intricately carved face turned black and began to smolder. "I promise," she said. She didn't know what else there was *to* say.

He forced a smile and stood up. "Good," he held out his hand to her. "Now let's get to bed. Dream of something happy."

Violet didn't sleep. All through that day, in the back of her mind, was the image of that shadow moving between headstones. Taylor asking if she saw it, too. She began searching on her phone, terrible connection though it was, it was the only internet connection in a ten-mile radius. "Shadow hallucination," she typed into the search engine. The results were not comforting:

"Hallucinations and delusions: symptoms of schizophrenia" Which typically manifested itself in early adulthood.

"Shadow people and night terrors caused by anxiety" Well, she definitely had that.

But it wasn't a shadow *person* she saw. It was more animal-shaped.

"Spirit Guides" and "Befriending your animal totem" popped up. Violet had no desire to befriend this shadow animal, if that's what it was.

Add "fainting" to the search, and everything came up "low blood pressure" and videos of fainting goats. Violet spent hours reading the tiny text until her eyes ached and watered. She found nothing that was *exactly* like what she saw. Certainly nothing that would make Taylor Bauman pass out at her grandmother's graveside. He hadn't seemed especially exhausted or sick when she talked to him the day before. Violet knew she should just let it be a strange coincidence. It was a shadow in a cemetery in the middle of the day, nothing extraordinary about that. But every time she tried to forget, that image

would flit back to the front of her mind, and she thought if she concentrated hard enough on the memory, she could discern a nose, ears, teeth, tail. Something alien and familiar, like a picture of yourself you don't remember being taken.

## **Chapter 4**

She finally fell asleep that morning, after the sun had grown yellow and bright through her tacked-up curtains. When she woke in the afternoon, she didn't feel rested, but couldn't get back to sleep. During the night, the shadow shape had become stuck in her unconscious, the shape everything else flowed around. She ate out at the side of the house, the side facing the cemetery, draped in her thrift store jacket with the fuzzy warm lining. She watched shadows cast by gravestones and trees sway as clouds passed by, but all remain tethered to their source. Around the yard, by the wood pile, she heard the thick echo of chopping and saw puffs of nicotine smoke billowing east with the wind. She wasn't sure how long her father had been up or how long he would stay down there. She should go talk to him. But she knew she wouldn't. She didn't know what to say.

When Taylor knocked at the front door, Violet dumped her bowl in the sink and answered in her pajamas.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" Taylor said. He was dressed in dark jeans and a pea coat over a plain blue sweater. His dark blond hair was cut short and perfectly messy. He had the posture of someone who had been somewhere important, and was desperate for all to know it.

“No,” Violet said. She ran a hand through her thick, black hair, trying to flatten it against her head. She’d cut it short in an attempt to look adult, but most of the time it ended up more in the style of an over-sugared toddler.

“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” he said. “If you need anything.”

“No, I’m fine,” Violet said. She sounded so sure it startled her. “I mean, my dad’s a wreck.”

“Right,” he nodded. He shoved his hands in his pockets like there was something in the bottom he wanted to hit. “Well, if you need anything. You know.” He began to turn away.

Violet stopped him. “Do you mind if I walk with you?”

He shrugged and eyed the cemetery to his left, searching, Violet thought. “Sure.”

Violet often went for walks alone, up to the cemetery, and walked through the grave rows. Most days, she preferred the company of corpses. This day, she walked with Taylor in the opposite direction, toward the town center, blocks of hollowed out insect shell buildings. Sometimes, she walked into places, papers on the floor, empty cash registers wide open. It was a strange feeling, like standing at the end of the world. Violet had a recurring nightmare in which all her teeth fell out like chunks of rotten drywall eaten away by fat, sharp-jawed insects. “You know there were seven thousand people living here forty years ago?” she said. Taylor shook his head. “Half the town left after the orchard closed. The rest, I guess just...died off.” She paused for a moment, then stood up a little straighter, pulled her limbs a little closer. She stopped outside the cracked glass paneled doors of the last grocery store to turn off its lights. She was stalling.

Violet let out a deep breath and fiddled with pieces of shattered safety glass piled on the waist-high brick wall. "I saw it," she said.

"Saw what" he said.

"Yesterday, at my grandma's funeral."

He backed up a little, trying to keep them moving along, but Violet didn't budge.

"What did *you* see?" he said.

"What did *you* see?" she said. For a moment, Violet was seized with a nagging anxiety that Taylor had, in fact, only been sick from exhaustion and she had created the whole elaborate ordeal in her head. That the first person under forty who seemed to be interested in her would realize she was just as crazy and spooky as everyone always said.

"It was just a shadow," he said. "It was probably nothing. It just looked like, um." He studied the crumbled sidewalk, looking for words in the dust.

"Like an animal?" Violet said.

"Yeah," he said. He sat against the faded brick wall, and let out a sharp laugh.

"Yeah, that's exactly it. I didn't think so at first, but it's like I can't stop thinking about it."

Violet nodded.

"Have you seen it before?" Taylor said.

"No, never." And she'd spent a lot of time in the graveyard.

"What do you think it was?" he said.

"I was hoping you had an idea," she said. Taylor shook his head. "God, I wish my grandma was here." She felt a stinging swell at the back of her throat and tried to swallow

past it. Talking to Grandma Dana was always like covering in a warm, safe blanket that no monsters, real or otherwise, could penetrate.

Taylor looked like he was about to say something, but drew in his lips, pressing them tightly together. “What?” Violet said.

“Nothing,” Taylor said. “It’s just...I think my grandma kind of hated your grandma. Not *hated*, really.”

“Yeah, I think that was a common opinion,” Violet said.

“I met her a couple times,” he said. “She seemed nice.”

“She was,” Violet said. “She tried to leave here once. Got married and moved away. Got divorced. Moved back.”

“It’s like a fucking black hole.” There was an unexpected harshness in Taylor’s voice. “My dad moved back after college because he wanted to bring the town back and died of bone cancer when he was thirty. I don’t think anyone who’s come back here, even for a little while, has left. They either get out for good or stay until they die.” He threw a piece of pavement back into the road and watched it splinted and scatter. “I have an interview at Walmart next week, in the city. Fucking Walmart. That’s what my life’s going to be: part time Walmart, part time with my gran. Sorry,” he interrupted himself. “I mean, it’s fine, I guess, if you want to stay here. I just don’t want to be here.”

“Neither do I,” Violet said. It came out more defensive than she planned. “I got my GED when I was sixteen and got accepted to Stanford. If I could get out with less than a hundred grand in debt, I wouldn’t look back.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know that,” Taylor said.

It was a good story, and true. Violet had repeated it to everyone who would listen when she first started attending university in Ellensburg on an academic scholarship. Truthfully, her grandmother had told her to take the debt and leave for good. Lots of the other kids her age had done just that. But Violet, who had never travelled farther than two counties over, couldn't imagine leaving her father and grandma and the safe little hole they'd dug for themselves in Nuovita. She spent hours on her computer in the campus library reading about other places, saving travel pictures, and pretending that someday she would go. Just not now.

"I should get back," Violet said. "I didn't tell my dad I was going out."

"You want me to walk you back?" Taylor said.

"No, I'll be fine." She turned down the street. "If you find anything," she said, looking back. "About the shadow, or whatever it was, you'll tell me, right?"

"Yeah, of course," he said. They exchanged phone numbers. "I'll see you around?" he said.

"Yeah," Violet said. "I mean we're probably the only people walking around here anyway, right?"

When she came in the front door, there was the sound of arguing from the kitchen. One-sided arguing. Harry was on the landline, talking to Eleanor, Violet guessed. Violet had never spoken to her mother—she left before Violet began speaking. There was a picture of her, long hair and smiling in the sunshine, somewhere in the junk drawer of Violet's dresser. She hadn't looked at it in years. Until Violet was twelve, Harry had told her Eleanor died in a car accident when Violet was a baby. What a

conversation that was: you're becoming a woman, and also your mother didn't die, she just abandoned you. That was the same year Violet had be asked to withdraw from school. Whenever she thought of Eleanor now, she was reminded of the worst year of her young life. Somewhere along the way, it began to seem as though Eleanor had been the cause of all that pain.

She kept in the hallway and listened to her father's half of the conversation:

"How do you know?"

"Well if you don't, you shouldn't be—"

"That's not what I said. Do you even understand what happened here?"

"What does *that* mean?"

"No. It doesn't. You have *no idea* what you're doing."

"You think I don't know that?"

"You don't even *know* her."

"Well, it's not mine either."

"Then at least let me—"

Harry stopped abruptly, pulled the receiver away, and said, "Ellie? Did—oh, *goddammit*." He slammed the receiver into the base and leaned on the wall. Violet came into the kitchen, then. "How long were you standing there?" he said.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Violet said, filling a glass with water.

"Did you go outside?" Harry said.

"What you mean?"

"Shoes," he said, pointing.

“Oh, yeah.” She took a long drink. “Taylor came over. We went for a walk.” Violet assured him that Taylor was doing just fine. It felt like a lie, but she didn’t want to tell Harry what she thought about it—him having to drop his whole life and live in Nuovita because his family needed him too.

“You should get dressed,” he said. “You’ll be late for class.”

“I already told them I’m not coming this week. It’s excused,” she said. Harry frowned at her. “Maybe I’ll go to work tomorrow, though. I don’t know.” She had already called in for the week.

“You should,” he said.

She shrugged and sat at the table. It was half-covered with papers and envelopes, spread around Harry’s computer. One was the deed to the house, with the mortgage release attached. Property taxes. A handwritten list of realty agencies, which Violet picked up. “It’s nothing,” Harry said, taking the paper from her. “I was just thinking, maybe, about selling the house.”

Violet had the spine-dropping sensation of rushing down a rollercoaster with her eyes closed. “That’s not nothing,” she said. Then, “Dad, no one’s going to buy this house. No one bought any of the other houses.”

He looked only at the computer screen. “Even if...I have some savings. We could just pick up and move.”

“To where, Ellensburg?” Violet said.

He shrugged, a little too quickly, betraying his nerves. “Sure. Or anywhere, really. Where would you go, if you could go anywhere in the world?”

Anywhere in the world? Where was that attitude three years ago when she was applying to colleges and afraid to be on her own in a new city? A week ago, her biggest problem was that she was going to turn twenty, living at home, an undeclared junior at her last-choice college. Things sucked, but at least they made sense.

She stood up from the table, a little oxygen-deficient. She took out her phone, and scrolled to Taylor's number. She almost called it. But she couldn't. Because then Taylor would know she was upset. Panicking. She would talk so fast all the words blurred together, and cry and make sharp, high-pitched wheezing sounds. The thought of another person hearing her do those things make her skin itch and throat grow sore. And what did she have to panic about anyway? Her father wanting to pick up and move? Changing his entire outlook on their future?

She told Harry she was fine and took her coat. "Absolutely fine," she said without looking at him. Violet couldn't decide which way to walk, so she locked herself in her rust-roofed Ford Escort. Only when she noticed Harry watching her from the window did she start the engine and put it in gear.

## **Chapter 5**

The old farmhouse stairs creaked and rocked at the slightest pressure. Harry had been trying to talk Dana into getting a carpenter in to reinforce them, but she kept putting it off. Violet had a brief fantasy about the steps finally giving out as she climbed them now. It was oddly comforting. This was the first place Violet went after school when she was younger, especially when she had been sent home or cut early. When she'd tell Dana she got in a fight—again—Dana didn't worry like Harry did. There were no lectures

about Violet just *trying* to fit in, to be a little more forgiving. Grandma Dana would give Violet ice if she had bruises and listen intently to the story of the day. Even after she withdrew in seventh grade, Violet still came to her when she was angry or afraid.

Violet entered Dana's bedroom, and the smell of lavender and nicotine hit her like a fist. Dana had quit smoking years, ago, indoors at least. And as long as the cigarette was outside the window, it didn't count. Violet curled on her side, half on top of the floral comforter because Dana hadn't finished making her bed the morning she died. She breathed in the smell of her grandma's skin and pulled the covers over her head until her wet face didn't feel so cold. Her chest felt full of snakes, wriggling and squeezing and biting. Everything inside her felt paralyzed with venomous pain. She would have given anything for Grandma Dana to rub her thumb across her cheek and tell her what to do. *Talk to your dad*, is probably what she would say. But Violet didn't know how. She didn't want to tell him to get it together so she could fall apart instead. He had a right to grieve, too, didn't he? Violet hated being so sad. She wanted to put it in a storage bin with every intention of coming back to it never. People had been dying forever. Since Coyote tore the blood feather off the sacred hut so that the dead couldn't come back anymore. That was the story Grandma Dana had told her. One of them, anyway. She had an encyclopedia of myths in her head. Violet tried to tell herself a story, but she could only think about death. About people dying and never coming back. That made her think of her mother, and she finally began to grow calm with anger. Violet knew Eleanor wouldn't even come to visit the grave. Harry had told Eleanor that her mother died and they ended up arguing about something entirely different. She didn't even care, Violet thought.

A sound from the hallway drew her attention. *Footsteps?* Violet shrugged off the comforter and shrank against the cold. She saw it for only a second, out of the corner of her eye: a shadow, low to the ground, pacing back and forth on the floor beside her. When she turned to it, she found nothing. Violet climb from her grandmother's bed, careful to look around her before going forward. Her stomach felt full of ice. When she came to the stairs, she saw it again, flitting just out of sight, and when she turned her back to the stairs it finally came into focus. A dog, maybe, she thought at first, but she knew that wasn't it. Its snout and ears were long, the latter standing up in two attentive triangles. Its body was thin, legs like sticks, making its feet look all the more bear-like. It didn't snarl at her, but held its head low, eyes focused and tail down, waiting for her to give chase.

Instinctively, Violet took a step back. She tried to steady herself on the wall, but couldn't regain her balance in time. She tripped and hopped backward down the stairs, desperate to keep from rolling over backward. When she reached the bottom, there was a sound behind her. A low rumble, the heaving click of claws on wood. It was behind her, now, snout wrinkled up in a growl. It pawed at the floor, making short, aborted lunges toward Violet, who again moved backward, terrified to let it out of her sight. But all around her were stacks of boxes so that she couldn't get anywhere without trapping herself. She felt her way around one stack and, ducking behind it, gave a shove in the hopes of scaring the animal off or trapping it. Either way, she would be able to get around, to the door, and to the safety of her care.

But when the boxes hit the floor, it was gone again. Violet hadn't heard it moved, hadn't heard any noised of pain to indicate it had been injured by the boxes. She would

have seen it leave the room or run back up the stairs, she was sure of it. She carefully walked around the spilled contents of the boxes. There was no indication of a smashed animal underneath. She nudged the debris. Nothing. She looked around, checked the patch to the door, the kitchen. She took a knife from the kitchen, just in case. She knew a wild animal couldn't just disappear from the house. She began to wonder if it had been there at all. Could she have fallen asleep, dreamed the whole thing? It *had* been a while since she'd had a good night's sleep. Violet took a deep breath to slow her heartrate. That must be it, she decided, if only because she needed it to be.

She knelt down and began picking up the books that had spilled out of the top box. Farmer's Almanacs, books about apple trees and herb gardening. The cardboard was damaged, but some of the books had been piled into a double-layered plastic shopping bag. Inside the bag were two books without dust jackets. One had PROPERTY OF CITY OF NUOVITA stamped across the front; the title was, "Harvest Records," but inside it had lists of names and corresponding dates—all around the middle of September—for consecutive years. The second was leather bound, full of long cursive handwriting. Violet had to shut her eyes and look at the ceiling when she saw the name on the inside cover. It was Dana's journal, from when she was younger than Violet was now. Before she was married and divorced, left town and came back. Violet put the books back in the plastic bag. She tied off the bag, left the knife on the floor next to the spilled boxes, and returned to her car.

Back home, the ground floor was dark. Violet turned on every wall sconce as she climbed the stairs, then the hallway light, then the ceiling light in her room and both

lamps. She did this because she didn't want to trip, and that was the only reason, she told herself. Violet called out for her father. His truck was in the driveway so he must have been home. He didn't answer. She slid the bag of books under her bed and smoothed the dust ruffle. Down the hall, Harry's door was slightly ajar, soft light glowing from within. Violet gave a slight knock before entering, but her father didn't seem to notice. He was standing at his dresser, a solid oak antique that had been in the house probably since it was built nearly a hundred years before. The top of the dresser had been cleared onto the floor except for a small notebook, open to a page with a drawing of a diamond with circles inside. The dresser had a large mirror attached to the back. Harry was rocking slightly, muttering something at his reflection. At first, Violet thought the mirror had become very dirty. The reflection seemed darker, as though the room it reflected were full of thick, black smoke. There was a large smear in the center, and as Violet approached, she realized it was blood. Her father's right hand was wet with blood, and didn't seem to notice Violet as he raised it again to press against the mirror, wiping fresh blood in wide, repetitive circles. Violet called his name, touched his arm, but it did nothing to stop him. The circles he made became smaller until he seemed about to pull his hand back. He drew back except for one finger. In the middle of the bloody smear, he began to trace a six-pointed star, and inside, what looked like a snake head. His hand thumped down on the thick wood. He woke from the trance with a start, and when Violet looked back at the mirror, it was no longer dark.

When Harry saw Violet, he nearly shouted at her. "Jesus, Violet, what are you doing here?" But when he saw what he had drawn on the mirror, his face went pale and still. A tremor seemed to roll up from his feet and he braced himself on the dresser. His

mouth opened so that Violet expected him to speak, but instead he vomited a thick, brown syrup with flecks of leaves. Violet instinctively stepped back. She reached the doorframe and slid down, covering her mouth and nose against the smell. Harry disappeared down the hall without a word. She could hear him gagging through the wall to the bathroom. When he returned, he had a roll of paper towels. He cleaned the dresser. He cleaned the mirror. He cleaned the carpet. Violet watched. He used up all the paper towels. Violet wondered if that was the last roll. If it was, they'd have to use regular towels until someone could drive to the store. There'd be more laundry, then. Did they have enough laundry soap? Everything was running out fast. Violet began making a mental shopping list: paper towels, laundry detergent, dryer sheets, disinfectant, large bandages. Harry wrapped a hand towel around his palm. Moving boxes, should that be one the list?

Harry knelt in front of Violet and reached out to her. She flinched away and stood up. He asked if she was okay, and Violet laughed, harsh and continuous. She laughed so hard she had to brace herself on the doorjamb. She caught her breath enough to say, "No." Harry sat on the edge of his mattress and told Violet it was going to be okay. She winced and shook her head. "You keep saying that," she said. "But that—I don't know, what that was. Some sort of fugue state? That's not okay."

"That's not what it was."

"Then what was it?" Violet demanded. He didn't have an answer. "I cannot handle you having a break from reality, right now, Dad," she said. *Not while I'm hallucinating wild dogs*, she thought. She almost said it aloud, but caught herself. She would not tell him, because if he had been in the same position, he wouldn't tell her. A

week ago, she would have expected him to tell her everything, but something had changed in Harry. He wasn't just mourning, he was scared, and it terrified Violet to not know what he was scared *of*. And now, his blood was soaking through a large hand towel.

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" she said. He shook his head. "I don't just mean the cut."

"That's not funny, Violet."

"It's not a joke."

"Why don't you just go to your room and calm down for a minute?" he said.

"Why don't you tell me what the hell is going on?" She crossed her arms tightly.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Oh, don't 'excuse me,'" she said. "Something has you freaked the hell out, cutting up yourself and rocking in front of a mirror and talking about moving who-knows-where. You are going to tell me what it is."

Harry's eyes went cold. He straightened his shoulder. "No," he said. "I'm not."

Violet couldn't hide her surprise. "So there *is* something?" she said.

"Of course there's *something*," he said. "And of course I don't think you're stupid enough to not see that. But if you can't believe me when I say that it will be alright, because I'll make it alright, then you need to at least believe this: I am not going to tell you."

"Why?" she said. "Do you think I can't handle it? Do you think I'm going to get scared? Because I already am."

He took a long pause before saying, “Do you remember when you were five, and you kept trying to play in the road? And you didn’t believe me when I said it was dangerous?”

“That’s not the same thing,” Violet said.

“You told me that if a car came, you would get out of the way, and the driver would see you and stop. Do you still think that’s a good idea? That a five-year-old can take protect herself playing in the middle of the road?”

“Of course I don’t,” she said.

“But you did then. And do you remember what I told you? That I’ve been alive a lot longer than you, and I know a lot more about things that happen in the world, so you needed to just *trust me* that I know what I’m talking about.”

“It’s *not the same thing*,” Violet said through gritted teeth.

“It’s exactly the same thing!” he said. “You think you can handle things because you’re an adult? You don’t even know what’s out in the world. What kinds of *things* are out there. You’re a very brave girl, Violet, but you have *no* sense of danger.”

“So, you’re not going to tell me,” Violet repeated.

“No,” he said.

“I’ll figure it out,” she said.

His squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “I really wish you wouldn’t.”

Violet didn’t respond. She closed Harry’s bedroom door behind her, then her own, and locked herself in her room. “Vision of wild dog,” she typed into the search engine on her phone. It took nearly three minutes to load results about wildlife conservation and first-aid for dog bites. She pulled Dana’s journal from under her bed,

flipping through pages for search terms. One word was repeated over and over. She pushed her phone aside and started at the beginning.

## **Chapter 6**

Harry had knocked softly on Violet's door, and when she finally answered, he had changed clothes and packed a bag. He told her he didn't expect her to understand, but that he had to go into Ellensburg. When she asked why, he said that her mother needed to see him. He gave Violet the name, room, and phone number of a motel, and told her to call if he wasn't back in two days. He told her not to try his phone because he didn't think he would have reception. He promised they would talk, have a real talk, when he returned. Violet had barely made eye contact. She couldn't reconcile the way he was now with the way he had always been. She wasn't used to being lied to. She simply shrugged and waited until Harry closed her door and she heard his footsteps going down the stairs.

Violet tried hard to suspend her disbelief as she read through her grandmother's journal. It began as a girl's diary. There was a boy she liked, pages describing his perfect hair. She got a new dress. She had a bad day at school. And then her name was drawn, written down in the Harvest Record. Violet saw that it was the last name recorded. And then instead of odes to boys' hair, there were pages of notes, stories, about coyote the trickster. Coyote racing a cloud. Coyote saving people from spoiled meat. Coyote saving people from a river monster. Coyote saved people a lot. Some of the stories, Violet knew. Coyote tearing down the door that allowed spirits to return from death. Coyote eating people. Stories from all over, but Coyote was always hungry, always clever, always getting himself and everyone around him into trouble. Violet tried to ignore the parallel

between Coyote and herself. *But why would they make a deal like that?* Dana had written. *And how?* Was it some magic the settlers had learned on the journey to the West, Dana had wondered. Or, was it carried from farther away? One of the Old Country religions that had been brought to Nuovita by the patchwork of misfit founders?

Violet left the journal open and rolled onto her back. She lifted the pillow from under her head and placed it firmly on her face, blocking out light and smell and sound. Her limbs felt numb and weighed down so that getting up—any action, really—was an insurmountable burden.

Two words from her grandmother’s journal flashed neon and hot in her mind: *human sacrifice*.

She woke in the same position at one o’clock in the morning. Her cell phone made an awful jack-hammer noise as it vibrated in circles on her nightstand. Violet’s right arm was entirely numb, and whoever it was calling a second time while she scooted over to answer. The screen read: “Taylor Bauman.” When she answered, he talked fast, all the words blurred together. He managed to convey that he had seen something outside his grandmother’s bedroom door, some wild dog. He thought he scared it off, but he didn’t know where it went or how it got in. “I checked all the doors,” he whispered. “And the windows, too.” His mother was spending the night hours away for a job interview. He didn’t know who else to call.

“Are you okay?” Violet said, suddenly wide awake. “Why are you whispering?”

“I’m fine. My gran still asleep. I don’t want to wake her.”

“Do you want me to come over?” she said.

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry I woke you up, it’s just, well, I’m sitting in the hallway in case it comes back. I’m really freaked out, here.” He was quiet for a minute. “I know it sounds crazy, but I think that’s what I saw at your grandma’s funeral. I don’t know.”

“I saw it, too,” Violet said.

“Today? Where?”

“At my grandma’s house. I saw a big dog thing. And then it was just gone.” She looked at the ceiling and tried to take deep breaths.

“Oh, my God,” Taylor said. “Are you okay?”

“No,” she said, weakly. “I’m really, really not.”

“Do you want to come over?” he said.

“I thought you didn’t want your family to worry,” she said.

“Well, yeah, but that was before you started crying.”

“I’m not crying,” she insisted. She ended the call, and got halfway down the stairs before turning around. She put Dana’s diary in the inner pocket of her coat and drove with the windows down to help clear her head. Everything seemed so jumbled up and nonsensical. She felt like she was living in an MC Escher drawing. Whenever she went one direction, she ended in a different place.

“He left? After all that?” Taylor said. He and Violet were sitting against the wall of his upstairs hallway, looking at the landing through the railing rungs. To their right was his grandmother’s room, at the end of the hall. While they stood watch for shadow-jumping coyotes, Violet told Taylor in hysterical whispers what had happened over the last few days.

“I don’t know if I should be mad, or worried, or scared, or…” She let him put his arm around her and didn’t tell him he was wrong when he said they would figure it out and everything would be okay.

The house was quiet except for the occasional sound of pipes or foundation settling. It made it easy to hear the low, helpless moans that began in Sandra Bauman’s bedroom. Taylor was through the door before Violet could stand, but she still saw it: the animal, the same one she had seen, and she now knew it was the same Taylor saw. It wasn’t doing anything particularly menacing, just pacing back and forth around her bed, occasionally pawing at the mattress. When Mrs. Bauman saw them, she began screaming for them to run away. Or, she would have screamed if she had the breath. She seemed to be having a panic attack. Or a heart attack. Violet wasn’t sure. She’d never seen a heart attack, much less one brought on by—she didn’t know what it was at this point. They were on the second floor. It couldn’t have come in the house without them noticing.

Taylor grabbed for the animal, but couldn’t grasp it. It turned on him, ears folded back, snapping its long jaw lined with sharp, yellow teeth. Mrs. Bauman tried to get up, but her ankle twisted and she fell to the floor. Violet pushed Taylor out of the way and immediately regretted the moment of heroism. Now it was focused on her. It lunged at her, but just as its teeth were about to close on her wrist, it shrank back. Violet coughed. Smoke was filling the room. But, when she looked around, nothing was burning. The smoke encircled only Violet, stung her eyes, and when the coyote tried to bite her again, it became engulfed in a thick, black cloud. When the smoke dissipated, it was gone. The air was thin and smelled of ozone. Violet couldn’t help but remember the smoke filling the reflection in her father’s mirror.

Taylor was helping his grandmother back onto the bed. She was coughing, gasping for breath, but still found the strength to push Taylor away, pointing from him to the door. “Gran, it’s okay,” he said. “It’s okay, it’s gone.” She shook her head.

It took half an hour and a full glass of water for Mrs. Bauman to be able to speak clearly. Still, her speech was punctuated by deep wheezes and wet coughs. She didn’t seem nearly as shocked by the attack as Violet and Taylor had been. That made it hard for Violet to be patient. She wanted to barrage the woman with questions, but she held back while Mrs. Bauman recovered. Finally, she leaned toward her grandson and whispered to him. “Of course, what do you need?” Taylor said.

Violet could hear Mrs. Bauman, just barely. “Pack a bag. Take your girlfriend over there, and leave. Don’t come back.”

She wouldn’t tell him why, just insisted he do as she said. He insisted he couldn’t leave his mother behind for whatever-it-is to start stalking next.

“It’s not going to do anything to her,” Mrs. Bauman said with alarming certainty. “She’s not from here. I don’t know why that coyote demon is back now, but the both of you need to leave. Don’t let what happened to Aldana happen to you, too.”

“What happened to my grandma?” Violet said. Mrs. Bauman didn’t answer. Violet threw her patience away. “What happened?” she demanded.

“Violet, keep your voice down,” Taylor said.

“No, if this thing killed my grandma, I want to know.”

“You’re grandma was selfish and careless and she got what was coming to her,” Mrs. Bauman said. “Just like the rest of us. You didn’t do anything. You. Need. To. Go.” But she wouldn’t tell them anything more. She pursed her lips and said she was very tired

and needed her rest. Violet wanted to keep at it, wear her down until she gave them answers. But Taylor saw his grandmother's frailness: her shaking hands, her shallow, strained breaths. He pushed Violet out of the room and closed the door behind them. He took her into his room, locked the door, and began pacing.

"What are you doing?" Violet said. "It could come back."

"The *coyote demon*, you mean?" Taylor said, as though trying the words out and hoping to realize how crazy it sounded. He mouthed the words again, to himself. "Well, if it comes back maybe you could just blow smoke at it and make it disappear."

"What are you talking about?" Violet said. "That wasn't me."

"Well, that's not what it looked like." He rubbed his eyes. "And we're not going to go harass my gran about it because she's sick and she's my gran." He sat on the edge of his bed, hands buried in his hair like a greasy stress ball. "I just wish I knew what to do," he said.

*But I don't know how to stop it.* Violet had read that phrase over and over in Dana's diary. She unfurled her coat from its pile on Taylor's floor and dug out the journal.

"What is that?" Taylor said.

Violet opened to the last page she'd read, and hoped Taylor didn't tell her she was as crazy as she thought she was.

## **Chapter 7**

Violet told Taylor that Aldana Abelli was the last name listed on the Harvest Record, a title which now resonated with a dark irony. It spanned over a hundred years.

One name was drawn from a different family each year at harvest time to sacrifice themselves.

It was all very Shakespearean. In the first years of Nuovita's existence, the orchard and crops had begun to fail. The founders had made sacrifices to Coyote, small things at first, rabbits and squirrels. Then, when Coyote demanded a human sacrifice, the townspeople tricked him into a deal that bound him to the orchard, and bound them into sacrificing a person each year to keep the crops growing. Violet wondered if Coyotes ever did anything for the orchard, or if he had made it fail—just one of his tricks.

Violet wondered how that had worked for so long. They couldn't just tie someone up, hold them on the ground, and make it an honest murder; the sacrifices had to offer their own life to the coyote. When Dana's name had been drawn, she found another way. She bound Coyote so that there would be no more sacrifice, but it came with a price. One that Dana had thought to be a small one. Four families had founded Nuovita, and children of those families bound Coyote to the First Tree. The Coyote had laid a curse on them, "that the fruits of our labors would wither and die and sickness would find us, and our children for all generations to come." That's what Dana had written. Four families would come to an end, and in return no more lives would be lost for the sake of some twisted tradition.

Mrs. Bauman was right: it was Dana's fault. She didn't want to die young, so she convinced three other people, including Sandra Bauman, to help her un-make the pact with Coyote and bind him. But Violet wasn't sure it was the wrong thing to do. It was *human sacrifice*.

"It took fifty years for someone to stop it?"

“More than that, I think,” Violet said.

Taylor ran his thumb over his grandmother’s name, written on a page in the middle of the diary. “I just can’t believe anyone would do that. Just stand there and watch someone die. Or make them do it.”

“People do lots of terrible things,” Violet said. “They thought they had to, or they’d starve to death.”

“Are you saying you would have done it?”

“What, sacrifice myself? I’m not exactly a follow-the-crowd kind of person.”

“Would you have watched?” he said.

She thought about it. She didn’t want to say “yes,” but, “I’m not sure I would know what else to do,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Me either.” He pulled his lips inward for a moment and closed the diary.

“You keep doing that,” Violet said.

“Doing what?”

“You make this face, like you’re literally swallowing what you want to say.”

“Oh,” he said.

“So, what?” Violet said.

He shook his head. “I was just thinking about you.”

“Me?” she said.

“Yeah. In school. How everyone treated you.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, yeah, but you never did any of that stuff.”

“I know, but...forget it,” he said. Violet let it go. Taylor seemed like he was about to apologize for something. She wasn’t sure how to handle that. She wasn’t sure anyone had every apologized to her before.

“So, what do we do now,” Taylor said. “Re-bind the coyote?”

“No,” Violet said. “I think that only worked because it was surprised. And we’d have to have someone from each family to do it. Which would be tough since there all dead.”

“Is it bad that dying in *Nuovita* scares me more than just dying?” Taylor said.

But what frightened Violet and Taylor the most was the realization that there were no other families left for Coyote to take revenge on. The Tiltons and Cichansckis had all died either childless, or after their children had passed away from illness. Sandra’s only son, Taylor’s father, had died nearly ten years before. Violet and her mother were the only living Abellis, and Eleanor wouldn’t get close enough to Nuovita to be cursed or killed by Coyote. Violet wondered if her father knew about the curse and, if he had, why he had brought her to Nuovita at all.

Taylor fell asleep sometime near dawn. Violet had barely slept in days, but she just couldn’t seem to crash. She kept going over what had happened, how she had ended up talking in terms of *binding* and spirits. She remembered the search result about the onset of schizophrenia and felt a little peaceful with the idea that this was all a delusion straight out of *A Beautiful Mind*. She only needed the CIA to show up asking for her help and it would be confirmed.

Violet’s muscles crackled like packing plastic when she rose from the chair. The sun was up just enough to see light through the crack in Sandra Bauman’s bedroom door.

Violet listened to be sure Taylor was still asleep, and tried not to think about what kind of person wakes an old woman that early in the morning.

On Mrs. Bauman's bedside table was an empty pill organizer, two empty prescription bottles, and a nearly empty glass of water. Her skin had gone a pale, faint blue, and Violet knew that she would be answering any more questions. She knew she had to call an ambulance. There would be police, and the coroner. She had never handled any of that before. She stepped back and forth, dancing between the landline to call 911 and going back to Taylor's room to try to call her father on her cell. And she would have to wake Taylor.

"Violet, what are you doing in there?" Taylor called from the hallway.

Violet hurried out, pulled on Taylor's arm to keep him from running to Mrs. Bauman's bedside, but he was frozen, stunned in the doorway. "What happened?" His eyes fixed on the empty pill cases. "Oh, my god," he said. He said it over and over.

Violet led him back to his room. He sat on the edge of his bed and leaned forward to bury his face in his hands. Violet sat next to him and called the ambulance. It would be at least thirty minutes before any emergency vehicle could get to them.

It was Violet who broke the long silence. "Why would she do that?" she said, more to herself than anything.

Taylor looked up at her, his face red. "Because of me."

"No," Violet said. "It's not your fault."

"The only reason I came back was to take care of her," he said. "She knew that. She's been trying telling me to go back to Seattle since I got here." He shook his head. "I should have gone. I should have—"

Violet rubbed one hand in a circle on his back. “You couldn’t have known she’d do this.”

“I could still go. You could come to. We could get an apartment, or I could sneak you into my dorm room or—”

“I’m not leaving here, Taylor,” Violet said. He looked at her like she’d proposed jumping from a plane without a parachute. “I’m serious,” she said. “I can’t just leave some vengeful spirit running around. What if it hurts someone?”

“No one lives here, Violet!”

“Yes, they do,” she said. “And even if no one lived here, there’s all these houses and buildings. Eventually people will come back. Even if it’s fifty years from now, I don’t want to wake up one day and hear about how someone was mauled to death by a coyote and know that *I* could have stopped it.”

“But you can’t.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “My grandma would not have just set this thing free to kill people. To come after *me*. She must have been—I don’t know. In the journal, she said she couldn’t find a way to kill it, so they bound it to the tree, right?” Taylor nodded. Violet continued, “Well, what if she finally figured out how to get rid of it for good? And something just went wrong, or she did something wrong.”

“But we don’t even know what she did,” Taylor said. But even though he still wouldn’t agree with her, Violet could see in his eyes that he wouldn’t just leave. He couldn’t any more than she could.

Violet tried her father’s cell phone, but there was no answer. On the third try, she remembered the contact information Harry had given her, which she’d left on her

nightstand. The EMTs came. They gave reports to the police. A short, graying paramedic wrote “suicide” on a form. The police officer kept adjusting her radio, as though itching to be called to something more exciting. She asked where their parents were. Violet watched Sandra Bauman, all zipped up and lukewarm, wheeled into the back of the ambulance and nobody said a word about it. Nobody would. Nuovita existed only in stories now, of people who left or died. The EMTs and officers would go home to another town, a town with a grocery store and used car dealership, and when people asked about their day they would say, “I didn’t realize people still *lived* there.”

Taylor’s face was red, eyes bloodshot and swollen. He was a quiet crier, but that didn’t make it easier. Violet could say “I’m sorry for your loss” all day and night, but found herself at a loss when it came to genuine empathy. Violet took Taylor’s hand, and was surprised by how warm and solid it was. She wondered for a moment how long it had been since she’d touched someone she wasn’t related to. She couldn’t remember. “Come on,” she said. She led him to her car, and drove home.

## **Chapter 8**

“Are you sure you’re looking at the right room?” Violet said to the man on the other end of the phone. “Room fourteen? Eleanor Redmond.”

“I’m sure, Miss,” the man had the unusual talent of conveying an eye-roll over the phone. “Fourteen is empty. And there’s no Eleanor Redmond staying here. Not now, not in the last two weeks.”

Violet sat at her kitchen table with Taylor across from her. She massaged her forehead, partly to sooth the growing headache, mostly because she didn’t want Taylor to

see how afraid she was. She'd filled Harry's voicemail with messages ranging from worried to pissed off. Now, the front desk man at the Super 8 in Ellensburg was getting the same treatment.

"She *is* staying there," Violet insisted. Maybe he was lying to protect client privacy. "This is her daughter." The phrase felt clumsy when Violet spoke it. "It's an emergency."

"She's *not* here, Miss. I ain't lying."

"Okay, what about Harry Masterson? Is the room under his name?"

Violet heard the man shift the phone, and for a moment was full of fear that he would hang up on her. "Like I said," he came back on. She could hear the faint sound of a keyboard. "Fourteen is empty and...No Harry Masterson. Oh, hold on," he went silent again. "Harry Masterson reserved room fourteen yesterday afternoon. Oh, I remember that guy." Silence, again.

"What?" Violet barely kept from yelling. "What about that guy? Is he there?"

"No," the man said. "He reserved the room, but while he was checking in some friend of his pulled up. Went outside to talk and ended up leaving with the other guy."

"The other *guy*? Do you know who it was?"

"I got no idea. *Harry* left his car blocking the handicap spot, though. Had it towed to impound."

"Where did he go?" Violet said.

"Don't know. Didn't ask. Is that all, Miss?" Violet didn't respond. She ended the call.

"What happened?" Taylor asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “He’s not there.” Her father had left his address book on the kitchen counter. She brought it to the kitchen table where Taylor sat and opened it to the page for Eleanor Redmond. All the numbers were crossed out except for one at the bottom. Violet was suddenly seized by an overwhelming bout of vertigo that left her breathless, panting in the wobbly wooden chair. She had never spoken to her mother. On the few occasions she’d overheard Eleanor and her father, they had ended up yelling at each other. She leaned over the table and braced her forehead on the heel of her palm. She dialed the number, put it on speakerphone, and set the phone in front of her. Her hands were suddenly shaky and damp.

“Hello,” answered a woman’s voice. It wasn’t a friendly question. More of an accusation.

Violet tried two times before saying, “May I speak to Eleanor Redmond, please.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Is this Eleanor?” Violet said. She hated the way her voice shook.

“Who is this?” she said.

“This is, um, Violet Masterson.”

The woman was quiet for a moment. “This is Eleanor,” she said. Then, “Violet? Are you okay?”

Violet cleared her throat. She did her best rendition of a customer service representative, a skill hone from years of working as a barista. “Um, yes, Eleanor, I’m wondering if you’ve heard from Harry Masterson, recently? In the last day?”

“No,” she said. She began to ask again, if Violet was okay.

“Where are you?” Violet interrupted.

Eleanor hesitated. “Arizona.”

“You’re not in Ellensburg?”

“No,” she said.

“You’re not staying at the Super 8 in Ellensburg right now?” Violet couldn’t keep the growing panic out of her voice. She looked up at Taylor and took a deep breath to steady her tone. “Because that’s where my dad said he was meeting you.”

“Violet, I haven’t seen your dad in years.” She sounded so calm. Violet wanted to reach through the phone and shake her. “Are you there?” Eleanor said. “Are you still in Nuovita?”

Violet ended the call.

“What happened?” Taylor said. “Is he okay?”

Violet’s vision was lined white with adrenaline. She had the feeling of an overheated computer, burning hot and fast until it froze and needed reset. She scooted back the kitchen chair, stood up, and knelt in front of a cabinet. She pulled all of the pots and pans onto the floor and reached into the back until she felt her hand close around dusty glass. Her dad’s secret bottle of bourbon. He drank so little that he never noticed the liquid line go down whenever Violet had a particularly bad day. She didn’t get a glass, just sat against the refrigerator and took a long drink. The liquor tasted to her like nail polish and stale, bitter, coffee, and she had to fight her reflexive gag. She rested the bottle on the floor between her knees. He was gone. Her dad was gone. He lied to her, then he lied some more, and now he was *gone*. Violet’s mind raced, panic coming in waves of lightning. She pushed off the floor and mumbled “Come on,” to Taylor.

Upstairs, she tore through her dad's room. The top of the closet, all the drawers. "It's a small notebook," Violet told Taylor, handing him a box to go through. "Like the size of a planner, with really tiny handwriting."

"Not here," Taylor said.

Violet turned the mattress over. Nothing. The nightstand? No. Finally, between two under-bed storage bins, Violet grasped something that felt like the right size and shape. She shimmied out from under the bedframe and began flipping through pages. She cleared the dresser and set it down, opened like a book, the same way her father had it the other night. She turned pages back and forth, trying to find one that looked familiar.

"What's in that?" Taylor asked.

"I don't know, but my dad had it out last night when he went into a trance and started writing in blood on the mirror." She stopped on a page with a familiar drawing of a diamond shape enclosing two concentric circles. The first words on the page were, "The all-seeing eye."

"Is that it?" Taylor asked. Violet nodded. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," she said.

Every page of the notebook was full of the same, miniature version of her father's handwriting. In the hands of someone who hadn't been stalked by a spirit coyote and protected by a circle of phantom smoke, the journal would be the diary of a madman. The first entry under the symbol began, "The simplest and longest-lasting way to obtain the vision of the all-seeing eye is to consume the eyes of a magical creature."

"Oh, simple," Taylor said. "We'll just kill a fairy and eat it *damn eyeballs*."

"That's not what he did," Violet said.

“Seriously, what kind of person has this written down, much less keeps it around for,” he pinched the corner of the page, yellow and crispy with age. “However long.”

Violet gave him a nasty look. “I’m sure he had a good reason,” she said. Even to her, it sounded weak. As angry as she was at her dad, she still couldn’t believe that he would do anything so dark.

The next entry was a recipe, for a tea that would allow someone to “seek answers from the spirits.” It cautioned that the user was likely to vomit upon waking from the vision. “This is it,” Violet said. It called for a pot of naturally pooled water. In it, they would heat soil, roots, or stones from the piece of land that would ground the journeyer, and a generous amount of his or her blood and hair. Harry had been looking for answers. Violet needed to know the question. Taylor believed they could use it to learn how to kill the coyote.

They took the water from a tarp crumpled in Violet’s backyard. Violet emptied the pot for the yellow bearded crepis Grandma Dana had given her for her last birthday, grown from her garden. She cut off the roots and let it soak in the pot of muddy water cooking on the stove. When it boiled, they poured it in two separate cups, cut their hair, and cut their hands. There was a moment when they looked at each other, eyes wide and focused on things far away, and both realized they didn’t *have* to do it. Violet wondered if Taylor was as afraid as she was. She wondered if he would regret this once he realized his gran wasn’t coming back and that his mother would worry. She wondered if he had the same desperate white noise in his head that kept him rushing forward. She knew she *could* stop. She could walk away like Taylor had wanted to. But she didn’t. He didn’t. They were an object already in motion.

They moved the kitchen table and sat back-to-back on the floor, eyes closed. The notebook specified that they must be completely centered, entirely focused before drinking the mud tea, in order for the ritual to work. So they sat. And they breathed.

Violet tried to focus on Grandma Dana, and the day she died. She tried to make the question solid and heavy in her mind. It was the most important thing. The thing she needed to take care of first. Her dad could take care of himself, surely. Violet wasn't going to come rushing in on a gallant steed and save him. "Grandma Dana, dying, how?" Not: "Dad, lying, why?" or "Dad, gone, where?"

She repeated her question in her mind until it began to sound like the ending of a game of *Clue*. Or, at least, until she heard Taylor lift his cup and drink the tea in two thick gulps. She repeated the question in her mind one last time, and drank.

## **Chapter 9**

Violet opened her eyes. She did not remember closing them. She was still in her kitchen, still sitting on the floor. She looked behind her. Taylor lay unconscious on his side. Still breathing. Had she done something wrong? Did she not focus enough? She heard voices from down the hall. One of them, a small child, the other, she thought, her father. When she stood, she noticed the refrigerator: scratched eggshell laminate, one cracked plastic handle. That refrigerator had given out years ago. She moved toward the noises, coming from the reception room at the front of the house. She couldn't quite make out the words. But before she could get to them, she tripped on something. To Violet's horror, she found a long, thick snake at her feet. It raised up, opening its mouth at her, smoke billowing out, so black and thick that it even blocked the voices Violet

heard in the other room. And Violet could see something else in the snake's mouth, also. A human face, yellow and black striped, growing larger. The snake's jaw split apart. Its body lifted up and peeled back like a husk to reveal shoulders, a torso, all painted yellow and black with white fingertips. The left leg remained entirely snake, tail curled up from the floor and twitching. The right foot was a black, reflective glass. The man—it seemed masculine—wore a red and white tunic with a six-pointed star former around the image of a hissing snake. When he moved toward Violet, she could see some of the skin on his shoulders, disappearing to his back. It looks like dried and rotten corn. He reached a hand toward her. She did not want him to touch her. But, the smoke was so this she couldn't find her way. The only light came as a reflection off of his right foot. He backed her against a wall, and Violet saw his eyes. They sparkled like all the stars she could never see in the sky. Stars for miles, lightyears. And she knew she had seen those stars before. He did not speak, but turned his palm sideways and covered her eyes.

Violet woke gasping on the kitchen floor. Taylor was still behind her, still unconscious on his side. The house was quiet. The refrigerator in front of her was black and chrome. She felt a knot in her stomach, and not a metaphorical one. She barely made it to the sink in time to avoid spilling the mud tea, and everything else she'd eaten in the last day (or five, there was so much of it) on the floor. She was still leaning over the sink, awaiting the next dry-heave when she heard Taylor get up from the floor.

When she turned to see, however, he was on all fours, eyes open but clearly not seeing the kitchen floor in front of him. He began moving his hand frantically, as though he was trying to write. Violet moved quickly; it made her head spin, but she grabbed the

message board from the refrigerator and closed Taylor's fingers around the marker.

When he finished writing, he nearly fell forward. When Violet caught him, he looked up at her, seeing her, but deeply confused. Before he could rub a knee through what he had written, Violet pulled him up and made him face the sink, just in time for the vomiting to kick in. She picked up the message board. Her heart nearly stopped. She was looking at her grandmother's handwriting.

"I think it was Sanskrit," Taylor said.

"You speak Sanskrit?" Violet said.

"My mom does yoga," he said.

"Why *Sanskrit*, though?" she said.

"I don't know," he said. "It was written on a piece of paper. A letter from someone named Ellie."

Violet felt like the wind was knocked out of her. "Ellie?" she said.

"Yeah. Do you know who that is?" he said.

"Ellie Redmond," she choked out. "Is my fucking mother."

Taylor was silent. Violet struggled to remain focused. "Are you sure that's all of it?" she said.

"It wasn't very long. I think that's all of it." He studied the writing on the on the board. "Are you sure you didn't see it, too?"

"I'm sure," Violet said. "It just didn't work for me." She didn't want to lie to Taylor. He wouldn't have lied to her. But whatever she had seen, she was sure couldn't help them now. Something hadn't wanted her to finish her vision. Something connected

to her father. Something that felt unnervingly familiar. She didn't understand it, so she kept it to herself.

Taylor had been much more focused. He had experienced the last moments on Violet's grandmother's life. He wouldn't look her in the eyes, just kept focused on the list of herbs he had written and the ritual he had seen in his vision. "These first two were used to consecrate a rope, to make a circled that would trapped the coyote," he said.

"I don't have a rope," Violet said.

"It's got to be in the orchard," he said. "Your dad didn't bring it here, so it's got to still be there."

"But did it even work?" Violet said. "Taylor?" He finally looked at her. "I need to know," she said. She felt a burning in the back of her throat.

"It worked," he said. "There was a stone, like a little pink river rock, and she put it on its head while she said the, the thing. The spell. That's what's supposed to make it solid, then you can kill it." He tried to turn his shudder into a shrug. He stared at his hand as if looking for fresh wounds, caught in the memory. "You have to hold it down. You have to get in the circle with it. You can hold onto it once the amulet touches it, but it can still move, you know? And it...she just wasn't strong enough, Violet."

Violet's mind created several re-enactments of that moment within seconds. She tried to capture the look on her grandma's face—fear? Anger? Blind panic? Dana wasn't *weak*. She must have put up a fight. And lost. How long did it take? How long between realizing she'd die and death itself?

"Are you okay?" Taylor said.

Violet wiped at the corner of her eye, pretending to scratch an itch. “That’s a pretty stupid question, isn’t it?” She said. “Are *you* okay?”

He laughed, a sharp exhale, and shook his head.

“What else do we need?”

“Cinnamon,” he said. “We burn it in the middle of the circle to get the coyote inside. And, of course, the stone.”

Violet had looked through her grandmother’s personal effects so many times, but had not seen anything like what Taylor described. “It’s got to still be in the orchard,” she said. Neither of them like the idea of going into the orchard with a pile of leaves and a picture of a whiteboard, but it was all they had. Their adrenaline was running low. A few more hours and they might lose their nerve. Or they might lose a lot more, if Coyote got tired of playing mind games and decided to just rip their throats out.

“So we’re doing this,” Taylor said, like maybe saying it out loud would make it easier. Violet knew better. She only nodded.

## **Chapter 10**

The orchard was strangely quiet in the evening chill. They found the rope easily, slightly askew under the old, dead apple tree. They put it back in place and searched for the stone. Taylor said it was small enough to close his hand around, and the grass was not short. They had expected to see the coyote by now and alternated between hoping it had simply gone away and a sense of forceful dread that it was *right behind* them, like the shambling villain of a horror movie. And maybe the old trickster *had* been there the

whole time, flickering just out of sight, waiting to see if it had time for one last prank, one last scare before finishing them off.

It wasn't until Taylor closed his hand around the little pink rock and shouted, "I think I found it," that they heard the quick, heavy paws coming close. It went toward Taylor, not running, seemingly confident that there would be time enough. Violet was about five feet away, on the other side of the circle. If she ran, and Coyote ran, she knew who would get there first. Taylor began backing away from it, so that the rope circle was between him and the Coyote. Violet called his name. She threw him the baggie of stale cinnamon sticks taken from the kitchen cupboard. Taylor worked fast to light the ends of the cinnamon and Violet breathed a sigh of relief when she inhaled the sweet, sharp scent. The coyote circled him, teeth bared, as though held back by some invisible fence. But Coyote recognized what they were doing. It moved away from the circle, but hesitated, torn between its own safety and his need for revenge. Half a century bound in a box and another half before then enslave in the orchard. It wanted to make them pay.

Taylor blew the embers toward Coyote. "I command you," he said. "Come into this circle." He dug an elbow into Violet's side and together they repeated it. It was as though the words became a solid thing that Coyote struggled against. They wrapped around him and pulled him closer, closer. His oversized paws stumbled over the rope, but Violet and Taylor's feeling of accomplishment quickly faded when they realized they had trapped themselves inside with Coyote, and if either of them left the circle, it would be broken, and Coyote would be freed.

Violet quickly wrapped her arms around Coyote's neck and tried to weigh him down with her body. "Give me the stone," she said. Coyote reared back and let out a

screaming, rageful howl that Violet would hear in her nightmares for a very long time. Taylor tried to grab Coyote by the neck as well, but his hand slipped. Violet felt it shake its head before she saw Taylor's arm, trapped between its jaws. Taylor's blood streamed down Coyote's snout at a worrying pace.

"Take it," he said through gritted teeth. His fist was still closed. He drew himself up, holding the coyote's head close to his chest so that his arm became a sort of gag. With the full strength of both Violet and Taylor, Coyote couldn't shake free. Violet put her hand around Taylor's fist and he managed to open it enough to give her the stone. She put it against Coyote's head and said the words she'd been sounding out phonetically in her head for the last hour:

"ehu mana mellaha pavana turanga sucancala  
sahaja-sahave so vasai hoi niccala"

Once, twice, five times. That's all it was supposed to take, but Violet couldn't discern any change in the coyote. Taylor's arm had gone purple in the coyote's mouth. His hand hung limply from his wrist, and there was a coat of sweat over his greying face.

Violet reached for the large kitchen knife stuck through her belt. She had never stabbed anything before. She didn't know where to find the heart, and she was afraid if she cut into its neck she could slip and hurt Taylor. She brought the knife down, hard, with one hand still holding the coyote's body. She barely broke the skin. But there *was* skin to break. She took in a deep breath and brought her other hand to the knife's hilt and brought it down again and again, until its legs buckled and she couldn't get the knife to come back out. She sat back on her knees and saw that the coyote was still breathing, but its lower half was motionless, the knife buried in its spine.

Taylor fell to the side. His eyes rolled back in his head and he didn't respond when Violet called his name. She wrapped her belt tightly just above his elbow, and she thought *there must be someone looking out for us*, because her cell phone had a signal. Taylor's eyes fluttered open, but Violet wasn't sure if he could see or hear her, though he did try to speak. This happened several times before the ambulance arrived. Each time he went still and quiet, she held her breath and tried to will him to keep breathing. She laid her head gently on his chest and counted the heartbeats the way she used to count her steps.

The paramedics wrapped a brace around his neck and lifted him onto a stiff board because the wheeled stretcher couldn't roll over the grass. They couldn't hide their shock at the sight of the coyote, and one of them made a noise of approval. He asked if they knew the old lady who had been attacked the week before, and the other warned them that they shouldn't have come out here alone. Violet didn't respond. They wouldn't commit to an answer when she asked if Taylor would be okay. They told Violet she should come to the hospital, too. That she seemed to be in shock. That's when Taylor's voice finally got loud enough to hear. He said "No." He tried to shake his head, but it just lolled around against the neck brace. "Did we get it?" he asked.

"Yeah, buddy, you got it," one of the paramedics said. "Just calm down, you're going to be fine."

"You have to make sure," Taylor said. He looked at Violet from the corner of his eye. "Make sure," he said.

She nodded, "I will." And when his eyes rolled back again, the paramedics stopped insisting she go with them. Violet watched them until they disappeared at the

bottom of the hill. She tensed each time they hit a rough spot on the ground and seemed about to trip. And when the lights flared up and disappeared into the twilight distance, she turned back to the orchard, to the first tree, and the coyote still bleeding and breathing in the broken rope circle.

When it saw her approach, it moved its front legs, and Violet thought it looked like it was swimming. That made her laugh. “I don’t think you’ll get anywhere,” she said. “What’s wrong? Not feeling chatty? I thought you could talk. That’s how it was in the stories my grandma told me. You remember her.” She pushed at the knife with her foot. Violet knew she should kill it quickly, before it could get away. But how could it get away? It couldn’t even stand. She thought of her grandmother being clawed and bitten and screaming for help, but no one was there to call for help. She wanted to make the coyote hurt.

Violet gripped the knife and had to brace a foot against the coyote’s back to pull it out. It made an awful, thick, meaty sound. Coyote whimpered. She crouched in front of its and it tried to snap at her. “I don’t think you want to do that,” she said. “You don’t want the smoke monster to come back for you, do you? I know I wouldn’t.”

“That won’t save you forever.”

Violet felt as though her lungs squeezed themselves into knots. She was alone in the orchard. She hadn’t seen the coyote move, but the voice came from it, gravely and blurred and entirely inhuman. But still, they were words. Human words that she could understand.

“You know what it is?” she said.

“I know what everything is,” Coyote said. “I’ve seen worlds no human ever will. Worlds that have past. Worlds to come. I can show you,” it said. It extended one stick leg, pressed its clawed toes against her knee. “Just set me free from this body, and I’ll give you all the answers you seek.”

Its eyes met hers, pupils wide and black like an empty sky. And she considered it, though she’d never admit it, for just a moment she considered its offer. But then she considered her grandmother, and her great-grandfather, and remembered what happens to people to deal with Coyote. She thought of her father.

“I can help you find him, too,” Coyote said. “I can show you the way. Through the smoking mirror. I can guide you.”

“So show me,” Violet said.

Her mind was filled with a high, barking laugh. “But you have to do something for me first,” it said.

“You’re not in a position to bargain,” she said. “I could kill you right now.”

“I could have killed you, too,” it said.

In its eyes, Violet saw like a film replaying, the coyote enveloped in a cloud of smoke at Taylor’s house. “What was that?” Violet said.

“You don’t know?” A new image in its eyes: the creature Violet had seen in her vision. “You have very interesting friends, Violet Redmond.”

“That’s not my name.”

“Names are a funny thing, aren’t they?” Coyote said. “Sometimes they last forever. Sometime they change in a day.” In its eyes, Violet’s father, much younger. He is taking a driver’s license from his wallet and throwing it into a deep, muddy river.

Violet tried to look away, but found herself transfixed by Coyote's endless gaze. He showed her images of her mother, driving on a highway in the rain, a smear of mud or blood on her jacket collar. He father's car, empty and abandoned at an impound lot.

"Where is he?" Violet whispered.

"I'll show you," Coyote said. "Join with me and we'll save him together."

"Join with you?" she said. She felt her hand closing around the knife's hilt.

"Give me your spirit. Heal me and I will do whatever you wish for. Alone, the smoking mirror with make you lose your way, but *I* can guide you. *I* can protect you from world that is coming."

She couldn't make sense of what it was saying. She felt something sharp pressing against her abdomen. She looked down to see the point of the blade, tearing into her t-shirt. Violet squeezed the hilt of the knife. She had a vague impression that she'd forgotten something. And somehow, somehow Coyote would get it back for her. He could see the way to her father. Her father...had told her to stay away from the orchard. Her father's tiny handwriting:

*The simplest and longest-lasting way to obtain the vision of the all-seeing eye is to consume the eyes of a magical creature.*

Violet drew the blade away from herself, shaking. Though Violet knew it was a mistake to deal with Coyote, she *did* believe him, that he could see things, see her father. And she needed to know what he saw. But she wouldn't be tricked. She would find her father. Coyote snapped at her as she pressed the tip of the knife to the soft spot under its chin.

“What world?” She said through gritted teeth. Her hand was itching to pull the blade back, to cut into her own body. “What’s coming?”

She smelled burning meat. Coyote let out a prolonged, strangled yelp, almost a human scream. It shook and cried out, and went limp on the ground. Smoke snakes out of its nostrils and still-open mouth. Violet had the feeling of eyes on her back.

*The simplest and longest-lasting way to obtain the vision of the all-seeing eye is to consume the eyes of a magical creature.*

She pressed her finger into the corner of its eye, and made a hook around the back of it. Behind it, she felt connective tissue, nerves. She yanked the knife out of Coyote’s skull and cut the right eye out, then the left. Her arms seemed to rebel against her, and she had to try several times before she could bring the moist, yellowed orbs to her lips. She closed her eyes, bit down, fought against the gag reflex as the vitreous gel clung to her esophagus. But when she opened her eyes, she saw the orchard like she never had before. She knew which trees were still alive by the faint wobbly lines around them, like heat over pavement. The stars were doubled, tripled, with nebulas trickling in between. The moon was dark, but she saw it too, huge and mirror-like overhead. And billowing around all of the night sky, Violet saw a great, unending cloud of smoke moving eastward toward a cluster of six stars, burning bright and blue, that she had never seen before.

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