

The Quarryman's Wife

A novel

By Mary E. DeMuth

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This novel is a work of fiction. Any people, places or events that may resemble reality are simply coincidental. The book is entirely from the imagination of the author, though based on historical data.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the *King James Version* (KJV).

Author's Note

This book is written for my great grandmother, Mary Walker, who lived like Jesus, told her stories fearlessly, wrote poems for everyone, and loved her children even after devastating loss. Her pluck and candor fueled my desire to write this book as a testament to her life.

This is the first novel I ever penned, so it's dear to me. When I submitted it back in 2004, editors said they didn't want Depression-era fiction. So I put this book on a shelf, always wanting to see it in print, never forgetting the story, hoping someday others would enjoy it. Now that it's in print, I hope *The Quarryman's Wife* touches your resolve, energizes you to love others more fiercely, and helps you to persevere through your own economic stress, grief, or changing family dynamics.

The Quarryman's Wife also signifies the first time I wrote historical fiction—and most likely, it will be my last. I'm not a digger. I don't flourish in details. But in researching this book for several years, I learned so much. Culled from my great grandmother's visits, video interviews of relatives, and her writings, I found her struggles universal, and her story heartening.

At times I wanted to rewrite the entire book because I've learned so much as a novelist since I first penned it. But after some internal wrestling, I realized this book is as it should be. It represents my inaugural effort, and it signifies my growth as a writer. You'll see more imagery in these pages and the evolution of my style, particularly if you read my recent, starker books. We're all on a journey, aren't we? We live; we grow; we learn from our mistakes. But we'll never improve if we never try in the first place.

You hold in your hands my first foray into novel writing. May the story transport you to a simpler time where hard work, grit, and filial love guided folks toward quiet greatness.

Mary DeMuth

“When you work in a quarry, stones might fall and crush you!
Such are the risks of life.” Ecclesiastes 10:9, NLT

*To my great grandmother, Mary Walker.
You're my heroine.
When I grow up, I want to be just like you.*

Chapter One

Centerville, Ohio. March 14, 1932.

Augusta always knew Thomas would die young. Always knew God would thrust his angry finger through the muggy Ohio air and point right at him. “Your time’s up,” the Almighty would say. And Thomas, being obedient to the depths, would nod quietly, then slip into glory without so much as saying goodbye.

The word *accident* repeated itself with each slap of Augusta’s shoes against shale. Accident. Accident. The word screamed in her head, longing to release, but clenched teeth kept her terror to herself. She needed Thomas. Needed his gentle hand with six children and a quarry house to run. Needed his grace-like words. His humor.

Her friend Olya followed behind as they passed stilled shovels, empty water pumps and halted rail cars standing sentry-like in reverential silence. The quarry’s Dinky engines saluted the two wives as they raced toward the rock quarry’s belly.

Thomas, you promised me there’d be no accidents.

Chapter Two

An odd chill twisted inside Meg. She told her stomach to settle. It didn't obey.

Heading away from school toward Mama's list of chores, she watched Lily lead the processional of children in pied piper fashion toward the quarry house. At eighteen, Lily's hair flowed down the back of her dress and frock, blessedly straight. Facing womanhood at fifteen, Meg pined for that straight honey-lit hair, but she tried not to let on that she did. "It's the sin of covetousness," Mama scolded when Meg revealed her longing for Lily's hair.

Lily turned toward her. "Remember me today. I'm afraid I'm a bit weary to be chasing the Wheeler twins around. Are you sure you can't come help? I'll pay you."

"I still have some reporting to do. Miss Allen's been nagging me about the story I'm working on. I'm sorry. Can't I help you next week?"

"You've procrastinated that story for months. Come just this once?"

"I have the rest of the children to herd home. You know that."

With that, Lily said her goodbyes to Edward, John-John, Helen.

Lily nodded. Her eyes showed disappointment, but true to form, she thanked Meg for considering it and detoured onto East Franklin Street where two squirrely Wheeler children awaited her calming touch.

Meg envied Lily, as she walked—no, glided—toward work. Meg never glided, she plodded. John-John once said she clip-clopped like Strawberry, their faithful horse. Her feet grew like rushes, rapid and serpentine-like, so that the only shoes that fit her now were eldest brother's Frank's—cloddy, awkward. But with Frank wheezing at home, straining to bring in breath, she knew she should simply be thankful for her own. She pulled one in just for him.

She shrugged, hoping the shrug would shush the antagonistic voices in her head. Someday, she would be elegant. She looked forward to her walk from school in the lazy afternoons when springtime welcomed new bird songs. Mother Nature

had flung herself in all her icy fury on Centerville last winter. Meg tasted the cold from September's first frost until the March blizzard. Until Frank took to the fever, Frank and Edward spent snowy days tamping down paths with their big snow boots for the schoolchildren to walk through. Sometimes a drift would swallow up a quarry kid, so the big boys took to carrying the wide-eyed first graders up the steps to school. It was a relief to have winter's frigid breath behind her.

Unlike the biting winds of Ohio winter or its muggy days of summer, the spring air had a delicious crispness to it. Faint whiffs of emerging forget-me-nots trailing along a broken fence lightened Meg's stride as she walked the western shore of the quarry lake.

And still, that niggling.

She renamed the lake "Lake Frank" after her eldest brother's fake drowning. John-John, who was mischievously eight at the time, thought it would be great fun to yell, "Frank drowned!"

Panicked, Mama had called Decker's store; she had them dispatch their boat, complete with grappling hooks. Swimmers dove in deep, scanning for Frank in vain. Mama and Meg stood on the back porch, waiting. On the lake perched a small island connected by a rock-strewn isthmus, so several of the men looked for Frank there, hoping he was playing some puckish hiding trick. The search stretched to an hour while Mama rung her hands in helpless anguish. She didn't even notice Frank when he stood next to her, puzzled.

"What's all the excitement? Why are all these people swimming in our lake?" Meg could still remember the look on Mama's face, a combination of relief and anger.

"We thought you drowned! What do you have to say for yourself?"

He shrugged. "You knew I was helping Louis Hanson clean out the fence row at the back of his farm. Did you forget?" Mama had forgotten, and that day the nondescript quarry lake became Lake Frank to Meg. John-John celebrated its christening with the spanking of his life.

She couldn't help but think what would happen if Frank met his maker that day, and as she plodded home, the familiar tinge that something wasn't right pitched a tent inside her. The world seemed too quiet. The path in front of her, too neat.

Chapter Three

Unshackled at last from school, Helen hated her shoes, especially as the youngest girl, each ragged pair passed down. She'd trained her feet to withstand the jabs of sharp shale rock until the bottoms became sturdy soles. Occasionally she'd yelp in pain when a shard of glass penetrated her feet's toughened leather, but even then, she would sit and pull the thing out and go on her jaunty way. So in love with the outdoors, she refused the use their indoor bathroom, preferring the ancient privy outside.

She walked along the western shore of the lake, mindless. She had a flighty carefree gait, often distracted by the likes of honeybees and monarchs. A girl deep down, she covered herself with worn overalls and her brother John-John's cowboy shirt. She knew he'd tan her if he saw her wearing it, but she just couldn't stop herself when she saw it lying atop the laundry pile after school. Quick as frightened mouse, she tossed aside her school dress and pulled it and the overalls on, leaving her cramped shoe-prisons behind.

Outside, she felt free, alive. No one walked that particular route with its brambles and hornets and green snakes, which made Helen love it all the more. She already explored the Indian trail that started at the Miami River and ended at the Turnell farm. She loved the idea that her naked feet walked in Indian's footprints, but once she found fifty Indian arrowheads, she lost interest, and the fact that Father located the trail first dampened her spirit of discovery and adventure.

Creator and founder of the Brinkworth Attic Museum, Helen kept a watchful eye for anything unusual. In winter Mama used the attic for drying clothes, but she'd been the pioneer who made tables out of sawhorses and wooden planks to house a naturalist museum, careful to flank the outer eaves with tables so as not to disturb the middle laundry area, Mama's strict domain.

Helen found most of the relics on these daily walks—bird's nests, bright blue eggs, one hornet's nest (which she paid dearly for in stings), arrowheads, fossils

from the quarry, two wasp's nests, and jeweled rocks. Father's sister brought them a large parcel of shells from the Florida coast to round out the collection—they put them on the table marked "Exotic Treasures from the Sea." Lily's penmanship outshone them all, so she labeled every item.

As the last child, she felt the pang of longing for privacy. Since the quarry had a bevy of known hiding places, she opted for wild spots, the places the mature ones felt beneath them.

She crawled through the grass tunnel she made the day before. With the grass so high, she had to bore a hole through. Yesterday's tunneling left her scraped and itchy. She thanked the Almighty that the grass now flattened before her so she could climb through unharmed. She stood up, brushed off the weed seed that pocked her hair and looked below.

She loved this spot, this outcropping of limestone that jutted fingerlike over the quarry. From this vantage point under the big oak, she could see everything: the crusher, the electric shovels, the dragline, the stone elevator, the electric water pump, the Dinky engine and its cars, the mazes of half-sized rail systems that allowed the Dinky its unfettered access, and the stone work house where Father had his office. Upstairs was a one-gabled attic room that Helen longed to make into a clubhouse. She still plotted how to create it unnoticed.

"Welcome! Welcome! Where are you?" By now the quarry sat mostly silent. Late afternoons quieted like that, since orders were trucked away from the quarry after lunch. She scanned the piles of rock below and yelled again, "Welcome, come out!"

"Miss Heaven-Anne, I'm down a-here!"

Helen scampered down the narrow winding trail that led to the quarry's bottom. He called her Heaven-Anne ever since she told him her Christian name, Helen. He misunderstood and said well, you can't have that name—Hell-Anne. Hell is a bad, bad place. Your Mama, she made a mistake, you need to be Heaven-Anne. Yep, you are Heaven-Anne, he said.

"How are you? I heard my mama and father want to invite you to supper. Want to come?"

"Well, I'd like to, but I need to bring some friends." Welcome, who was the picture of earthy dishevelment, looked down and fumbled with his fingers. When he untangled them, he presented her a wrinkled leaf and a bent feather that had been hugged to near death by his sweaty hands.

"Can I bring Mr. Feather and Mrs. Leaf, Heaven-Anne? Can I? Would your Mama mind?"

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“No, she wouldn’t mind a stitch, Welcome. You can bring them.” She grabbed his gnarled hand and led him to the spring pump that stood erect outside the stone workhouse. “Let’s wash you up, OK? When was the last time Mrs. Wheeler washed you?”

“Don’t know.”

“You wouldn’t let her, would you?”

Welcome had a way of running away when he heard the words *bath* or *lye soap*. He shook his head no.

“Well, all I can do now is get to your hands, all right? I want you to go home and take a bath. Mama wants a clean man at the table.”

“Yeah, I will. But, can you take care of Mr. Feather and Mrs. Leaf for me while I do that? They do not like baths. No they don’t. They are afraid of them.”

“Sure. I’ll put them in my overall pocket, the one in the front, next to my heart.”

He nodded.

She stuffed several buttercups in there to make a chain, so she removed them, gave one to Welcome and stashed the rest of the golden wee-flowers in her hip pocket. She put Mr. Feather and Mrs. Leaf to rest in the cool folds of her denim pocket and patted the pocket to prove to Welcome they’d be safe. “See you at six-thirty at our house.”

Welcome waved with his right hand wildly, forgetting the buttercup. The tiny yellow flower fluttered to the ground and settled on the toe of his boot.

Helen heard Welcome say, “Don’t worry Heaven-Anne’s flower. I’ll take good care of you. You and me is going to take a bath, we are.” His dirt-stained hand plucked the resting flower from his boot and placed it in his shirt pocket. He patted it. He turned back to the outcropping where Helen stood. “Bye-bye Heaven-Anne. I love you.”

“Love you too, Welcome. Now don’t be dilly-dallying. Go take that bath. And don’t forget to scrub behind your ears. If you’re really clean, I’ll let you catch fireflies with me tonight. We’ll make us our own firefly lantern.”

In the absence of Welcome to liven up the afternoon, Helen’s eyes felt droopy, sedated by the March sun. She flattened the leftover winter’s grass with her hands. Every time she smoothed a place, a thicket of starchy grass would pop up, creating a comical dance of pressing down and popping up. Finally, a bouncy bed of straw beckoned Helen’s weary body—she succumbed to the grassy mattress. Diverting her eyes from the descending sun, she jutted her chin heavenward and looked behind her.

She thought it would be lovely to live outside every single day of her life. The sky, with its emblazoned blueness, captured her. She watched as a butterfly

fluttered above her head in a haphazard flying pattern. She followed its jerky movements with her eyes, still avoiding the sting of the sun, and patted the pocket of her overalls where the butterfly's kin—the feather and the leaf—laid buried.

The butterfly flew in an ambling sort of way. Voices below interrupted Helen's sky watching. The quarry awakened with machinery and male voices. She crept to her knees and almost stood before catching herself, preferring to be invisible. She inched along the top of the outcropping that jutted over the gray, rocky hole. Every time she looked at that quarry, she felt a betraying catch in her throat. She knew it wicked to despise the quarry—it brought in precious money to their home, after all. But the hole invaded her sensibilities. No flower, no weed, not even a slithering garden snake survived amid the rocks and machinery—only a gray, lifeless hole, full of crushed rock, boulders, and dusted men.

She had to admit, though, that she loved it when the geology professors from Miami College came to the quarry with their students. Father encouraged the children to watch and listen. Helen enjoyed hearing the high talk of the professor and aspired to become a geologist one day, just for the sheer fun of knowing words other people didn't. During these "teachings," as Father called them, Helen discovered her first fossil—a stick of petrified wood—peeking out from the dust, thus inaugurating the Brinkworth Attic Museum.

Father instructed them in a hundred different ways—as he walked, as he worked, as he cleaned the barn, as he gardened alongside Mama in the potato patch. It seemed Father's greatest hope that Mama and all his children found education, and he sucked out every teachable moment to attain this—as if Father knew the shortness of life.

Helen felt a rumbling under her stomach like a train lumbering toward her, but there was no train. To her left, she saw the cliff give way, roaring calamity. Debris spewed heavenward. Without thinking, and forgetting her vow to be stealthy, she stood up, ran to the edge of her perch, and looked down. Two men stood, as if fixed to their assigned spots. She scanned the gray hole, left to right, her heart beating lumpy in her chest. She saw her Father's truck to her right, unharmed.

"Father!" She yelled it, but the mayhem swallowed her voice. She ran to the quarry pit, hollering, inhaling rock dust. As she broke into the rock-pile's belly, Mr. Strang caught her in strong arms.

"What about Father? Where is he?"

"You run and get your mama," he said, redirecting her toward the quarry house. "Now!"

Chapter Four

Augusta stopped.

Before her stood a pile of boulders not there yesterday. Men, like ants serving their queen, scurried about the heap, yelling. The acrid smell of heated rocks permeated the air like the fire-smoke she created in childhood by pounding rocks together. The odor anchored Augusta's feet to the earth.

"Gloves?" Few understood English, so she pointed to her hands. A dirtied face shook his head no.

Augusta hefted a long plank and motioned Olya to grab the other end. "Leverage with this. Help me get it under." Her Ukrainian friend obliged. Together they pried at the unforgiving rock until it moved, slightly. Augusta scampered over while an errant wind flapped the skirt of her dress. She sat on the pile above and pushed the moving rock with her legs, careful to smooth her skirt first.

Other wives stood watching, hands held to their mouths like speak-no-evil monkeys. But Augusta bled and dug, grunting under the weight of grief, fear, immovable boulders.

"Stop!" Ira Strang's voice cut through the labored voices. "I hear something. Quiet!" Even Hattie Wheeler, prone to theatrics, stopped to listen.

Nothing.

A minute passed.

Through the rubble, a muffled noise escaped. "Help" was all it said, but its utterance spurred immediate energy in the quarry. Silence became hollering; inaction sprung to frenetic action. Augusta returned to digging as bits of shale tore into the flesh of her ungloved hands.

"We got one, Doc."

Augusta's stomach shot her breakfast to her throat. She swallowed the sting. Doc Fenn, black bag in hand, rushed over.

“It’s Crawford,” yelled Elijah Frye, the quarry’s electrical engineer. Augusta pulled away from digging and hurried over. Benjamin Crawford’s bluish face nearly blended with the quarry, the rest of him still buried. The doctor bent over Mr. Crawford, placed a finger on his jugular. The doctor’s shoulders slumped, his head dropped.

“He’s dead,” he whispered. Cries perforated the silence.

When dusk shrouded the rescue, floodlights hooked to electric generators cast a ghastly glow on the pile. Over and over the discoveries had the same conclusion. Someone would yell *I’ve found one*. Everyone would stop. Doc Fenn would press his finger into the man’s neck, whisper *he’s dead* and the digging would continue.

Benjamin Crawford.

Jack Ramsey.

Jim Wheeler.

Hattie Wheeler collapsed when Doc Fenn announced Jim’s demise, though Augusta worried more for Welcome, Jim’s sweet-tempered brother.

When another *I’ve found one* echoed off the quarry’s walls, Augusta’s bleeding hand grabbed Olya’s.

“It’s the immigrant. He’s alive!” Alex’s eyes were closed, but his lips moved. His upper torso now lay exposed, his lower trunk held captive by one menacing boulder. Men above strained against an iron lever to free him.

“What’s he saying?” Doc Fenn looked at Olya.

“He says he can’t feel his legs” She pulled the *babushka* from her head and held it to Alex’s bleeding temple while men strained to free him. The rock budged, then gained momentum and rolled off Alex’s legs.

“Let’s get him to the hospital,” Doc Fenn ordered. “Easy now. Lift him easy.” Augusta noticed how Alex’s ankles skewed outward, like a child’s first drawing of legs and feet. Olya kept her hand on the side of his face. She sang to him.

She looked up at Augusta. “Don’t worry Miss. They’ll find your Thomas.”

Chapter Five

Augusta nodded. She made her way back to the pile and scraped rock with raw fingers, clawing away at the unseen fear that threatened to escape her throat. Seconds turned to minutes. A moving picture flickered in her memory. She and Thomas sat across from each other, newlywed love between them. Augusta served dinner—a bowl of vegetable soup she'd labored over. Thomas slurped it dry, wiped his face, and said, "Great! What's next?"

"Soup," she said. "That's it."

"That's it? No more?" She remembered the surprise painted on his face—the seed of their first argument.

Hollering broke the movie reel, spun it reckless.

"I've found the foreman. Over here, by the truck."

Augusta groveled over rocks. There, below her, Thomas lay flattened, a slab of limestone propped against the stone wall. She scurried to his side. "Thomas." She grabbed his hand. "You stay right here, Thomas. You stay with me."

Doc Fenn touched Thomas' neck. "He's still got a pulse, but it's weak."

"Thomas, look here. Look at me."

He looked into her eyes.

"God's not done with you here. He can't take you." She looked at the blackening sky, sneered at God through narrowed eyes. *You can't have him.*

Thomas coughed red.

She wiped away the blood with her apron. "I need you to stay with me. I need you to—" A tear collected in his eye's corner, swelled, and spilled down his cheek into his ear. He mouthed *I love you Augie.*

Chapter Six

Yesterday, Thomas brought the children home in the back of the quarry truck. They dangled from its narrow bed. Like a herd, the children ran into the house and ran out—to chores or adventures. All except Helen. She was the last to drop her satchel on the kitchen table and embrace Augusta; she ran upstairs, caused a ruckus making Inferno screech, and scurried downstairs, barefooted and wearing overalls. She stopped.

“Mama, I can spell *geography!*”

“Really? Spell it for me.”

“G-e-o-g-r-a-p-h-y. Geography.” She spelled it with a smile—the kind of smile that said she was up to something or knew something you didn’t know.

“Want to know the trick? Miss Wilson showed us how. She’s pretty smart for a pirate. You take the first letter of the words in this sentence.” Helen cleared her throat. “George Eslinger’s old granny rode a pig home yesterday. G-e-o-g-r-a-p-h-y!” She whirled through the hinge-wear screen door, causing it to slam on itself; it rattled the transom window that peeked through to the parlor. Augusta stared behind Helen through the now-silent screen door.

“We need to install one of those revolving doors. I hear they are all the rage in downtown Cincinnati.”

“If I could, I would give you the hotel that’s connected to the door.” He leaned over and kissed her. “How’s Frankie boy?”

“I had to hog tie him to keep him in bed, but once I did, he slept.”

“Has Edward been taunting him still?”

“Not since you pulled the two apart yesterday. I swear those boys are like Jacob and Esau. Maybe now that Esau is sick, Jacob won’t pick a fight.”

“Don’t count your chickens, Augie. They’re just boys. They’ll grow out of it.”

“You think I should call the doctor? Frank’s still wheezing something fierce.”

“Fever?”

“Yes, a high one. Last I saw him, he barely stirred.”

“He’ll be fine. Quit your worrying.”

“Inferno’s worried. He hissed at me when I tried to rouse Frank. Do you think that’s some sort of sign?”

“Naw, it just means the crazy cat thinks he’s a dog, that’s all.” He brushed back a slip of Augusta’s hair that had wrestled its way loose from an errant hairpin. He had a way of wooing her toward him, irresistibly, like the moon drawing water. He pulled her closer, brought his left hand to her cheek, dusting off skiffs of flour. As the flour powdered to the ground, her worry ebbed.

“You’ve been making bread, Augie?”

With a flourish, Augusta took a handkerchief out of her apron pocket and brushed off the remaining flour from her whitened face. “Don’t you like me this way? I put it on just for you.”

“You do beat all, dear.”

“That’s why you married me, right Thomas Brinkworth?”

“Nope, it was for your vegetable soup.”

She smiled. “Well, I do make a hearty vegetable soup. I should make some for Frank. Are you sure I shouldn’t call Doc Fenn?” Augusta inched toward the telephone.

“You told me the phone’s for emergencies.”

“Maybe this is one. He’s coughed up blood, you know.”

“Frank’s fine. He just needs some rest. He’s been working hard—you notice his hands?”

“I make him salve every night, but the blisters persist.”

“He’s a man now. Don’t be fussing over him. You know he tears off those gauze bandages as soon as we crest the hill?”

“You make him wear them! His hands will never heal if he doesn’t follow my medicine.” She turned to her pot of beans and stirred in measured circles. She had been staring at him again though she did so in stealth, not wanting to give him the satisfaction. An odd quarry owner, he always wore a crisp white long-sleeved shirt to work, even in the sticky Ohio summers. With his spectacles and a crooked bow tie, he looked more like Banker Brinkworth than Quarryman Brinkworth.

Their conflicts were few, but when they had them, he seemed to understand his role—silence. He traced the grain of the table with his finger and looked up, catching her eyes. She tried to avert her attention as if the look she gave was momentary, but she was caught staring and they both knew it. They laughed, not for any reason in particular.

It was their way, she thought. Something petty would blow into their con-

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versations and they would always avoid each other's eyes. The spell of anger and vengeful words ended if they looked at each other, so both of them tried to avoid each other's gaze.

"I have an urgent order to fill tomorrow. We blasted for the rock on Friday, but the rain's kept us all from working all weekend. The sun is trying to come out and those men need a paycheck. Can you manage while I'm gone all day?" He rose from his chair and pushed it back behind him, its feet making a chalkboard screeching noise.

Augusta's teeth itched.

"I'll be sure to pat some more flour on my cheeks for good measure."

Thomas laughed his chest-cavity laugh, the one that reverberated off the stone walls.

"Oh, and by the way. Welcome Wheeler's been hanging around the quarry again. Seems lost half the time. Can I invite him to supper tomorrow after it's all said and done?"

"Well, sure you can. It'll just be some baked beans though."

"That's fine. I think he will just be happy to be warmed and fed."

"You tell Welcome that Helen wants him to come, so he won't be shy to accept the invitation."

"I never did see the likes of that boy. He's nuttier than an obese squirrel. He talks to feathers and leaves. Did you know that?"

"Of course," Augusta said.

Thomas shook his head. "Calls one Mr. Feather and lets it fly away to join the already launched Mrs. Leaf. He did that for ten minutes or more today by the crushing machinery."

Thomas aped Welcome's antics, leaping in the stale kitchen air, enlivening the mundane. So blessedly alive.

Chapter Seven

Thomas gasped. Licked his lips. “Words,” he said. “Remember.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to say your words, Thomas.” Augusta wiped her wet face.

“No.” He siphoned in a breath, wheezing out. “Listen. Please. The children.”

Augusta touched his cheek, ran her fingers along his stubbled jaw. “I’m listening.”

“Frank. No blame. . . . Lily. Play more. . . . Edward. Stop fighting. . . . Meg. Be still. . . . John-John. Be a man. . . . Helen,” Thomas coughed. His eyes rolled back one short glimpse as if he were looking for heaven behind him.

Augusta held his face now. “Don’t go. You tell the children yourself.”

One more gasp. “Can’t, Augie. . . . Remember. . . my. . . words. Tell the children. . . Tell Helen she’ll always. . . be. . . my. . . little. . . girl.” His face contorted under the Ohio sun. He pulled in another slice of air.

Augusta let out a wail. “No! No! Thomas, it’s not your time. You stay here with me. Stay—”

Thomas closed his eyes, pressing more tears down his face. He took another labored breath. “Keep . . . making . . . soup.”

“Stop it! No!” Augusta felt her heart ripping, tearing, like part of her was dying under the weight of Thomas’ faltered words.

He squeezed her bloody hand. “I love you,” his voice rasped. Blood issued afresh from his mouth. Augusta leaned in closer, her heart touching his. He choked, his eyes widened—then narrowed—and his hand relaxed in hers.

If only God had pointed at me instead.

Chapter Eight

Meg remembered Lily when she dropped her books off at the stone house. Perhaps lingering guilt made her go to the Wheeler's, or perhaps curiosity. Whatever the motivation, four-thirty found her knocking at the big Wheeler house. No one came. She noticed the doorknob, and remembered Lily telling her that the Wheelers had one of those fancy doorknobs that rung when you pulled it. She pulled the ornate brass knob toward her. It rang—like a Model T horn. Meg jumped back.

Lily opened the door slightly, and peered around the jam.

"It's me, you silly goose."

Lily breathed a heavy sigh. "Come in."

Meg walked past her, smelling the musty house.

"What brings you? A change of heart?" Lily shut the door.

"Something doesn't feel right," Meg said.

"That's something's me. I'm exhausted." Lily settled in a wingback chair.

"What's wrong?" Meg asked as she surveyed the high ceilings and the cloth-shrouded windows.

"Just a bad afternoon is all."

"Already?"

Lily sighed. "Have a seat."

Meg noticed the dusty grand piano in the corner, how it gave the room a conservatory-like feeling. "This place reminds me of a funeral home."

"Yeah, I know. Ever since Mr. Wheeler's first wife died, he's shrouded the house in black. Miss Hattie, she's akin to darkness, being a divorced woman and all."

Centerville had been up in arms since widower Jim Wheeler had married Hattie, a divorcee with two children. Joshua and Emmy Jo were the town's first stepchildren. The church ladies had some sort of soft spot for Jim's crazy brother Welcome, but they had no sympathies for stepchildren. The children somehow

sensed the judgment, and obliged their criticism by being unruly—especially in church.

Hattie hired Lily to bring some civility to her wayward children, but so far the experiment proved disastrous. Hattie, weakened by her previous battles with a hard drinking, heavy-hitting man, passed many of her days in an upstairs room, writing furiously on any scrap of paper she could find. Everyone knew Jim lacked sense in marrying a divorced recluse, even if she was a published writer.

“Someday, I’m going to pull open the mourning draperies and open a window or two. At least then, I could see the dust.” It troubled Meg that this job, with its built-in isolation, took pieces of Lily, ebbing wisps of her personality with each passing hour of her duties.

Meg broke the dirge-like silence. “Is Welcome here?”

“He was, briefly. Said he had to bathe. When he came out, he was pink, which was a nice change from his normal grime.”

“Where are the twins?”

“Asleep at last—I think. Joshua was good today, actually. He only pushed wheat grains up his nose twice. Oh, and then there was the Double Mint gum incident with Crazy Cat. Poor thing’s still licking the mint out of its fur. Joshua said that cat smelled bad—like a rat, so he put his well-chewed gum on its back to deodorize it. Mostly, it was Emmy Jo who ran wild. Do you think I will ever be a good mother like Mama?”

“Sure you will, Lily Pie.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “When will you stop calling me that, Magpie? I am eighteen, you know. I don’t even *like* pie.”

“You did when Mama asked you what kind you wanted for your birthday.”

“I know the story. I was eight and you were five and I demanded Lily pie for dessert on my birthday.”

“Sorry, Lily Pie. When a nickname sticks in my stubborn head, it sticks. You’ll be Lily pie ‘til you can’t eat pie, ‘til your George Washington dentures rot.” A loud crash above them, followed by unrelenting screams, startled them both, shattering the circle of sister bantering.

“I knew it was too quiet.” Lily hurried up the circular staircase, Meg biting at her heels. She ran to the third door on the left and flung it open. “Oh no. Oh no.”

Lily darted toward Joshua who was gagged and bound to the nursery rocking chair that now lay on its side. Emmy Jo piped in, “I’m tired of Joshua, Lily. He’s a savage infidel, a dirty immigrant he is.”

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Meg and Lily tilted Joshua upright and began the task of untying him. “Where’d you get these silk stockings?” Lily asked.

“They are Mr. Wheeler’s dead wife’s,” Emmy Jo chimed. “She’s dead, in heaven with Jesus, so she won’t mind us *borrowing* them.”

“Your father is not going to like this one bit, Emmy Jo Wheeler. Not one bit.”

“Aw, Lily, he don’t mind. We could burn the house down, and he’d still bring us licorice from Decker’s store.”

“He will mind, Emmy Jo. Now, you help me free Joshua.” For the next several minutes, Meg, Emmy Jo and Lily worked on freeing the struggling and kicking boy. Once free, he growled and shrieked down the wooden-floored hall, spewing revenge-filled words with every step.

“Told you he’s an infidel.”

“I don’t think you know what that word means.” Lily held Emmy Jo’s shoulders firm.

“Oh yes I do. Got my mother’s vocabulary I do. It means heathen. Joshua carries on like one of them Hungarians who work with Papa. He drives me frightfully crazy. I was just teaching him a lesson.” Emmy Jo had a way of talking syrupy sweet.

“You will spend the rest of the day in the sewing room. Go!” Lily said. Apparently she saw right through the sugary talk too.

Emmy Jo gave Lily a fierce haughty look, turned on her paten leather heels and headed toward the sewing room. She slammed its door, reverberating the ancient house.

“Meg, help me abscond the infidel, will you?”

Meg nodded.

They found him wallowing like a greased pig outside in the dilapidated greenhouse. Ohio dirt covered his new clothes, and his hair jutted outward in muddy tendrils. Meg grabbed Joshua’s collar.

Once back inside the dark house, Meg thought up a suitable punishment since Lily seemed frazzled. She retrieved Emmy Jo from her sewing room prison and announced, “OK, here’s what’s what. Joshua and Emmy Jo, you must apologize to each other.” The two looked at each other, triumphant. Apologies? Easy.

“And you have to hug each other for one minute and say I Love You.”

The siblings squirmed. Emmy Jo looked at Meg. “No! I won’t. You can’t make me!”

“Oh yes, I can, little woman with big mouth. If you start now, it’ll be over sooner.”

“This is worse than when Mama rubbed me against Daisy Anderson to make me get the chicken pox,” said Joshua.

Meg ignored the comment and glanced at the mantle clock on the parlor’s fireplace. It read five fifty-five. “You’ve got one minute.” She shoved the rip-tearing children together with a force that surprised even her.

“Let’s hear the love, children.” Lily turned away, covering her laugh.

“I love you, Joshua—even if you are a damn immigrant.”

Before Meg could reprimand Emmy Jo’s profane mouth, the doorbell rang.

Lily answered.

Helen ran in like a crazed girl, hair flying, eyes wild. “Accident,” she panted. “At the quarry. I ran to get Mama, but only Frank was at home, upstairs.”

“What kind of accident?” Meg asked.

“That large outcropping just gave way, tumbling down into the quarry pit.”

Lily gasped. “Where’s father?”

Helen bent forward, slaking in panting breaths. “I don’t know.”

Chapter Nine

Augusta never got to answer, never got to tell Thomas her love, least not in his last moment touching earth.

The morning's memory would have to satisfy, but it felt dry, bereft of life, just as Thomas' body reclined on the quarry's ground. Weeping erupted around her. The feel of grit under her nails. The acrid smell of burning rock. But all she could see was her kitchen, with Thomas alive inside it, in their own circle of two.

"Where's my kiss?" She and Thomas played this game ever since she could remember in their twenty-two years of marriage. He would pretend to be leaving, and she would ask him where her kiss was.

"I've got it right here, in my pocket." He took the invisible kiss out, pretending that it flew away from his grasp, then catch it. He pressed it to her heart.

"Today I want the whole kit and caboodle," she said.

Thomas—with his dancing blue eyes and thinning blonde hair—pulled her in, his heart touching her heart. "You're a fine woman Augusta Brinkworth." He kissed her and held her gaze. "I'll be home soon."

He shut the back door behind him, cranked up the old truck and drove away. Augusta watched the truck spit and sputter up the meandering hill next to the lake.

"I love you Thomas."

He didn't hear her then. And now he never would.

She didn't know how long she sat there, touching Thomas' face. An hour? A minute? A lifetime? A voice played in the corner of her mind, a frantic cry, but it didn't rouse her from the touch. She felt his warmth leave, even as the sun angled its warmth.

"Mama!" Lily grabbed her shoulders, shook her a moment. Her eyes focused. Lily. Meg and Helen stood beside—pale, haunted.

"What's wrong with Father?" But when Mama's eyes locked on Lily's, Lily must've known.

Augusta shook her head. Meg and Helen now knelt before Thomas, eyes spilling one thousand tears. Augusta told herself to comfort, to weep alongside. As Lily hyperventilated and nearly kissed the earth with a fall, Augusta steadied her, but didn't caress, soothe. She stood. Then she walked the quarry path toward home.

Chapter Ten

The quarry house hummed late into the night, but it was the bustling of grief that haunted every nook. Augusta glanced at the stack of nine plates she'd placed on the table in anticipation of baked beans with Thomas, the six children, and Welcome Wheeler. *I need to put one back. I need to put one back.* Her eyes, glassy already, spilled onto the top plate. She wiped it, and placed it back in the cupboard. Looking around and seeing no one, she clutched her cherry apron to her face and mopped the defecting tears.

Meg interrupted. "Mama. Preacher Bourland is here. He came in the front door." The Preacher, a gangly man with eyes that blinked too much, now stood next to Meg, looking down and wringing his hands. Augusta nodded, and then busied herself with kitchen work, her hands bandaged.

"Mrs. Brinkworth. Why don't you let that be? I'm sure no one wants to—"

"I've got to feed my children, Preacher. Do you mind setting out the silverware?" The preacher looked lost until Meg handed him utensils. He placed the knives and forks all around the table and looked puzzled after he placed eight plates around.

"Ma'am, there are eight plates here. Should I put one away? I don't expect dinner."

"No, Preacher. I'm expecting other company tonight. Welcome Wheeler's to be our guest."

He nodded and followed a beckoning Meg to the parlor. Quarry workers had hefted Thomas's body inside—Augusta's instructions—to the parlor and laid him to rest on an old door supported by two sawhorses. She'd covered him with their double wedding ring quilt, a gift from her mother.

Augusta placed a jug of milk on the table. A knock at the back door startled her. "Come in."

In walked Welcome, scrubbed raw and clean with a spring daffodil in his hand. "Mrs. Brinkworth. I picked this for you." He nodded, then nodded again and shot his arm forward so that the flower tickled Augusta's nose.

He scanned the dinner table. “I don’t need no dinner, ma’am. I just wanted to say . . . I am sorry.” Welcome shook his head back and forth, back and forth.

“It’s really not a problem.”

“I can’t eat.”

“I’m so sorry about your brother. Must be a shock.” She placed jelly jars to the right of each plate along the rectangular table and set aside the eighth plate and accompanying silverware. She placed the daffodil in the remaining jelly jar, filled it with tap water and placed it in the table’s center.

“Yeah, well. Jimmy’s my friend. My brother. I’m going to miss him.” He fidgeted, pursing his lips and mumbling to himself while his right hand curled underneath itself. With his other hand he strummed thick lips.

“Did I say I am sorry?” Welcome asked.

Preacher Bourland returned to the kitchen’s entryway. “Yes, you did. I think it’s about time you left Mrs. Brinkworth alone.”

Augusta shot the preacher a narrowed gaze. “Preacher, why don’t you head to the sitting room? My children are there. They may need you.” Her tone created the desired effect. He followed her directions and left the kitchen.

Welcome shifted his weight. “Well, I am sorry. So sorry.” His vacant eyes bored into hers, holding a curious depth of wisdom. Into his overalls, he plunged his runaway hands. He tapped his left foot and swallowed, looking down.

“My eyes are leaking Mrs. Brinkworth,” Augusta handed him a clean handkerchief. The teary man rubbed it over his pink face and his curly brown hair, and then blew his nose with a startling honk. He handed the soiled cloth back to her.

“You go ahead and keep it, Welcome. You’re going to need it this week, all right?”

He mumbled thanks and shuffled across the stone floor, dragging his left foot. He opened the door, peered back inside the kitchen, and looked at Augusta—looked right through her it seemed.

“You’re a strong lady, you are. If your eyes start leaking, just you tell me. I’ll give you a new hankie.”

Chapter Eleven

While Mama fussed in the kitchen, Meg corralled the children in the sitting room. Frank looked dizzy-sick, so sick he could barely talk or walk. The bug he'd had the last two weeks had visibly weakened him, something she knew made Frank hopping mad, always the strong one. Though some secret side of her relished his weakness for once, it saddened her to see her big brother lean heavily against the sitting room's main support beam. The lamplight cast upward shadows on his pale face while Inferno the cat declared himself Frank's guardian, circling his ankles.

"Father's gone. Gone to heaven." Although twenty, Frank's voice sounded boy-like when he spoke. He had a deep resonating voice, most notable when he sang, but today it betrayed him by sounding small, raspy. His father's mantle, too big for a boy of twenty, seemed to crush the life out of him.

Edward stood across from Frank, arms folded across his chest, his proud chin quivering—a chin he grabbed when Meg noticed. A hint of blue-eyed scowl dared her to look away. Seated on the small couch were Lily and Helen, sharing handkerchiefs. Helen twisted her blonde hair around and around like she was wringing laundry while Lily, always genteel, clasped her hands on her thin lap. John-John stood beside them like it was his almost-a-man duty to protect them. With staid jaw, he looked out the window. Meg could see Father's profile in John-John's. Meg stayed near Frank, hoping her presence would somehow steady him.

Preacher Bourland cleared his narrow throat; his Adam's apple bobbed while he did so. "God must've needed your Father in heaven, children. It's time to get on with things—with the funeral arrangements, with the burial. Your Mama, she won't talk much, least not about important matters."

Lily cleared her throat. "Preacher, I hope you don't think me rude, but we lost our father. We need to be alone. Thanks for visiting us. I'm sure the other families will need you."

When the preacher left, tipping his hat, they let out a collective sigh.

Frank coughed violently, pulled out a well-used handkerchief and coughed again into its belly. As he pulled it away, Meg gasped. Blood seared the cloth and oozed from his mouth. Frank slid down the support beam in slow motion. Inferno scatted beneath him.

John-John sprung to life. "Lily . . . Get a cool cloth and attend to him. I'll call Doc Fenn."

Meg followed.

They passed through the parlor where Father laid. John-John stopped. He pulled out a toy soldier from his pocket, brushed it off on his plaid shirt, and laid it to rest on Father's chest. "In case you get lonely," his voice quavered.

Meg wiped tears, sucked in a breath. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "No time, let's call the doctor."

In the kitchen, John-John cranked the phone.

Meg grabbed Mama's shoulders, panic rising. "Mama, Frank's sick, real sick. John-John's calling the doctor. Mama?"

Mama didn't respond, at least not in voice. Meg watched as Mama broke free from her grasp, turned up the heat under the beans, wiped her gauzy hands on her cherry apron and went outside.

"Dorothy, it's me, John-John. Yeah, I know. Thanks. Listen, I need Doc Fenn. Frank's sick. He fainted and coughed up blood. All right. Thanks."

After John-John hung up, Meg added, "We need help. Call Grandma Ellsworth and Uncle Henry and Aunt Bertie. I think Mama needs them. Oh, and don't forget Grandpa Brinkworth,"

John-John nodded and cranked the phone.

Meg went outside. She circled the house, calling Mama's name, but silence swallowed her voice. A slight movement to her right caught Meg's attention. The front porch's swing swayed just a bit where Mama sat.

"Mama?" Meg mounted the stone stairs and sat down.

She touched her fingers one by one. "Finger prayers," she said.

"What?"

"It's what I do every morning, Meggy." She pointed to the second finger on her left hand, the one that held Father's ring. "But I'm afraid I have to cut one off."

Meg gasped. "Mama!"

Mama shook her head. "My finger prayers. One finger for me. One for your father. Six for the children. One for Mother. And one for the cares of this world." She twisted the ring on the Father finger, but she did not remove it. "I guess I have

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two fingers now. Two to remind me to pray for the world's cares. Lord knows, they're multiplying."

"I'm sorry Mama." Meg covered Mama's fingers with both hands. Gripped them tight, but Mama slid them away and stood.

"Best be getting back to fixing dinner. Time's a wasting."

Chapter Twelve

Augusta lamented that dinner didn't grace the table as it neared ten o'clock. Doc Fenn had attended to Frank, using the word *pneumonia*. A sudden rainstorm pelted the house while lightning flashed through the window, illuminating Augusta's swollen-from-grief face. She placed fresh greens and wheat bread on the table. When she lifted the bean lid she knew something had gone awry.

"Burned!" She said it so loud, and with such combustion that she startled herself. Tears came, then more, then a torrent of emotion. She went out to the barn and let the rain pelt her already wet face—at least that way the children wouldn't know she had allowed tears to master her.

When gathered around the table, this time with six place settings, Lily, Edward, Meg, John-John, and Helen supped in silence. Augusta missed plate number eight with a dull ache, and she worried about Frank's plate number seven now sitting in the cupboard. *Would he be next?*

They ate field greens and bread while Mama stared out the kitchen window, leaving her food untouched. The children excused themselves one by one—creaking up the back stairs to their beds. When a broken branch hit the window with stormy force, Augusta neither flinched nor stirred.

She just stared, her throbbing hands clasped on her lap.

Augusta didn't know how much time lapsed. The storm passed over, apparently, because she could see tiny stars trying their hardest to light up the night. She watched them wink at her through the kitchen window, then focused on the window itself, blurring the stars. *Window. Widow. I am a widow now.*

She stood.

Thomas slept in the parlor, not in their bed. The thought caught in her throat.

She walked across the creaking floorboards Thomas promised he'd fix and stood over him now. His paper skin looked pained stretched over the bones of his

face. She longed for his eyes right then, wanted them to open blue as the sky and sere themselves into hers, but his lids slept. Forever.

John-John's soldier reclined on Thomas' chest, the rock-like chest she'd never hold against hers again. She let the soldier lie, touched Thomas' hand, then recoiled.

Cold.

"You can't do this, Thomas. Can't do this to me. You promised me." Augusta held her stomach, then swallowed the grief that threatened to erupt.

She walked up the stairs to her empty room, the empty bed. On Thomas' nightstand sat an opened Farmer's Almanac, a Bible, and his pair of reading glasses. Augusta picked them up between tweezed fingers and put them on. She sat at the small desk tucked in the bay window and watched the stars through his spectacles. They blurred before her, though she wasn't sure if tears or glasses smeared the sky.

Augusta picked up a pen. With one smooth motion, she pulled a piece of paper from the desk drawer and set it in front of her. Pages beckoned her, usually, but tonight the blankness of the paper screamed grief. Emptiness. She steadied her hand for Thomas' sake, for his words' sake, and wrote.

Frank. No blame.

Lily. Play more.

Edward. Stop fighting.

Meg. Be still.

John-John. Be a man.

Helen. You'll always be his little girl.

She capped the pen, folded up the paper, and put it away, maybe forever, while blotted stars sung grief in the night sky.

Chapter Thirteen

Sleep taunted her, teased her, then left her wide awake in a quiet house. She crept down the back stairs to the kitchen. Dinner dishes greeted her. She tied on her cherry apron, the one Meg and Lily stitched her for Christmas. Lily's stitches were examples of uniformity. Meg's ambled in artistic revelry, but tended toward the haphazard. Whenever Augusta tied it around her waist, she smiled; although the seams were uneven and the hem held a riot of thread colors, she cherished it. But tonight no smile came.

A roused Inferno wove in-and-out of Augusta's legs, figure-eight-like, his feline way of dusting her legs.

Inferno happened upon the Brinkworth family four years ago on an unusually wintry April day. Thomas was absorbed in Dante's *Inferno*, when Helen said, Father I hear something. Thomas said it's the wind, little bunny, now shush. Helen's curiosity led her to the back door, her tattered quilt trailing behind her. She cracked open the door, only to have it flung wide by the snowy wind. Standing on the stoop was a tiny ball of red-orange fur, mewing passionately.

Augusta's bare feet touched the cold kitchen floor. Thomas called it Ohio Marble. In the summer, its coolness greeted her feet, but in the winter, when busy hands rushed to get dishes on the table, its hardness was unforgiving. Many a Willowware plate shattered there creating a riotous cacophony, followed by usual cries of repentance from John-John. Meg called him The Great Plate Dropper for months after he dropped three plates on three consecutive nights.

She finished the dishes. Everywhere she looked, Thomas shouted his presence. She padded past him, lying quietly. She touched his hand. Told her tears not to spill, even here, even alone in the dark. She looked beyond him to the gray-rocked fireplace. When they moved in, Thomas built a hearty fire there with green wood while the kids slept. Sparks flew, jumping into the dark room. He gathered her in his arms. "I finally gave you the country. No more city living, Augie."

She smiled, nestling her head into his shoulder.

“I’d say this calls for a dance.”

“I don’t dance.” Although she considered herself a woman of the arts, her stubborn feet disobeyed her.

“You do tonight, Augie. Climb on my feet.”

Stepping on his feet served two purposes: it lifted her gaze to his, and it forced her to waltz. While “April in Paris” played hushed on their Crosley radio, Thomas whispered instructions to her. “Hay foot, then straw foot. Hay foot, then straw foot.” Her left foot had to follow his right.

The memory pierced her. She could nearly see the two of them twirling before the fire. Breathe, she told herself. Quit hallucinating. Heart pounding, hands sweating, she pushed through the front door and sat on the porch swing. Hoping for a miracle.

“Porches are for miracles,” Mother told her when Augusta lived as a skinned-knee tomboy perched in the climbing trees that lined the streets of her childhood. “You just never know what miracle the day will bring, and a porch is as good as anything in helping you watch it unfold.”

Augusta longed to embody her mother’s oft-repeated advice—that she’d be one who captured the moment, whether the moment held some sort of private delight scribbled on her mind or if it would be announced to others through the nib of her pen. She had hoped this same pen would liberate her from a childhood fear—that if she wrote and wrote and wrote, she’d no longer think that yes, today, someone will die.

And yet.

Today someone did.

Despite her fear.

Despite her unspoken pleadings to the Almighty.

Despite Thomas’ promise.

It wasn’t until that other terrible day that the fear refrained itself over and over in her nine-year-old head like Row, Row, Row Your Boat—the day her mother’s voice changed from passionate to resigned.

“Your father’s dead,” Mother said in a steady, unemotional voice.

“Why, Mother?”

“The good Lord must’ve needed him, that’s all. Either that or the consumption got the best of him. Take your pick.”

And like that, childhood became adulthood. The climbing trees stood as sentinels, her skinned knees healed, and the fear of someone dying commenced its haunting.

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Augusta glanced at her callused hands, knuckled on her lap. The chill of the midnight Ohio March penetrated her always-cold toes as the porch swing rocked on the house's porch.

This morning the children had gathered around them both. Morning preparations enlivened them, and just as soon as they flitted, they flew slam-bang out the back screen door into the dense air, the older ones sauntering behind, with Frank in convalescence. They left the quarry house carefree. They returned fatherless.

A foggy wind interrupted her. Its cold insistence creaked the trees, making her pull her housecoat around her and locate the amber brooch in its pocket. The honey-hued stone had been a rare find in this part of southern Ohio, even for an experienced quarryman. Thomas sent it to New York, where a gem cutter who owed him a favor fashioned it into a fine marquis and set it in a gold pin. She gasped when he gave it to her right there on the porch, and of course told him he spent too much, and would he please be sensible and next time buy milk instead.

"Milk's always going to be around, Augie," he told her. "But, you—you're a treasure. It takes one to deserve one." Even in recollection, she blushed.

She raised her eyes to see the moonlit stone quarry below her, wrapped wraithlike in threads of still-lingering mist. She adjusted a loose hairpin securing a strand of dark brown hair.

Even there on the porch, Thomas haunted. Last night they sat here, she cradled in the crook of his arm. The couple sat there like stones watching the western sky redden. She reached for his rough hand and held it until she felt him relax.

Under emerging stars, they waited for their own porch miracles.

Chapter Fourteen

The fog lingered late that Friday morning, casting a pall over the quarry lake and Augusta's soul. Frank awakened once during the four days since his father died. He rolled away from the window and coughed, brownish-pink sputum dirtying his pillowcase. Augusta rocked in the rocking chair next to his bed all night, still and taciturn.

When he roused, she broke her silence, "Frankie boy, you're going to be just fine. Now, get some rest. You need to rest."

"But Mama, the plans, all the work. I need to—" His own hacking and labored breathing interrupted his speech. Beads of sweat dappled his face.

She leaned in close, wiped his hot forehead and whispered, "You need rest. Don't worry. The Good Lord will see us through this battle yet. Now, sleep."

"I . . . should have . . . been there." His face contorted, wracked in guilt's seeming vice grip. Augusta had no salving words. She looked at her feet, and walked out Frank's door.

Faint in the distance, she heard knocking. Meg came pounding up the stairs to Augusta, "The folks from Brough's Funeral Home are here. They want to take Father!"

When she came face to face with the young man from the funeral home, she did not allow him to speak. She held up her hand. "Now, young man. Thomas will stay here until my brother Henry comes along. You will have to have patience. It's been less than a week since—"

"Ma'am, I don't mean to be prying, but don't you want to have a service with all the other men? We're offering a discount, see, four funerals for the price of one. If you would just sign here, I can assure you of this packaged offer." The unnamed man pulled a pencil from behind his ear and pointed it, eraser first at Augusta.

"I don't believe you heard me young man. You will have to wait. My husband is one man, and he will have a funeral as one man. Now, I suggest you go back to

Brough's and let them know that I will be contacting them when I am good and ready." She said her words within a few inches from the visitor's face.

"It's going to cost you a pretty penny, Mrs. Brinkworth. Goodbye!" The death salesman left.

In some ways, she felt uncanny relief, even though poverty knocked at her door. Every day of life since her own father died, Augusta feared that yes, today, someone would die, and once again someone had obeyed death's premonition. Her worst fear had been realized, yet she survived, at least so far.

Augusta remained calm the rest of the day, although money worries sidled into her thoughts. She knew there would be no insurance money since Thomas had borrowed against it. Since he was the owner, of a company in receivership to boot, she would not qualify for worker's compensation like the other widows would.

Her thoughts whirled inky black and threatened to take over when Mother walked through the back kitchen door and hollered up the stairs, leaving Aunt Bertie and Uncle Henry to trail behind carrying her parcels.

"I'm right here," Augusta said. "No need to yell."

"Oh my dear baby," Mother said, pulling her to herself. "Tragedy. What tragedy."

Augusta let go of the embrace first. "Hello Uncle Henry. Aunt Bertie."

Uncle Henry nodded. Gray-haired, nimble bodied, he gave her a thin-lipped grin, the grin of grief, she thought.

Aunt Bertie rubbed her hands together, perhaps readying herself for work. As she did, her hair shook, wildly out of control.

When Augusta recounted her meeting with the death salesman, Uncle Henry sprung to action. Back home in Newfane, New York he worked for a funeral home on weekends. He spent the rest of Friday and Saturday negotiating, planning, and gathering folks together for a Tuesday funeral.

Later that Friday, when the sun cast long shadows through the budding trees, reporters darkened the doorstep of the quarry house. Augusta kept them at an arm's distance in the doorway and refused to let them in. "We've come all the way from Dayton," one man said, arrogance punctuating his sentence.

"I don't care if you came from Moscow, I am not talking to you. Please leave us be."

Another reporter said, "But, ma'am, all the other widows spoke to us. I understand they've got workman's compensation to fall back on, but you don't. How are you going to survive, Mrs. Brinkworth?"

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She didn't respond.

"Don't you want your story told?"

"Only God can tell a story right, and only then in heaven. Goodbye, sirs." She slammed the door. Inferno, who had been sitting at her feet as protector, meowed and ran up the stairs.

When the next insistent knock came, Augusta raised her voice, "I said go away. No more press, you hear me?"

Through the door, a small voice said, "But I won't press you—just hug you."

Grandpa Brinkworth stood hat in hand when she opened the door.

"Forgive me! I'm so glad you've come. Please come in."

He dropped everything he held—his valise, his hat, and his walking cane—and pulled his daughter-in-law toward him in embrace. She felt herself starting to cry, so she pushed him back. She wasn't ready to emote—not in front of the children.

Sunday the whole family stayed home from church. They populated the sitting room, the girls attending to sewing and John-John and Edward listening to Uncle Henry's instructions. Grandma Ellsworth had insisted they stay home.

When John-John protested, "But won't God hate us, Grandma Ellsworth?" she laughed. When she laughed—really laughed—her lower chin shook. She had beard-like wiry hairs on the left side of her chin, and when her chin shook, the hairs did a wild jig.

Grandma Ellsworth's beard stopped dancing long enough to answer John-John's fears. "The Lord was a rest-er too, John-John. He rested on the seventh day, at least that's what it says in my Bible. So, today, we rest. Frank can't go with us anyway and I know your mama wouldn't want to leave him behind."

Augusta nodded, half in thought, half attentive.

"Well, I don't like it. How do you expect the good Lord to take care of this corral of children if you don't go to church?" Aunt Bertie asked.

Grandpa Brinkworth countered, "Aunt Bertie, I swear you could talk water up a hill."

John-John snickered.

"Well, if water needed to run uphill, what's the harm anyway?" Aunt Bertie stood when she said this and pointed her finger at Grandpa Brinkworth. "How do you suppose this sorry group of folks are going to eat, let alone survive? I'm telling you they need religion, and they need it now. You just mind your Ps and Qs."

Grandpa Brinkworth, who could soothe an angry hornet on a hot day, asked, “Now Bertie-Bee, you’ve been to how many years of Sunday school?”

“More than you, and I don’t mind saying so,” she snapped.

“Well, I know enough about Jesus to know He was a grace-giver and a weeper to boot. He understands grief, He does. Besides, who says church is a building anyway?” This raised a few brows around the table—Grandpa Brinkworth was a retired Methodist minister who made his life from the church.

“A heathen’s what you are,” Aunt Bertie said, but Grandpa Brinkworth just laughed—an antic that seemed to trouble her more, but endeared him to Augusta. He shared Thomas’s laugh.

Uncle Henry rose. When he did, he settled the bantering. He spoke in tones of businessman to the whole family. “They’ll be taking your father today to get embalmed, and they’ll bring him back tomorrow in a coffin. Funeral’s Tuesday.”

Chapter Fifteen

Gephart and Schmidt Funeral Home brought Father back to the stone house Monday as promised. Their embalming rates were a bit higher than Brough's, but Uncle Henry refused to deal with them, calling them weasels and schmucks. Meg thought the coffin of simple Maple, sanded and varnished, suited Father. His thinning blonde hair was parted on the side, his eyes shut. He was neither smiling nor frowning, as Meg later recounted. She thought he looked uncomfortable in his suit, which was strange because he loved that suit. One thing seemed out of kilter. When she realized what it was, she bent low to make crooked his straight his bow tie. *There, that's more like Father*, she thought.

The caretakers handed Meg a toy soldier when they brought Thomas in. "We found this on him—didn't know what to do with it." Meg took it and later handed it back to John-John.

All that day, streams of visitors came by. Sammy Nutt drove the quarry bus bringing every child from Washington Township School to the stone house. He, red haired and freckled, made it a point to tip his hat to the blushing Meg.

"Good morning, Meg," Sammy put his hat in his farm-worked hands. He caught her eye.

Instead of returning a lingering gaze, she watched his Adam's apple bob up and down. *Say something, Meg. Think!* According to Mama, she was loquacious to a fault, rhythmically flinging words like a Dinky engine spilling rocks. But today, under the shadow of Sammy's Adam's apple, the words that had once been welcomed friends packed their bags and left. The silence remained. Sammy shifted his hat to his other hand and cleared his throat.

Finally, words formed. "Hi Sammy. Thanks for bringing the children by. It's nice to have some life in this house." *There, was that so hard?*

Sammy placed his free hand on his heart, and looked into Meg's green eyes. "I'm awfully sorry for your loss, Meg."

She nodded at him, her words clear gone again.

Thankfully, the school children entered the house, filling the silence with a hushed bustling. They filed between Sammy and Meg, holding homemade cards and spring flowers. Some carried cakes, cookies, and casseroles from mothers who felt guilty for sleeping next to breathing husbands. They added their tender offerings to telegrams from distant relatives and cards from Centerville businesses that sat piled on the kitchen table.

They looped through the kitchen and walked between Sammy and Meg just as fast as they came.

“Well, Meg, I guess I’ll be seeing you.” He put his hat squarely on his red head and smiled. With an awkward gesture, he touched her shoulder.

A lick of excitement surged up her arm and met his touch. “Yes, that would be nice,” was all she could say before he cocked his head and left the house.

Stupid. Stupid girl. How can I let Sammy’s touch make me blush when there’s pain etched on everyone’s faces? She touched her warm face, wondering if anyone had noticed. She straightened her smile into a pressed line.

“What’s gotten into you, Magpie?” Aunt Bertie interrupted Meg as she composed herself.

“Nothing, Aunt Bertie.”

“Nothing? Nothing? I saw you redden when that red-headed boy tipped his hat to you. I smell romance, I do. Now’s not the time, Magpie. Besides, we have to find you clothes.”

“Clothes?”

“For the funeral, child,” Aunt Bertie said. “The Brinkworth children don’t have proper mourning clothes or shoes to attend the funeral. I’m off to downtown Centerville. If I go door to door, I’ll likely corral me some.” She who herself dared to wear purple lawn dresses and a floppy hat took the “proper clothing” mantle upon herself. Like she knew.

“We are not beggars, Aunt Bertie.” Meg imagined her crazy aunt knocking on doors detailing the Brinkworth plight to every Centerville family. “We can make do. Really.” But Aunt Bertie remained unmoved and took to her self-appointed task. Around the dinner table that night, she shared her encounter with Olya and Ida Hornby.

“What’s her name, Olga?”

“It’s Olya, with a Y,” said Meg, amused.

“Well, that Olga, she gave us the most beautiful dresses. Said they were hers when she was a lass. Well, she didn’t use the word *lass*, but you know what I mean. Wore a funny scarf, though.”

The Quarryman's Wife

“That’s called a *babushka*, Aunt Bertie,” Mama said.

“Anyway, her husband, Adam is it?”

“Alex,” Helen said.

“Suit yourself. Yeah, Adam, well, he’s home now. He’s not walking, but he’s talking, he is. I couldn’t understand all his French—”

“It’s Russian,” Edward interrupted. “They’re from Russia somewhere. They’re immigrants.”

“Well, I don’t like immigrants. They have beady suspicious eyes, they do, but these two, they seemed like people. Real people. I think that Adam man’s going to be a cripple. But that man running for President, Roosevelt is it? He’s a bit crippled, so maybe he’ll amount to something after all.”

“Aunt Bertie!” Meg said, but didn’t have anything of rebuttal to say.

“Then, I turned the corner. I walked from those immigrant houses full of vermin and such and walked to the real nice part of town. I right near ran into a bent lady. Scowled at me. Said get out of my way, and shook a crooked cane at me. Meaner than leftovers. Seems like Satan’s little sister, if you ask me.”

“You don’t need to bring Satan into this Bertie-Bee.” Mama’s weary eyes revealed a hint of laughter.

Everyone knew Aunt Bertie knew each word for Satan, and she intended to use every one: *devil*, *Mephistopheles*, *demon*, *Lucifer*, *Prince of Darkness*, *Apollyon*, *Beelzebub*. She loved to use *demon* with the word alcohol or with a politician she didn’t agree with.

“You’re scaring the children,” Grandma Ellsworth protested, with more irritation than amusement.

“Say, children, do you know Grandma Ellsworth’s given front name?” Aunt Bertie looked at the children with an animated expression. Her hat tilted to the left while her purple vanity scarf laid to rest in her gravy.

“Urilla!” the children tried to stare at their plates. It was upright Edward who laughed first, causing a raucous chain reaction among the diners.

Except Mama.

Chapter Sixteen

John-John watched wind whistle through the trees, bending them southward across the quarry lake, making the rainfall slanted, askew. It was Tuesday, blacker than Black Tuesday that crashed an economy. This Tuesday bludgeoned a family.

When Grandma Ellsworth looked out the window during breakfast she shook her head, “It’s as if God Himself were mourning. Just look at His tears, children.” John-John looked up. He met her gaze, and then poked at his gooey oatmeal.

His Father, casketed, already rested in the Methodist church, awaiting crying crowds. When everyone slept, John-John crept downstairs. He de-pocketed his toy soldier and secured it in Father’s suit pocket. He patted it and then reached for his father’s folded hands. With one light touch, he recoiled—cold as winter stone. He shivered and rushed upstairs to the warmth of his cedar-paneled room.

Mama did not eat that morning. Most of the kids feigned interest in Aunt Bertie’s infamous glue-like oatmeal. When Mama came down, she was draped in black from head to toe with one exception: she wore white gloves. The old truck held just four of them in its cab and the rain prevented them from riding in its bed, so Edward called some neighbors to help ferry them through soggy roads to the white steeple church.

When the family arrived, Preacher Bourland had reserved the first two rows for them. Father lay to the left of the altar, reposed and silent. The preacher escorted Mama first, then Grandma Ellsworth, then Grandpa Brinkworth followed by Aunt Bertie and Uncle Henry. The children were escorted last. John-John craned his neck to see if he could see the bulge in Father’s pocket as he walked by. Helen jabbed him with her index finger. He stayed erect, soldier-like through the entire church service.

Chapter Seventeen

Augusta watched as Preacher Bourland adjusted his round spectacles behind the pulpit. “Today we are here to celebrate the life of Thomas Elmer Brinkworth, beloved son, husband and father. We do so knowing that he is in heavenly spheres now, without pain, without tears, without the mourning that we are left to face—”

Although Augusta had thought him an annoyance the day Thomas died, she appreciated the cadence of his words. She concentrated on the words, as if the sheer act of concentrating on the abstract would deter her from sobbing. When the organ started playing, she realized she was sitting while those around her stood. She stood, and now read the words from her hymnal while voices rose and fell behind her:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;

Don't let me go, God. Don't let me go. The ocean of grief overtakes me now, but please don't let me go. I am so weary. The lines in my face deepen with worry. Walk with me.

O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to Thee,

Light my path, God. My flame recoils. Don't snuff it out. It's dark, so dark.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to Thee

I cannot know joy. I cannot. The rain is falling, and I am falling in its incessant demise. God, help me to not close my heart to you, to the children.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

He's dead, God. Dust, ashes are on my head in grief. Help me to live, God . . . live without my Thomas.

She only heard the next hymn's first stanza; it resonated and echoed through her like a desperate prayer. So while others sang on, she stayed—glued to the verse one.

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
O'er the world's tempestuous sea;
Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
For we have no help but Thee;
Yet possessing every blessing,
If our God our Father be.

Augusta heard a rustling behind her. Her mother tugged at her black skirt and then her shirtwaist.

"Time to sit, Augusta," she whispered.

White-gloved, she clutched the mahogany colored hymnal still turned to *Lead us, heavenly Father, Lead us*. Some of the scraping wounds were buried beneath the glove's soft fabric, but she still felt their sting, still knew each wound. If only her scraping and clawing could have brought Thomas back.

The preacher mopped his forehead, read from a big, black Bible then said a closing prayer. He looked up. "Internment will be at the graveyard."

The motley processional of black-clothed mourners inched serpentine-like through the pelting rain up the hill behind the Methodist church. All at once, it seemed to Augusta, people marked their arrival by uncomfortable coughs and ahems.

The rain spat at the mourners who walked through the mud to the tiny cemetery, which also flanked the western ridge of the quarry lake. Edward, taking Frank's place, stood as the lead pallbearer. Other men, including Grandpa Brinkworth, huddled around the coffin and shuffled it out into the cool, dank air.

The Quarryman's Wife

Augusta walked behind, alone. The children followed behind her with Grandma Ellsworth.

A makeshift tent had been erected that morning, so most of the crowd huddled under its shelter, shivering. Long ropes snaked across the gaping earthen hole, secured by nearby Poplar trees. The undertaker instructed the pallbearers to set Thomas's coffin on the ropes. Preacher Bourland asked if anyone wanted to say anything before they lowered Thomas. Augusta found her voice.

"I wrote a poem, years ago, when I was a bright eyed sixteen-year-old with a third grade education. I hadn't met Thomas yet, but within a year I would. He loved this poem, said it was his favorite, and now he's embodying the poem.

As we near the Holy City
The harbor lights we see
The tempests cease their raging
And a calm comes o'er life's sea
We enter at the gateway
Greet the Savior by the hand
Forever to be with Him
In that —"

Her voice broke. Meg picked up where she left off, "bright and happy land."

The undertaker nodded. The men dislodged the ropes from the anchoring trees and lowered the coffin into the earth.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The Preacher's voice broke as Augusta dropped a handful of dirt on the lowering coffin.

"Wait!" Welcome tripped through the cemetery's gate, landing knee first in the foot traffic mud. He stood up trying in vain to wipe mud off the knees of his too short suit. "Please, I have to give Mr. Brinkworth a present."

Murmurs of irritation shot through the crowd. Augusta let the remaining dirt slip off her gloved hands. She walked away from the perched casket and reached for Welcome's muddied hand.

"What is it Welcome?"

"Here's another daffodil. The other one's old by now. Am I too late?" He shifted from one foot to the next, like he needed to use an outhouse. His face reddened as folks concentrated on him.

“No, Welcome, you are right on time. I laid the dirt, now you place the flower on top.” She led him to the halted coffin and pointed to her pile of dirt. He placed the tattered daffodil on Augusta’s dirt.

“Thanks Welcome. Now Thomas can lay to rest in a daffodil-filled meadow.” She continued to hold his gnarled hand in hers as the coffin thudded on the earth’s floor.

“Did I tell you I was sorry? Did I?”

“Yes, Welcome, you did. Now let’s get you some supper.”

Chapter Eighteen

John-John stood behind a Maple tree and watched the mourners leave. Some hovered in small groups, sheltered by black umbrellas. He saw relatives and neighbors come up to Mama one by one, hug her hard, and turn away, shaking their heads. The jarring slam of car doors punctuated the goodbyes. A country boy at heart, this drumbeat of car doors was a modern shock to his quiet sensibilities. It took all he had not to press his pocketed hands to his ears and scream *shut up!*

The gravediggers let the rain win its battle and left the casket sitting six feet under with a handful of dirt and a few stray flowers to bury it. John-John stood alone, un-protected by umbrella; he peered down into the muddied hole as the rain intermingled with the tears he fought back.

As if by some genius stroke of recollection, he remembered the toy soldier in his father's pocket. Without thought, he saluted. "Goodbye, Thomas," he said.

Through the cemetery he trudged while Centerville mud glued itself to his borrowed shoes. A five-minute walk away, home wasn't far, and he didn't seem to mind the rain, least not today. It mingled with his tears, so the Maple trees couldn't spy on his sissy-ness.

Once out of the gate, he puzzled over why he called father Thomas. The name had catapulted itself from his lips. For a boy of eleven, he didn't quite understand why he needed to identify for the first time with the fraternity of Brinkworth men. It was as if he was a peer to Thomas now, that they were men side by side. In heaven, they would be men—cajoling, reminiscing, and building crystal edifices from heavenly materials. Thomas's death had made him a man. His face was free of worry lines, but his soul had plenty.

From now on, father was Thomas to him—a fellow man.

Chapter Nineteen

Augusta placed a cup of weak tea in front of Aunt Bertie, and a strong one in Grandpa Brinkworth's welcoming hands.

"Now that Grandma Ellsworth and Uncle Henry are leaving, you'll be needing me a spell," Aunt Bertie's voice, steady and high-pitched, bored into Augusta's ears. She sat in Thomas's stone-cold chair at the kitchen table.

Aunt Bertie interpreted her silence as a free ticket to talk. "Frank, well, he can make it on his own—if he ever gets better, and so can Lily and Edward for that matter." Augusta thought Aunt Bertie's chatter an annoyance, like mosquitoes that hovered over the quarry lake and migrated to the back porch at evening time waiting for supper in the form of Brinkworth children blood.

Augusta hunched herself over a steaming teacup, hoping the woman would leave the kitchen.

"I'll take Meg and Lily, that's the God's honest truth. They'll be apt helpers in my mending business."

The Augusta who slumped just a second before became the Augusta who stood tall, hands clenched on the ladder-back chair. "You will do no such thing. Now hear me, Bertie-Bee. Not one of my children leaves this house, understand?"

"Now don't be putting on airs, Augusta. I was only suggesting that I take a few off your hands. You can't feed them all, and I don't mind telling you so." Aunt Bertie sat in Augusta's rocking chair that sidled up to the cooking stove. She held Augusta's stare.

At this Grandpa Brinkworth stood. "They aren't puppies, they're children. Have a heart, will you?"

"It's because I *do* have a heart that I want to take two. I don't want to see my kin starve. Is that what you want? Because it seems like that's what's going to happen. Don't let your stubbornness get in the way of your children's welfare."

"We're like a weaving. If one thread gets ripped out, the whole thing falls apart. I don't care if Jesus and the angels offer to take my children, I won't dole

them out like some sharecropper's meager commodity." Augusta shook when she said it. She recognized the familiar pang of anger—the seeping rage that leaked out with a renewed frequency since Thomas's death just one week ago. It was then she noticed Meg in the doorway.

"Mama. We'll do our part, you'll see. We'll still be a family." Meg turned her soft eyes from Mama to Aunt Bertie. Her gaze hardened. "Aunt Bertie, I can't thank you enough for all you've done for us. Please let us know how we can pack your trunk for the train tomorrow."

"I am not leaving you here surrounded by the immigrant heathen and a red-headed boy aimed at winning your foolish heart. I am certainly *not* leaving tomorrow, either. Your Mama, she doesn't know it, but she needs me."

"We are well acquainted with the train times, Aunt Bertie. It rumbles behind our house every morning at ten o'clock. That's when yours leaves. Now, how can I help you pack your trunk?" Meg walked over to the determined woman and softened her words with a hand on her angular shoulder.

Hands on hips, Aunt Bertie said, "Of all the thanks. Now don't you be coming to me whining about your poverty some day. I could give a decent life to those girls, with privilege and schooling in New York. You think on it, and think on it soon. Tomorrow I'm being abducted and thrown on a train." She threw a dishtowel on the table and huffed out of the kitchen.

Grandpa Brinkworth held his hand out to Augusta. "I hate to say it, but I have to go too. Here's a little something to keep your puppies from starving." His open hand held a twenty-dollar bill.

"I can't take this from you. You have your own money troubles." She held it back to him but he shook his head.

"Consider it a gift from Jesus."

Chapter Twenty

The morning Grandpa Brinkworth, Uncle Henry, Mother and the cantankerous Aunt Bertie embarked by train, the porch swing swayed to and fro under Augusta's slight frame. Mother's mantra, "Porches are for miracles," resounded in Augusta's tired head. If she had any wisp of hope, she'd expect Thomas to walk through the fields and sidle up to her on the swing—alive. Now that would be a porch miracle fit to rile Mother.

The sun began its wake up routine climbing above the Maple trees to her left and warming her cold, folded hands. *Time for finger prayers*, she mused, but her fingers remained intertwined in defiant repose. She breathed in the Ohio March. This time of year, the muggy shroud was now a distant memory and a faint premonition of the upcoming summer. Crisp, clean air—it was what Thomas called "open air." She breathed it deep, in a quiet tribute to Thomas. She glanced at her rebellious fingers, now scabbed over from her clawing the day Thomas entered the pearly gates.

She remembered her paralyzed body as it lay in repose last night. Helen's crying echoed down the hall seemingly knocking on her door, and yet she remained unmoved—unable to comfort her grieving child. She knew all their cries by heart. Below Helen's high-pitched cry, she was sure she could hear John-John's muffled pillow cry and Lily's catch-her-breath cry. They blended to form a mournful lullaby, a lullaby that lulled her to fitful, stoic sleep.

She brushed dust away from the porch swing, half-hoping the sweeping motion would sweep away her guilt. To no-one, or perhaps to herself, she asked, "Now, who am I going to pray for? I'm missing a person for that last finger. Show me, Jesus. Show me." Even as she prayed, she felt an odd dichotomy. On one hand, she needed God. On the other, she hated Him for stealing her husband from her. At times her prayers resembled humble petitions, at other times they consisted of tirades—tirades always far from listening ears. She yelled to God in the apple groves beyond the lake. She looked up from her folded hands, the hands

that both prayed and lamented, to see the Preacher. Perhaps God had given her a miracle. She was on the porch, after all.

"Mrs. Brinkworth?" Preacher Bourland stood below the porch, his hat in his hand. She wondered at the extent of his eavesdropping, but then brushed the fear aside. She had far more things to worry about than the opinion of the preacher—like how to buy meat for six hungry children.

"What can I do for you?" She tried to make her voice sound interested, even cheerful, but once it left her lips it fell flat.

"I've come to discuss the children's welfare."

"Their welfare? What do you mean?" The flatness in her voice morphed to agitation. The sun beat down on her line of site, so that she had to create a hat bill with her left hand to see the intruder.

"Our church has been supporting the Methodist Children's Home for some time. Some of your tithes go there, Mrs. Brinkworth. Perhaps it's time you consider using their services." He, although uninvited, mounted the sawed stone steps and stood in front of her, blocking her sun.

"Services? It's an orphanage!"

"Now, don't get riled, ma'am. We all know Thomas left no pension. It would just be for a year or so, until you marry again. Then you could get the children back—when you have an income. Frank—he's the man now, and he's an invalid. Edward and Lily don't bring in but a pittance." He seemed genuine, even concerned, but since he blocked the sun, he stood menacing in front of her like a shadowed specter.

"Get married?" She had said it in such a way that he backed away, flooding her face again with light. "Preacher, have a seat."

"For God's sake, Mrs. Brinkworth, consider it." He sat next to Augusta on the porch swing, gesturing. "That's what the Methodist Children's Home is for—to take in impoverished children. You've paid for it with all your tithing."

"A children's home is for orphans, Reverend, not for children who have a mama." Even as she said it, she wished she had been a mama who comforted her crying children.

"But how will you feed your family? Would you rather they starve? Or all take sick like Frank?"

"Thank you kindly for your concern for our welfare. I am sure your suggestions come with the best of intentions. If I might be so bold, can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course. But I don't see how—"

The Quarryman's Wife

"I don't mean to interrupt, but this is an important question. Who feeds the doves, Reverend? Who takes care of the squirrels? Who?"

"Well, haven't you ever heard the scripture, 'God helps those who help themselves?'"

"No, sir, I have not heard that scripture. It's not in my Bible, Preacher. You read your Bible front to back?" The sun's rays were higher now, giving her eyes reprieve.

"Well, of course I do. I have to." Preacher Bourland wiped his upper lip, was wet from perspiration.

"No one should have to, they should want to." Her newfound anger that had manifested itself in verbal jabs now softened. She took a deep breath and took on the role of Sunday-School teacher. "You tell me where that verse is, about God helping those who help themselves."

"Well, I don't rightly know, but it's in there."

Augusta stood, letting the swing sway. It tipped toward the perspiring man like a teeter-totter. Without explanation, she went into the house. She made her way to her rocking chair in the kitchen, reached under it, and grabbed a leather-bound book.

The creak of the screen door made the man who now sat in the middle of the swing look up. Augusta stood over him as he sat—her short frame and his long willowy torso brought them nearly eye-to-eye.

"It's not in here. That scripture you told me about. Here." She handed him her Bible. The pages were yellowing, the leather crumbling. An ambling fickle wind swirled through the trees and then gusted through the narrow porch making the book's pages slap each other. The preacher tried to shut the book, but each time he did, he bent a page. The wind stopped, leaving him to the task of unfolding the pages, page by page. He handed it back.

"Here, Mrs. Brinkworth. Maybe you're right about that verse. But, you know what? I think I'm still right. Faith needs feet. You still have to provide for your children."

She walked in front of him to the end of the porch and leaned on its rock pillar. "You know something?" She didn't wait for a response. "Ever since my father died, I lived with Herculean fear. At night, I'd look up into the sky and wonder, *Am I going to die tonight?* There's just something about a girl losing her father that makes her feel that death is a haunting just waiting to suck out her breath."

She straightened, releasing the pillar from its duty and turned toward the Reverend. "Funny thing, though. I lived. I thought death would grab me just like it did Father, but it didn't. Then, I married Thomas and the fears came back.

My husband's going to die, I worried. Every time he left for an errand, every time he went to work, every time I would think he would die. I've even imagined his funeral. I got so crazy that I underlined every widow verse in the Bible. But you know what? After reading those verses, I realized that no matter what happened to Thomas, I would be all right. God would take care of me. So, here I am. I'm living in the nightmare I envisioned most of my life. I am a widow. God will take care of me. And He will take care of my children."

The preacher rose and put his hands up as in surrender. "You have me, Mrs. Brinkworth. May God Almighty take care of you. But when you need God with skin on, will you call me? Millie and I figured you'd be too stubborn to consider the Methodist's Children's home, so we want to offer to take Helen off your hands. We've talked about it."

"Tell Millie thanks for the pot roast she brought last week. Helen liked it too. Goodbye now." Augusta watched as the man half-waved and put his hand in his pocket. He walked down the porch's stone steps, down the rock walkway, and through the picketed gate.

Augusta watched him as the gate's hinges squeaked. *He's an odd one*, she thought. *He points them to the Almighty, but He doesn't seem to believe deep in his heart. It's all in his mind, his thoughts.* She didn't think much these days, so this thought held a strange precedence for her.

She found herself following the preacher's footsteps. She walked down the stone stairs, failing to stop and greet the new growth of new-growth hollyhocks that lined her front bed. She just walked, never minding anything else. When she reached the gate, she hesitated.

At her feet, encircling her unshod toes, were spring daffodils. She crouched low to the ground, picked a harried bunch, and stood, looking down the path Preacher Bourland had taken just seconds before. Clutching the daffodils, she instead turned left and walked through the emerging meadow barefooted.

At the crest of the hill, she reached another gate, this time to the cemetery. It too creaked when she opened it. She plodded forward, dirt inching its way through her toes.

"Hello Thomas."

The grave, yet unmarked and earthy, did not answer back.

"You've put me in a fine kettle of beans, Thomas. Everyone's being a vulture, wanting to take away our children." She took one daffodil, pinched the long stem between two fingernails, and made it short. She swept it up in her hair, behind her left ear.

“Remember how you used to bring me flowers to put in my hair, Thomas? Well, I have to do it by myself now, but I’m supposing you know that.” She laid the remaining bouquet on the dark brown earth heap.

April had come, and with it no showers. Perhaps there would be no lilacs in May. Although she loved flowers, and had presented Thomas with her best bouquet, she hoped no more flowers would bloom. April had come, and she was not dancing hay foot and straw foot in Paris on Thomas’s merry feet. No man laughter reverberating the stone house. No happy eyes to tease her about vegetable soup. No money.

“What am I going to do? I don’t have any money. You leveraged our insurance. What should I do? I don’t even know what receivership is.”

She knew she spoke a one-sided argument. A dull ache penetrated her heart as she realized afresh that she couldn’t play their argument game. His eyes could not be caught, breaking the tension. His gaze died, and in a way, hers was dead too.

“Frank—well, he’s going to be just fine, I hope. Doc Fenn said he’s a tough nut. I suppose you know that. He looks more like you every day.” She noticed spring weed-shoots darting through the grave’s bare earth and knelt down so she could clean Thomas’s graveside.

“I just don’t think I can handle surprises, that’s all. Remember what your mother used to say? I suppose you do since you two are dancing the waltz up there. She said ‘you’re never safe from surprises until your dead.’ I’m afraid, Thomas. Afraid for the future.” She pulled the last little weed from his plot. She had been kneeling, but the position hurt her haunches. She sat down and criss-crossed her legs like she did as a little girl in Newfane, New York.

“I’m keeping the children, Thomas. Don’t you worry a bit about that. But could you ask Jesus to send us some loaves and fishes? We’re going to be hungry soon.” She pet the earth, dirtying her fingernails. The sound of crunching grass startled her.

“Mrs. Brinkworth?” Welcome stood at the open gate, looking at his feet.

“Welcome, you scared me. Don’t be sneaking around, especially near graveyards. It’s spooky.” Her reprimand had a gentle teasing tone to it, and her voice raised his head. He looked at her and said nothing.

“What do you need? Are you looking for Helen, I mean *Heaven-Anne*?”

“No, ma’am. I came to tell you something, in private-like.”

She noticed he looked at his clenched right hand.

“I found this here butterfly, Mrs. Brinkworth.” He opened his hand, and a crumpled monarch opened its wings in a futile attempt to escape.

“Welcome! You can’t be holding God’s creatures so tight. This butterfly’s going to die.”

“Like your husband?”

She didn’t answer at first. The weight of his simple words seemed to impale her vocal chords. “Yes, Welcome, like Thomas. You must learn to be gentle. If you don’t, you will end up killing more creatures. Do you hear me?”

He stroked the butterfly’s wings and rested it on Thomas’s grave. “Fly little friend. Fly!” When it ceased its flapping, the hand that crushed it balled into a fist. “No, no more dying! I can’t say anymore goodbyes, Mr. Butterfly.” He crouched low to see the lifeless monarch and let out a boar-like roar that startled Augusta who patted the heaving man.

“Calm down, Welcome. Dying’s a part of life. You just have to learn to be gentle, that’s all. Next time you see a butterfly, just watch it fly. Don’t try to catch it. Butterflies are made for freedom, for breeze soaring, not for clasped hands. All right? Just learn from this, Welcome.”

“I can’t learn. I am stupid—a fumbler, a mistake.” He stood above her, his eyes filled with a heavy sadness. When he exited the gate, he let it swing on its hinges, not bothering to close it. She watched him go.

“Now, Thomas, about Welcome.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Augusta washed dishes again, her apron hanging off her. Food held no lure these days. A knock rapped the back door. She opened it to Olya.

“Please, Missus. Please. I need your help!” Olya pushed by her. “Quick, shut the door! He’s after me!”

“What are you talking about?”

“My crazy rooster! He tried to kill me.” She sat, then lifted her skirts slightly to reveal bloodied ankles. Her hair, usually pinned in a bun, fell everywhere, feathers jutting out of her *babushka* in all directions.

“I’ve told you about that rooster before. You must be his boss. He must fear you, not the other way around.” Augusta chuckled. “Perhaps it’s time to make rooster stew.”

Olya shook her head. She removed her purple *babushka*, revealing more wayward hair. “I don’t like to kill, but that monster-thing, he makes me think I could be a killer.” She picked a feather from behind her ear, and set it down on the checkered tablecloth.

“You must be a poultry pacifist, Olya.” Augusta smiled.

“What is this word, paci—”

“Pacifist. Say it like this. Pass a fist.” As she pronounced the word, Augusta made a fist and passed it in front of Olya’s feathered face. “A pacifist is someone who likes peace so much that she won’t fight in a war, on principle.”

“Ah, that would be me, then, Missus. And Alex too. We left the Ukraine. There were many fights there.” Olya’s voice trailed off. She looked out the curtained window to the quarry lake, but her eyes seemed to see miles beyond it to scenes unmentioned.

“Sit. I’ll fix you a cup of hot tea.” Augusta put the full teapot on the range and stirred a pot of soup. She sat down next to her new friend.

“How is Alex doing?”

“He’s . . . Well, he’s in pain.” Olya’s accent seeped through every word. She wore a long black skirt and a peasant’s top, but she held herself with dignity, as if

she were a czarina from the Ukraine instead of a refugee with an injured husband. She continued to pluck feathers from her nested hair, placing each one in a row after the first. “Perhaps I shall stitch a pillow and stuff it with these.”

Augusta restrained a smile and poured the hot water into two china cups. She put a fresh tea bag in Olya’s cup and placed two sugar cubes on its saucer. In hers, she dropped a used bag. “How old are you?”

“Not yet twenty nine.”

“You look much younger. What’s your secret?”

“For a year of my life I held my breath. So, I suppose I did not age that year.” Olya took a cautious sip of her tea. “Yes. In grief, I held my breath.”

Augusta stood and touched Olya’s shoulder. “Someday, you’ll have to tell me your story—when you are ready.”

“Yes, someday. But not today. I don’t want to rain on your circus, as they say.”

Laughing, Augusta corrected, “You mean rain on my parade? Don’t trouble yourself about raining on me, or my parade of six children. We’ve had our own share of rain these days. You speak when you can. Sometimes a story takes a lifetime to tell.” Augusta offered her more tea, but Olya put her hand over her cup. “How is your home? Any more rats?”

“No, not so many as before. That cat Meg gave us brings us at least one dead rat a day. We named him Ivan the Terrible, Ivan for short. Please tell Meg thank you. You have all done so much for us already. I can never repay you.”

“Don’t mention it. I am sorry quarry housing isn’t better. Thomas wasn’t happy with the immigrant housing when he bought the quarry, but we never could pull together the money to make it better. And now—”

“Now, I will be happy with what I have.”

Emotions brewed under the surface of Olya’s words, Augusta could feel it. She had a husband; Augusta did not.

Augusta steadied herself. “Maybe you can move from a row house to one of the quarry’s cottages. I hear they are nicer. A little smaller, but cleaner.”

Augusta rose and opened the top drawer of her grandmother’s sewing bureau. “I found this material for curtains. I want you to have it.” She presented her friend with a bolt of red and purple floral fabric.

“No, Missus. I can’t. You have already been too kind to me.”

“You bring me some rooster stew and we’ll call it even.” Augusta laid the fabric on the table in front of Olya’s broadening line of feathers.

“In my country, we make stew. But for friends and family, we make *pierogis*.”

“What are those?”

The Quarryman's Wife

“A little pie you boil in water.”

“Well, then, bring me Rooster *Pierogis*, and we'll call it even.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Augusta later called it “the day the casseroles stopped coming.” It had been two weeks of noodles, roast chickens, dumplings, roasts, bread, and twenty different pies. She had made a point to preserve what food she received, wrapping it in paper and shuffling it to the cellar. She washed every dish until each shined—even the pre-stained pie plates—her sacred duty to return things nicer than when she received them. In her scrubbing she heard her own mother’s voice. *Always give more back. Always appreciate.* In each emptied pot and plate, she placed a note of thanks.

Augusta sat stooped over her father’s writing desk in the parlor. She needed the solace of penning, but her days ebbed with the never-ending details of putting Thomas to rest in a thousand ways.

One of those ways was writing piles of thank-you notes, and she was determined to write everyone in Centerville who helped, even in the smallest way. When her children swung open the kitchen door, she ignored them, snapped at them, and told them to be quiet while she wrote thank you notes.

The children tiptoed around her until she finished every last one. She tied them with string in four neat bundles and decided to go downtown and hand-deliver each one, to save stamps.

Centerville’s downtown met at the four corners created by South Main Street and West Franklin Street. West Franklin had been called Station Road back in the days when the older boys raced their horses one dirt-flinging mile from the schoolhouse to the Centerville train station. Edward and Frank both wanted to revive the legendary tradition, but she reminded them Strawberry the horse was nearing retirement at eighteen. It might just kill the poor animal.

Even today, she did not bother Strawberry. She could walk on her own sturdy feet. Besides, it felt good to leave the four walls of her home. It was time to show this town she was moving on—that she and her family would be just fine.

The hard scrabble-farmers who founded the town pragmatically named the town’s center, Four Corners. It was the only place where paved limestone side-

walks—courtesy of the quarry—extended a block in four directions. In some places, the frost heaves of winter buckled the limestone sidewalk, so you had to watch your step.

She stepped on and off curbs, placing the handwritten thank-you notes in appropriate mail slots. Sometimes a dog would bark. Sometimes she would meet a child whose parents needed a thank you, so to save time, she handed the child the note with specific instructions.

“This is a very special delivery. You think you can take it to your parents for me?” The child would nod—happy to have a secret assignment.

Making her way through the town’s center, she realized Centerville was a town of twos. Two general stores: McCray’s Grocery and Decker’s. Decker’s had distinguished itself from McCray’s by being modern; it used the new-fangled telephone. Grocer Decker took phone orders from town and country ladies alike and delivered the groceries right to your door, so she had made a point of befriending him when they moved into the quarry house. Often, he’d put six complimentary peppermint sticks in the bottom of a delivered sack, so that she wouldn’t fuss about it. She pushed a thank you note through Decker’s mail slot.

Two doctors had offices downtown—Doctor Fenn and Doctor Calverley. Doc Calverley doubled as a veterinarian for livestock, so she had settled on Doc Fenn. She didn’t want a goat doctor looking after her children. The children called Doc Calverley Doctor Doolittle behind his back. The animal-friendly doctor had an ardent admiration for anything stone. He built a country home solely from quarry pickings, his particular love being the sleekness of sawed-stone. Little Helen thought its gray façade looked haunted—she’d skitter like a chipmunk when she passed it, even though Augusta told her there was no such thing as ghosts or haunting.

Two churches flanked the outskirts of Four Corners: First Baptist and First Methodist. John-John used to ask where the Second Baptists and Second Methodists went to church, but Aunt Bertie reprimanded him for speaking “blasphemies.” Everyone knew that there was no such thing as Second Methodists—they’d be the first in heaven’s gates. She never did defend the poor Second Baptists.

There were two fluff stores, as Aunt Bertie had called them: Billy Hall’s Confectionary and the new ice cream parlor across the street. Although Aunt Bertie scolded Augusta for allowing her children such frivolity—lollipops, popsicles, and other Satan-infused confections—she was known to turn her own tongue black from Billy Hall’s famous foot-long licorice. “It’s a tonic for my stomach,” she would say.

The Quarryman's Wife

A little farther out from town, on the road to home, stood the Catholic Church—the Church of the Holy Name—where their friends the Hansons attended. Good, hardworking folks sat on pews there, but Augusta had never stepped foot inside. Its stained glass from the outside intrigued her artistic sentiment, but according to Aunt Bertie, the weak-minded were Catholics, so to prevent a family rift, she admired its art and architecture from the outside.

When she walked down the long driveway to the right of the lazy lake, she noticed Olya sitting on her kitchen porch.

“Olya It’s so good to see you. Please, won’t you come in?”

“I am not interjecting you, am I?”

“No, you’re not interrupting me. I was just delivering thank you notes in town. Please, I insist.”

Olya nodded, stepped just inside the door and looked at the stone floor. She removed her *babushka* and folded it, placing it in her coat pocket. Inferno hissed at her, standing hunch-backed and wild haired at the kitchen door’s threshold.

“Don’t mind him, Olya. He thinks he’s a guard dog since Thomas died—thinks it’s his feline duty to scare away intruders.” She laughed, a weary paper-like laugh, and motioned for Olya to step around the snarling beast. “You should’ve seen him guard Frank’s doorway when the pneumonia struck. He barely let me pass, and I had Frank’s medicine.”

“How is Frank, ma’am?” Olya closed the door behind her and looked at Inferno who continued his hissing.

“Oh, he’s less green, thank God. Dr. Fenn says he’s out of the woods but he needs his rest. Have you ever tried to make a grown boy rest when he has working and fishing in his eyes?”

Olya didn’t respond, and stood as if glued to the stone floor.

“How is Alex doing today?” Augusta lifted teapot to make sure there was enough water. “Want some tea?”

“No, ma’am. It’s fine. I just wanted to say something.” She paused a moment. “I am sorry . . . for your death.”

“I know. Please sit down and let me get you some hot tea. I’ve gathered some spring chamomile just yesterday. It’ll make a good, strong cup.” She motioned for her friend to sit down.

“Now, please tell me how Alex is doing.”

“He is all things, Missus. He is angry. He is sad. He is grateful. He is—how do you say it—guilty?” Olya fingered the rooster-patterned tablecloth.

“You mean he feels sad that he is alive when others died?”

“Yes, that’s it. I feel it too . . . especially here.” She didn’t lift her eyes from the tablecloth. Augusta put a steeping cup of chamomile tea right below her nose, causing her to look up.

“Take no pity, Olya. All of us will die someday. It is just not Alex’s time.”

“Yes, but I think he wishes it was his time. He speaks of death more than life. He yells at Ivan when he meows. He says he’d kick him if he could, but then he swears in our language and looks at his legs. Sometimes he beats his legs with his fists, telling them to walk. My mother, she used to say a dozen *pierogis* would heal anyone. I’ve made hundreds, and still, he doesn’t walk. He just gets angry.”

“I am sorry I haven’t visited. Perhaps if the children came over?”

“I don’t know, Missus. He is an angry man now. I keep the knives out of reach.”

Augusta sat down in Thomas’s chair. She seldom stopped since he died, busy-ness her shield.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When new spring grass reached the tops of Meg's shoes, she marked a month since Father died. She scarcely noticed the fog, didn't catch its haunting ambience. She simply walked to school with John-John and Helen, kicking rocks on the road behind her, while Edward led the way. Lily—whose cheerful demeanor she missed on these walks to school—had taken to leaving before daylight to attend to the now fatherless Wheeler children; the longer she endured them, the greater the paycheck.

The remnant of four made a somber processional, she thought. The fog's persistence failed to rouse her, at least not like last year when she ranted about its nuisance. In a deeper sense, she was resigned to its sameness. She became fog-like; she lived spring's cadenced mystery half-gazing, half-living. Even if Sammy Nutt jumped in front of her from the foggy trees, she felt sure that she'd treat him like a stump or an immovable boulder. Not even Sammy Nutt could rouse her from the relentlessness of life.

John-John abandoned his game of rock kicking with the others and ran to catch up with Meg. The thump of his gait let Meg know he wore his newest shoes, a forbidden thing in the Brinkworth house. Mama must've been too tired or distracted to scold or even notice. Mama didn't notice a lot of things—like Helen's crying bouts.

"Meg?" Helen tugged at her un-starched skirt, an odd thing for her to do. She had been clinging more. Her self-assuredness that manifested as defiance had been buried with Father.

"What is it?"

"Well, you don't mind do you?"

"Don't mind what?" Meg extricated herself from her sister's clinging hands.

"Me asking you a question. You seem in thought. Was I interrupting?"

"No. Please, ask."

Helen took a deep breath and rubbed her hands together, and then grimaced. “Mrs. Hornby said something to me yesterday. I tried not to cry, but I couldn’t help it. Do you think I am a coward?”

“What did she say?”

“Well, you know how she conducts her spelling tests, don’t you?” Meg nodded.

Helen continued, a little louder. “She whispers the words. Unless you sit in the front, or if you’ve memorized the order, you just can’t hear her.”

“Well, why would she do that?” Meg asked.

“Because she’s the devil in a crooked woman’s clothing,” John-John said.

“Shh,” Meg said. “Let’s let her tell her story.”

“Mrs. Hornby got to number nineteen. I craned my neck to hear the first eighteen, but for the life of me I couldn’t hear the next one. She turned away from us, sort of gazing at the chalkboard. I looked around, and everyone just shrugged. Stuck!”

“Why didn’t you just ask her to repeat it?” Meg walked sideways, waiting for an answer.

“You should know you can’t ask old Mrs. Hornby anything. You’ll understand soon enough. If she wasn’t the superintendent’s sister, I think she’d already been fired.”

“So what happened next?” John-John continued kicking at the gravel roadway that lined the quarry lake. The fog hovered over the lake as if it were its dull bonnet, but it lifted everywhere else leaving the small band of Brinkworth children encircled with warm sun. It had been dreary, now it was light, but none of the school-bound seemed to notice. None turned upward.

“I gave up, John-John. I tiptoed to the front of the class and asked Emily Williams what the word was. I did not cheat. I just whispered the question in her ear. When she turned to tell me, Mrs. Hornby reeled around from her chalkboard gazing. She grabbed her geography pointer and walked right up to me. She looked me up and down, like I was some horse to be auctioned off in Dayton.”

“Did she smack you on the hand?” John-John held his hands out, palms up, as if to demonstrate.

“Yes, and I swear the pointer almost busted.”

“You’re not supposed to swear,” John-John said.

“I know. But you know what? I didn’t cry. I think I would have if I knew I was wrong, but I knew she was hitting me because she was hopping mad. It was her, not me, so I stayed silent.”

The Quarryman's Wife

Helen showed Meg her bruised right hand. A clear red-purple line ran from her pointer finger to her palm.

“Well, when she saw that I didn’t respond, she turned red—like a Centerville strawberry in June. Harriet, she just looked at the floor. I could tell by her feet that she was shaking. Her legs did that jittery dance thing, like you do, John-John, when you get, I mean *got*, a lecture from Father.” Helen smoothed the white frock that covered her calico dress.

“OK, Helen, we get the gist. Don’t be getting all poetic and wordy like Meg.” John-John threw a smooth lake rock in the air and caught it.

“All right. Mrs. Hornby bent closer to me. I could taste her breath and—”

“Folks say it smells like sulfur,” Meg said.

“Well, I don’t know for sure. To me it smelled like turpentine and John-John’s feet. Well, anyway, she pulled herself up tall, like a statue, and said Helen Brinkworth, I used to feel sorry for you because your Father died. But it has been a month now; you should be over it. You won’t be able to use that as an excuse for cheating anymore. With that, she grabbed my elbow, took me back to my seat, and ripped up my test. She said I failed. What am I going to tell Mama?”

“I will take care of it. Don’t worry. I don’t know how, but I will fix this,” Meg said. Edward, now far ahead, made the turn toward his bus while the other children walked bathed in sunlight. They didn’t speak; they kicked at rocks in a methodical game called walking to school.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Violets purpled the fields around the stone house on May Day, daring to scent the morning. The Brinkworth girls gathered them in nosegays, just like they did every year. Meg and Helen tied seven bundles of the sweet-scented violets with hay-binding string and secured them on unsuspecting doors around Four Corners.

That Saturday, Meg worked in the barn—scraping, raking, heaving, feeding, hoeing—all the while thinking about how she could fix “the Hornby problem.” Maybe she could talk to Miss Allen about it. She shook her head at the thought. Miss Allen kept pestering her about the quarry story—the story she had killed when Father went to heaven.

She could hear Frank hacking in the house; Mama buzzed around him these days, never letting him up out of bed.

Meg was surprised it wasn't Edward who took ill this time. He did crazy tree climbing feats to make the quarry kids gasp and hold their breaths—he had already broken his arm, gashed his head twice and always wore a bandage over some small appendage. He'd been the only one who contracted scarlet fever in their Columbus row house. He, then a wild-eyed ten-year-old, hated the quarantine more than any of the other healthy Brinkworth children.

The health department had hung a crudely lettered red sign on the home's door before Father came home from work that night, so he wasn't allowed to come in until the quarantine was over—two excruciating weeks. He and Mama met every night at the sidewalk and Mama would bring in his scarlet fever presents—paper dolls, books, coloring pages, newspapers.

Edward scoffed at the paper presents and only perked up when Father sent him a radio kit; he assembled it in just two hours without looking at the enclosed instructions. Instructions are for sissies, he had said. He twisted the dial while he lay in bed and in no time, he was receiving all four Columbus stations. Thomas would bring home a real Crosley radio after the quarantine, but for a time, his was the only radio in the house.

Mama placed Edward's radio outside his doorway so they could all listen without scarlet fever germs invading the rest of the family. The tedious quarantine coincided with Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight to Paris. Even Mama listened to Edward's radio; the whole family—even Father from the uninfected outside world—ventured a guess as to when the aviator would reach Paris. Lily was the closest, so she got to have the radio in her room first, something Meg still brooded over.

Perhaps that's why she gloated a little too much when she had his radio the day the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped. Although the Crosley table-model radio that Father bought Mama after Edward's recovery now rested on a Victorian end table in the parlor, everyone gathered in Meg's room, on her squeaky bed to hear the news on Edward's radio:

“Hopewell, New Jersey. Charles Augustus Lindbergh Jr., twenty-month-old son of the flying colonel, was kidnapped last night from his nursery in the Lindbergh country home near here.” Lily cried, tenderhearted that she was, and the Brinkworth boys bantered about conspiracies.

The shock of the kidnapping seemed years ago to Meg. Since Father's death, Mama put on her nurse's cap again for Frank, just like she did with Edward whose bout with the fever ended as it had come—swift. She wore the same Hubbard apron and washed her hands in the same concoction of carbolic acid every time she entered and exited the pneumonia-filled room. She shut the transom window above his door, so no air, not even a renegade germ, could escape. She gave strict orders again this morning saying hold your noses when you walk past Frank's door—you could inhale a tiny germ.

Meg held her nose when Mama was looking, but she and John-John both took deep breaths in mild defiance when Mama's gaze landed on tasks in other parts of the house. They held it as a sibling confidence; with all the loss, all the grief, it felt good to have secret societies. Edward told Meg not to tell Mama about looking for more jobs, so that made another secret society. Helen asked Meg to cover for her when she went exploring with Welcome every afternoon in the fields beyond the lake—secret society number three. They all knew about Helen and Mrs. Hornby, so Meg called that secret society number four. Only Frank, who was too sick for secret societies and Lily, who was too good, remained out of their sibling's confidences.

To keep secret society number three, Meg had to cover Edward's chores; Edward told Mama he fished for supper (which he would do, after he found another job, he had told Meg). Meg feigned great interest in attacking the outdoor tasks

in front of Mama, so she wouldn't look suspicious. But outside, away from the gaze of a Mama who no longer seemed inquisitive, in reluctance, she continued to clean the barn—a monotonous task. The barn stuck out in all directions from her: straw jutting from her front pocket, dung on her boots, and bits of milled oats in her tousled hair.

Meg heard the creak of the barn's crooked door. Sammy Nutt stood in its opening, the sun's rays pouring around his tall frame. Dust particles shimmered in the light around him while he beckoned her to come out.

"Close your eyes, Meg-girl." His boy-like freckled face betrayed his grown man body.

"I will do no such thing. I hate surprises." He had caught her in a moment of veiled femininity; instead of her Sunday best, she wore her Saturday chore clothes: slumped overalls and an old plaid shirt of her father's.

Sammy held out a conciliatory handpicked bouquet of honeysuckle and lilacs toward Meg. He had apparently paid rapt attention when she had rambled on and on about how flowers, to be romantic, had to have divine scents.

"Oh, how did you know?" Meg pulled the flowers to her barn-smudged nose and inhaled. Forgetting her appearance—and her barnyard smell—she threw her arms around Sammy Nutt in front of God and the animals. Sammy at first stepped back in surprise, but soon wrapped his strong arms around Meg's shoulders.

"Can I take you driving tonight, Meg? My Father's lent me his Model-T."

"I'll have to ask Mama. She's a bit skittish about cars. Wait here. Just a minute."

Meg ran from the open yard between Lake Frank and the barn into the coolness of the house. She located a nearby Mason jar and plunged her scented flowers into it. She set it on the table and stood back, admiring their beauty.

"Mama. Mama! Where are you?" Meg, spying her hairpin on the kitchen table, picked the oats from her hair and knotted her free-flowing tresses at the back of her head.

"Land sakes, Meg. Keep your voice down. You sound like a town crier," Mama stood in the doorway. She wore her faithful gray woolen work dress, the one she wore on Fridays.

"Mama, what're you doing in that dress? It's Saturday."

"There's cleaning to do, Meg. I'm up to my eyes in it." She stood in the doorway and held herself with an air of inconvenience, an air she wore since Father passed away. She seemed impatient somehow, like interruptions were a capital nuisance. Her tasks—whether they were weeks of supposed spring-cleaning, or rug beating, or quilting—siphoned the life out of her, Meg thought.

Meg cleared her throat and looked down at her dirty hands. “Mama, Sammy Nutt asked me if I could take a drive with him tonight. I told him I would ask you, so here I am asking. May I?”

“Most certainly not!” Mama’s initial ambivalence turned into loud irritation. “I will not have my fifteen-year-old gallivanting around town with any boy—not in a motorcar. You tell Sammy Nutt to get some proper manners.”

“But Mama. He just has the car for—”

“Enough, Meg. I have spoken.” Mama fingered her amber brooch, as if she needed its guidance. “Besides, now is no time to be pursuing romance. Don’t you think it’s time to toil—to help this family survive?”

Meg for a moment hung her head, hoping that dejection would sway her Mama’s iron will, but it was to no avail. When she looked up, Mama was gone—probably off to some scrubbing exercise inside Frank’s room. *She’s some sort of wild fanatic about germs*, Meg thought. While she washed the cow and horse germs from her own hands, she noticed Sammy crouched by a new spring kitten. Something about his tender playfulness gave Meg a delicious idea.

She tied a white apron over her overalls, lifted her head, and walked out the back door with a smile on her now clean face. Sammy looked up, hopeful.

“Mama said I could, but not until a little later. Can you come at nine o’clock tonight?”

“I don’t know. That’s awfully late.”

Meg grabbed his hand, something she’d wanted to do for months, but never dared. “Oh c’mon. We’ll just be out an hour or so. Your father won’t mind, will he?”

“No, I suppose he won’t, Meg. I’ll be driving down your lane at nine then.” Sammy started to walk away—down that same lane—when Meg interjected.

“Well, actually, how about if I meet you at the top of the lane, past the lake. Mama says she doesn’t like the dust at night—says it invades our open windows and settles into corners.”

Sammy tipped his hat. “Nine, then. At the top of the lane.”

Meg walked toward the still-messy barn and whispered, “Secret society number five.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Augusta pattered. That's what she did now, Sunday through Saturday. She wouldn't call it that, but inside she knew that if she cleaned every inch of her home, she could somehow erase the memories. When she bent over the stone floor and scrubbed it horizontally, vertically, and diagonally, she tried to wash away her heightened fear of impending financial doom and possible homelessness.

Her mother had offered for the family to come live with her, but her house was too small, just one bedroom. Other than that, she had no other place to go. Aunt Bertie had made it clear that she would take Lily and Meg—but no more. More than anything, even more than knowing what the future held in store, Augusta just needed to hear Thomas say, it'll be all right, Augie.

But no voice came. And the voices of her children annoyed her, although she pretended to be interested in their schoolwork, their perplexities, their need for shoes. On her knees, facing the still clean floor, she chastised herself for not entering the grief of her children, or even allowing the grief. She set a stoic precedent, and the children followed her silent directive. Although she sat in Thomas's chair at dinner, he was seldom mentioned, not even in prayer.

She worried that she had placed the entire family in a Lindbergh-like holding pattern, never remembering the past, never living in the present except to exist, and never looking with hopeful eyes to the future. Perhaps with Meg she had been too strict. She threw her cleaning rag on the floor and sat down.

She didn't cry, although she thought she would.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Meg wanted her whole body to exude spring. Instead of her usual bath in the stone house, she ventured to a tree-secluded swimming hole off the beaten path of Lake Frank's north shore. She stood near the isthmus that connected the shore to the lake's island—the site where they'd all left the cousins one summer afternoon to fend for themselves.

After feeling the tiny streams of sweat meander down her forehead under the toil of pitchfork and manure that afternoon, it felt cathartic to slice through the lake's nippy waters, nearly naked. As she floated, still and serene, she remembered how Edward returned home earlier that afternoon with mixed news. She never did like to hear him say, "I've got good news and bad news." Being a pessimist by nature, although she tried to cloak pessimism's voice with almost convincing cheerfulness, she always asked for the bad news first.

"No jobs. None." He hung his head when he said it, and Meg regretted asking for the dark news first. She had studied him, then, her Tarzan brother whose wisp of black hair flopped over his left eye. When he laughed, the shock of hair danced with him, lifting above his brow in one motion, and veiling his eye in the next. Although they rivaled—biting at each other like yippy puppies, she held a resonating admiration for Edward. His playful gaze mimicked Father's, and his *joi-de-vivre* infected even the most sullen soul. Of all the martyred pupils Mrs. Hornby "educated," he was the one person to make the woman smile, albeit a Mona Lisa smirk.

"I am so sorry. What could possibly be the good news?" She asked this while she still stood muddled from performing his chores near the barn. She noticed he concealed both hands behind his back.

"I caught us some dinner!" His former dejected self disappeared when he pulled out a string of seven gutted fish. "You think Mama will be happy?"

"I don't think she will ever be happy again, but she will be grateful for the meal. Why don't you go in and show them to her. Be careful you don't soil the

floor, though. She's been scrubbing, you know." He tipped his hat to Meg, and wore a crooked smile, matching his one-hinged suspenders.

After she watched his fish swing side by side behind him, she decided to take in Lake Frank's healing waters, where she now floated. Alone and partially clothed, she let her mind wander beyond the events of the day. Whenever she lay in her bed, whenever she stood motionless below a carpet of stars, whenever she stopped, the same picture punctured her mindscape. Father. Dead. Ash gray skin—cold to the touch.

The frigid water, which betrayed the relative warmth of the May afternoon, reminded her of him. How she longed for a memory of his playfulness, his vitality, his roaring laughter. The blue eyes that danced now in her memory were gray, staring vacant. She pressed her wet eyelids together in a fierce upper and lower lid embrace, trying to remember Father's face, his hands, his laugh. But she could not summon the memories. Instead, she floated, letting her long hair splay out atop the lake's rippling surface. Filled with green water, her ears heard nothing.

In the silence she imagined a gaping hole in her chest—the emptiness Father left behind when the stone crushed him. The hole bled raw for two months. Although it was plugged temporarily by busyness and chores, Meg knew its emptiness. Its insatiable need to bleed afresh worried her. She saw Sammy Nutt in her half-asleep daydream. He bent low to her, kissed her forehead and placed flowers in the hole in her chest. Maybe, just maybe Sammy's forbidden love would fill her heart.

Trying to forget the holes' insistence, Meg let the tiny current float her toward her dry clothing on the shore. She remembered her tryst planned for nine o'clock with Sammy, and a faint delight crept to her lips. There was guilt in the smile, but not enough to sway her from her secret society number five. The sun held her floating head in a strong embrace. Its warmth surprised her. She didn't know how long she floated there, but it was enough to age her body with water wrinkles, to let the sun sink from its face-kissing position to beneath the giant Maples, shivering her.

When her left big toe butted up against the lake's shore shale, she opened her eyes to find Welcome, face flushed, his shoes rooted in the water before her.

"Welcome Wheeler! Get out of here!" She meant to scream, but her diaphragm provided no air.

"Miss . . . Meg . . . I . . . You was drowning? I was going to save you. You are . . . almost naked."

The way he said "naked" made Meg think he was a Sunday preacher, preaching against the twin evils of drink and nudity. She hurried to wrap her woolen

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blanket around her, shielding Welcome's eyes from the underclothes that clung to her wet, pink body.

She snapped back, "Of course, Welcome. Don't you bathe in your skivvies?"

"Not if I can help it, Miss Meg. I like to keeps my dirt. Bathing is for once a season—if that. You want me to walk you home?"

"I told you to leave. A woman should have privacy. Now scat!" His shoes made a slurping noise as he pulled each foot out of the water.

Secret society number six.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Augusta sat at the dining table. It was counting day; that's what Thomas had called it when the family pooled their monthly money to see what was left over. When Thomas was alive, the leftover money was meted out for frivolities like candy, gas for a drive, or new shoes. This month there was no frivolity, just enough to pay bills.

Lily brought in eight dollars a month tending to the Wheelers and Edward's bus driving job added twelve more. That covered half the mortgage at forty dollars a month. They had some savings, most of which were gobbled up in the Dayton Savings and Loan collapse. She hated pulling at least twenty-five dollars from their reserves, but that is what had to be done. Soon their savings would be gone.

The voices of Aunt Bertie and the preacher echoed I told you so in her aching head. She pressed her temples, and almost allowed herself to cry when Edward sauntered his way into the house.

"Mama, guess what?"

"You found us a gold nugget?" Her sarcastic tone cut through Edward, she could tell.

Lately she likened herself a puppeteer. She made herself act certain ways, and when her haunted self leaked out and inflicted her children, she scolded the internal puppeteer and told her to pull new "all-is-well" strings. The tired and worried Augusta percolated out, making her even more furious with her inept puppeteer within.

Edward exhaled a cavernous sigh and pulled his hand through his flap of hair, revealing both blue eyes. "No, Mama. No gold—just some silver."

He paraded the silvery fish before her, and then rested them in the deep limestone sink. "I've already cleaned them, Mama. All you have to do is fry them up. We'll have a feast tonight."

His voice seemed fraught, edgy. She wanted to tell that snippy puppeteer to jump up and hug Edward, to console him, to apologize to him, but the strings did

not pull. Perhaps like the lifeless fish, she sat there dead. Augusta sat, boulder-like, at the table and watched Edward open, then shut the kitchen door. She wanted to run after him, but she chose not to.

They supped in silence that night, the motley bunch of six. Frank couldn't join the family; his contagion frightened Augusta. Regaining strength, Frank insisted he be able to get out of bed and join life, but his voice fell on her deaf ears. She would have none of that. She would not lose another family member.

After dinner, Meg announced that she was going to sew herself a dress, a proclamation that was greeted by indifference from everyone. Earlier that day, she found some material in Augusta's kitchen sewing cabinet, and had pestered her for it. Augusta gave in.

The fabric, a faded floral shrouded with a white haze, had been a flour sack in its former life. Augusta, never one to throw something out, beat the sack at the clothesline for what had seemed like hours last winter. The clouds of flour powder mixed with the snow flurries on the line, so she was never sure if she beat out all the white. She unstitched the side seams, leaving a wide rectangle of fabric. She'd been saving it for more utilitarian use—perhaps potholders, or fodder for braided rugs, but Meg's insistence changed the fate of the dusty floral material forever.

The radio spat out news from its place in the parlor amid the clank of the dishes and the sliding of the chairs from the table. Meg prattled on and on. "My dress will be beautiful." She twirled about the kitchen in a mock display of her imaginary dress.

"A dress is hard work," Augusta said, her voice flat.

"Mama, you make it look easy. It can't be that hard."

Lily said, "Meg, don't get discouraged when you stitch. Remember what Grandma Ellsworth always said?" Although not given to theatrics, Lily cleared her throat, deepened her voice, then aped Grandma Ellsworth as she said, "She who sews shall rip."

"I will not need to rip, Lily Pie. I will be cautious, you'll see."

John-John interrupted. "Listen!" He said it with such unprecedented force, that the entire slew of dishwashers stopped and looked at him. "They found the Lindbergh baby."

Helen turned up the radio and everyone huddled around the wooden box in the parlor.

"Repeat. The Lindbergh baby was found murdered yesterday, May twelfth, in New Jersey. Police are combing the area looking for a suspect."

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“Oh that poor baby,” Lily welled tears. A pall fell over the room. The death of the Lindbergh baby opened a fresh wound for Augusta, as if Thomas had died all over again. She had tried to push death far from her mind by entangling herself in life, but its insidious insistence always poked its way back into her thoughts. She almost told the children to attend to bedtime, but they walked out in solemn procession. Maybe their wounds are exposed, too. With a heavy sigh, she pulled herself from the table and creaked up the back stairs, Frank’s sick tray in hand.

At least she could keep one child under her gaze.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sitting in front of her mirror, Meg figured it would take ten minutes to walk to the top of the gravel driveway.

They had the nicest gravel driveway in Centerville—Father had seen to that. On weekends when the excavated dirt lay in enticing mountain heaps around the circumference of the quarry, all the Brinkworth children would dominate their own mountains, maintaining their own kingdoms. While squealing and dirty knees abounded, Father collected leftover bits of limestone gravel that had fallen from the Dinky engines and put them in his rusty wheelbarrow. He wheeled the limestone up the ravine on the trail that hugged the limestone cliffs to the “top of the world” as he called it. He’d wheel it through the unkempt grass to the driveway and dump the pile at its edge. To Meg it seemed an eternal task. It would take thousands of wheelbarrows to pave the driveway to the top of the lane, she knew, so she wavered between thinking her father was a fool and believing he was the most persistent man she knew.

Now his persistence before the grave made Meg’s life complicated. Shoes and gravel did not make for a stealthy departure. She had already decided to walk in the dewy grass, but a stretch of gravel lived between the back door and the grass that she’d have to cross.

None of the Brinkworth girls had any sort of make-up, although each—except for Helen, of course—had pined over French potions and perfumes in the Sears catalog. Since Mama’s beauty was of the plain Ivory soap variety, there was nothing to purloin from her mother’s accoutrements. Mama used to quote the Bible, “Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who feareth the Lord shall be praised.” She had first passed down that advice to Lily, who possessed a raw beauty that make-up would spoil anyway. Meg still pined for Lily’s honey brown hair, and Mama’s amber brooch, confirming that she indeed was guilty of “the sin of covetousness.”

Meg usually reveled in her earthiness, but this evening on her clandestine first date, she felt frumpy, unattractive. She hoped that her bath in the clear waters

of Lake Frank would, like magic, transform her into a wood nymph, but when her hair fell limp and her plain face stared back at her from the hazy mirror, her countenance fell.

“I need some color,” she whispered to Inferno who curled up on her quilt-topped bed. When she spoke, she realized she spoke her thoughts aloud; she looked around her lamp-lit bedroom, anxious. No one. Just her, a thumping heart, and the sleeping cat.

She sat at her dressing table and twisted and pinned her hair until it framed her face. She pulled small tendrils of hair from around her face and wet them with her saliva. She twisted the spit upon strands into ringlets around her left index finger and held them tight. It was then that her gaze lifted and viewed her salvation: the red rose wallpaper.

Meg released her coiled hair and touched the wallpaper. She spit on her index finger and rubbed a blazing rose with vigor. She pulled her finger to herself and examined it with delight—ruby red. She dabbed the pigment on her cheekbones and rubbed it in wide circles. When she mirrored the effect on her other cheek, she heard the doorknob turn. In one quick motion, she pivoted and stood, her back to the mirror. Inferno arched his back, then screeched out a protesting meow.

“Who is it?” She tried to sound nonchalant, but her voice came out creaky.

“Meg, can I come in?” John-John’s voice sounded small—afraid.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“Meg, can I—” Before he could finish his request, he stopped and stared.

“Shut the door!”

“What happened to your hair? Your face? You look like a clown.” He said it in such a naive way that Meg took no offense. She dismantled Inferno, dropping him to the ground, and plopped herself onto her bed. She patted the place next to her for John-John to sit.

“I am sneaking out, John-John—to see Sammy.”

“Does Mama know about this?” His round eyes seemed rounder in the dim lamplight, his pupils darker and wider. It added to his innocence, she thought.

“No, that’s why it’s called sneaking. You mustn’t tell her. Please. She forbade me to go driving with him tonight, but I just have to go. Do you understand?” She turned to catch his gaze, hoping her penetrating look would persuade him to side with her.

“Meg?”

“Yes, my little quarry boy.”

“Do you love Sammy like Mama loved Father?”

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“Their love is a mystery I don’t know much about. But I do know this. I am smitten with Sammy Nutt.”

“What’s smitten? Isn’t that a Bible word? Didn’t God smite his enemies—kill them to smithereens? Why would anyone want to be smitten?”

“It’s just what the girls call it when they want to be around a boy they find interesting. It means they like him. I guess it’s like Mama and Father.”

“I’ll never like girls. Mark my words this here day.” With that he crossed his heart in a sort of solemn boy vow. “But, I’ll keep your secret if you will keep mine.”

Meg ruffled his unkempt hair, laughing. “Now what could that be, quarry boy?”

“I saw a picture show last Saturday—without permission.”

“There aren’t any picture shows here. How on earth?”

“Remember when Michael had me over to his house? Well, his family is rich—really rich. They paid the fare for us to go on the morning train to Dayton all by ourselves.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would die to go on the train.”

“Because, then I would have to tell you about seeing a movie, and I just couldn’t. Besides, Mama wouldn’t approve.”

“Why? Mama loves pictures if they are wholesome. Was this a bad movie?”

“No. It’s just that it cost two bits.”

“Didn’t Michael pay?”

“Oh that’s the worst of it. He saw this miniature steam train in a toyshop window that he just had to have. When we got to the movie, he realized he didn’t have enough for the both of us. He told me, ‘Here’s my plan. You look poor, and I don’t. I’ll pay for my ticket, and you go hide in the alleyway out back. I’ll open the exit for you when it’s all clear.’”

“What did you do?”

“What I had to do—Michael’s bigger than me. So, I went to the alley and waited five long minutes. The door opened, and I slipped through it. Michael had warned me not to go through a wide opening because I’d let in light, so I sort of side-winded in. I’ve been having stomach aches ever since.” He held his stomach and grimaced.

Meg tried to look reassuring. “What movie did you see?”

He let out a whining groan. “That’s where the story gets worse, Meg. It was *Sign of the Cross*. It was all about Jesus and I had to sit through the whole thing with a wicked feeling in my gut. I am never sneaking out again. Never.

Please don't tell Mama. I don't think she'd tan me, but I couldn't bear her words. Please."

"All right. I won't. The only one who knows is Inferno, and unless he becomes one of Dr. Doolittle's animals, he won't be talking either." Meg patted John-John on the head. They were two rebels, she knew, with a crooked kinship. "Let's do the pledge—but let's do it quiet-like."

John-John joined her voice, "Cross my heart and hope to die. Poke a needle in my eye."

"I have to go. Can you watch for Mama for me?"

He nodded.

Inferno led the guilty down the stairs to the back door. Meg surmised that Mama must've been on her perch, swinging like she did every night on the front porch, looking off in the distance.

Although she knew Mama couldn't see her from that vantage point, she might hear the crunch of the gravel. The one option, she decided, was to risk cutting her bare feet on the driveway. When she tiptoed to its rocky edge, she slipped off her shoes and padded slow and steady toward its opposite side. Every small sound, every rocky creak made her heart leap into her throat. Three times she stopped and stood statue-like in the middle of the little road. Each time, she strained to hear any sound. Each time, she heard nothing and proceeded to cut her feet until she reached the safe haven of grass on the other side.

She crossed the gravel driveway, her own triumphant red sea, only this sea had been forged by sheer bloody will, not the mighty hand of God. It was her red sea—since the gravel trail behind her was littered with speckles of red blood—a fact she unearthed the next day as she raked away the culprit red stones, erasing her forbidden liaison.

When the wet grass greeted her bleeding feet, she let out her breath. She must've held it a good ten minutes. John-John's interruption had cost her five minutes, so she ran on the grassy side of the road, her lungs burning from the incline she didn't realize was there until tonight.

Headlights greeted her when she reached the main road. Sammy leaned on the Model T, his body a darkened silhouette against the moon-filled evening. He didn't move when he saw her; he studied her. Although she could not see his gaze, she felt its heat as she stooped to put on her man-shoes and stood, smoothing the wrinkles of her skirt. She walked toward him, trying to mimic Lily's stateliness. From his mouth hung a wheat stalk, a remnant of last year's harvest from the stubbed field behind him.

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“Hey there, Margaret. Want to take a drive?”

She nodded. He met her, took her arm, and led her to the passenger side of the car. Before she settled into its shiny black seat, he stole a kiss—a wisp of a kiss on her forehead, a brushy, breezy sort of engagement that made her stomach tumult. When he shut his door and cranked the hiccupping motor, she found her voice.

“Where are we going Sammy Nutt?”

“To the moon, Meg-girl. To the moon.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The lavender moon shone in Meg's pupils. She let its coolness pierce her eyes, course down her spine and kiss her aching toes. She removed her man-shoes to limp across the shale driveway, less cautious now—more from fatigue than lingering fear. Midnight had a way of depleting her energy, even though her spirit felt delicious and alive. There was nothing taboo about her first date save that it had been forbidden by Mama.

While she walked down the meandering driveway to her sleeping home, she recounted the forbidden rendezvous. Sammy took her on a moonlight drive around the perimeter of Centerville and parked at his father's most remote wheat field just beyond his prized apple orchard. They got out and sat on the hood, letting the headlights illuminate the nubile green growth of wheat sprout. The wheat seed was sewn in rows perpendicular to the car, making it look like one of Mama's prized afghans. That they were facing forward enabled them both to talk unhindered without fear of embarrassment. That's when Meg recovered her voice.

So, they talked. And talked. And talked until Sammy checked his pocket watch. "Almost midnight," he said with a sense of urgency. So, like the horsemen and carriage, they raced back to the top of Meg's lane, hoping against hope that the Model-T would not turn into a pumpkin.

"Are you sure I can't drive you all the way home, Meg-girl?"

She shut the car door, then waved. He backed the car away. Its headlights swept through her, she thought. She stood and watched as the vehicle sputtered down the paved road toward home.

The kitchen had a dank air about it, almost stifling. Mama must've forgotten to open the sink window, she surmised. She set her shoes by the back door and faced the stairs with premature defeat. She knew that every stair, every riser, had a creak or a squeak; it was as if each stair's purpose was to make a noise, as if each one anticipated a planted foot just so it could sing. Meg kept to the left sides

of the steps, hoping that the less indented risers were quieter. She was right. She mounted each step in silence.

She gulped in air and held it from the bottom step to the top, waiting until she deemed herself safe in bed to let out her blue breath.

Chapter Thirty

Augusta felt like an overlooked guest; perhaps she'd been rendered invisible, she thought. She watched Meg's escapade from Thomas's ladder-back chair. The air, which hung heavy in the muggy night, seemed to create an inky curtain between the two as if both women were in parallel worlds, neither detecting the other.

She saw Meg place her oversized shoes just so. She observed her slight hesitation before her ascent up the stairs. She heard every little creak, every cautious footstep that echoed down the upstairs hall, every spring from Meg's old mattress when she lit upon it.

She heard. But she did not speak.

She did not pray. She did not fret. Her fingers remained intertwined in a tight, clamp-like embrace—still no finger prayers.

Now that Meg had skulked in, Augusta just sat, and watched the condensation run in rivulet streams down the kitchen window. She felt a kinship with the rivulets; they just ran because of the sheer force of gravity and the thick, wet air that pelted the window. She, too, just ran—because she had to. She was caught in life's inevitable force—a veritable baby Moses in the bulrushes at the mercy of the Nile's current. She existed because she had to, because her children needed her to.

Escaping the humid room, she thought about her wayward daughter as she sat on the front porch swing. There, she let a deep sadness engulf her. The lilacs stood in full lavender bloom, yet she couldn't let herself delight in their heady fragrance. Instead, she remembered a poem she memorized long ago. Walt Whitman seemed to have penned the first three stanzas just for her, just for this night.

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,
And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,
I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night -O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappeared -O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless -O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-
washed palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of
rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume
strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle -and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-coloured blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich
green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

Sitting alone on the lilac-scented porch like that, reciting memorized poetry about a dead man, Augusta couldn't bear how the swing made her feel—alone, as one, without him. She existed, but she felt no life—at least not tonight when her daughter mistook her for furniture and the lilacs mocked her pain. *Mother was wrong. Porches aren't for miracles; they're for anguish.*

Into the “old farm house” she went, to battle the demon called sleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

Apparently, John-John curled around himself when he slept. Edward was all arm and leg sprawl—with appendages betraying the four-cornered boundaries of his iron bed. Frank, said Meg, snored like the quarry’s rock crusher. But one thing about Brinkworth men, they all appreciated their sleep, no matter what their position or how wide the orifice of their snorer.

John-John, who dreamed wild dreams at least once a week, uncurled himself at 7:48 that Saturday morning. When he looked at his ticking clock, he moaned. *Mama’s not going to like this.* Saturday morning was chore time, plain and simple, and chore time started at six o’clock on the dime.

Right before he woke up, he dreamt. Because of all John-John’s graphic dreams, which he re-enacted for the family, Edward nicknamed him “The Dreamer.” John-John preferred that to Meg’s “The Great Plate Dropper.” It reminded him of Joseph with the multicolored coat. Joseph’s father preferred him. Maybe Thomas preferred him from heaven.

In the dream, he stood in the quarry, right in the center, in what must have been summer. Flies buzzed around his ears. He looked down to notice he wore his blue and white striped pajamas. Before he could flush with embarrassment, he heard a familiar sound—the Dinky engine. Thomas had rigged the engine so that it encircled the entire operation. The tiny steam engine, creaking along narrow-gauge rails, hauled dirt and debris that blanketed what Mama called “our bread and butter.” To uncover limestone, dirt had to be excavated, but to excavate the right way—the Brinkworth way, dirt had to be carted away. That was the Dinky’s job.

On the tractor-sized Dinky steam engine sat Thomas, in a crisp white shirt, a crooked bow tie and his trademark wide-brimmed hat. Bespectacled, he sat tall and motioned for John-John to work the steam shovel. He did not talk to his son; he gestured.

“But you know I can’t work the shovel. I’m just eleven. You’ve never let me on it,” he protested. He was surprised that Thomas didn’t reprimand him for not

calling him Father. Perhaps he really *had* been inducted into the hall of Brinkworth men at death.

Although wordless, John-John understood—that Thomas' silent command, he was not to be crossed—so he climbed onto the gray steam shovel and turned the ignition. Instead of sputtering, it roared to life. He knew just how to operate the rumbling behemoth; he carefully watched the quarry laborers on countless afternoons.

Thomas pointed to a fresh spot of earth. John-John broke its virgin surface with the crush of the shovel's bucket. Dirt, then baked by the summer sun, crumpled and quivered under the weight of the immense scrape, sending flurries of dust around his pajamas. Thomas's hand kept pointing while his shaded face held a look of mild amusement, like he was just about to tell one of his stories about Aunt Bertie.

The boy scooped up a shovel-full of Ohio dirt and motored it toward the Dinky's awaiting bucket cars. He pulled the release lever and watched the dirt thud into the car below him; the bucket car swayed back and forth in response to its load and righted itself. Dust flew up as if in protest and for a moment he was caught up in the rainbow created by dust particles and the light of the sun. He knew it didn't make sense—that rainbows needed water, not dust, to be created—but he delighted in the incandescent reverie, a reverie that was interrupted by a voice.

"Well done, son. Well done." Thomas' disembodied voice sounded like him, but more languid, like water pouring over smooth stones, and it resonated deep into John-John's heart. But then he heard something strange. The Dinky, instead of clack-clack-clacking, ticked. It ticked in rhythm, like the meted footsteps of a metal soldier army. The haze of dreams and deep sleep lifted, and John-John understood the noise—his ticking clock.

Mama would be hopping mad. Normally softhearted, she'd become as tough as an Ohio buckeye. He dashed out his door, forgetting that he still wore his blue and white striped pajamas. When he flurried into the kitchen, he was surprised to see Mama, tatted in Father's chair. Flanked on her left sat Frank, in clothes, wearing a pale expression on his drawn face.

"Frank! You're up!"

"Which is more than I can say for you sleepy-head." Mama's voice laced with sarcasm—again.

"Sorry. It's just that I was having this dream about—"

"The garden is waiting for you. Weeds grew while you dreamt." Mama shooed him out the door with a swift motion of her hand. "Skit Scat."

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He didn't have the wherewithal to argue, so he turned his attention to his resurrected brother.

"I'm glad you are up and about." In a rush of brother solidarity, he approached Frank and squeezed his broad shoulder. "Gotta go. Chores are calling."

"I'll be able to help soon," John-John heard Frank say as he pushed open the screen door.

John-John blinked. The sun's rising mirrored the lake; its angled light slanted right into his eyes, spotlighting him to the ground where he stood.

"Since when did you do chores in your pajamas?" Meg stood to his left, near the entrance of the barn with her hands planted on emerging hips.

"Oh, I forgot. Sorry." He spoke in a sullen way to garner sympathy.

"Poor little Johnny. Come here. I need to talk with you."

He followed her, wounded puppy fashion, into the stale-smelling barn. He whispered, "How was your drive, Meg?" Even in the dark, he noticed a restrained smile on her lips.

"Marvelous. Splendid. I can't think of any more adjectives right now, but suffice to say, it was lovely. And besides all that, Mama doesn't know a peep. It's a dream, really."

"Dream. I had a dream about Thomas last night. He seemed to be proud of me. Do you think he is—really?"

"Of course. Of course." She seemed preoccupied, and her words did not reassure him. Instead, she pressed his back, propelling him into the yard. "Why on earth do you call Father, Thomas?"

"I'd rather not say. It's just my way now. Don't tell Mama. She wouldn't understand." His toes curled under him, grasping the dust.

Meg looked at him, right through him. "Our lips are sealed, right?"

He knew what she meant, and recoiled at the remark. His loyalty never wavered, yet she questioned it. "Meg, you know what Thomas used to say—loose lips sink ships. Don't worry. I won't sink your ship."

Instead of taking the shortest distance between two points to put on his clothes, he walked clear around the house to the front porch, wanting to avoid Mama's voice.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Augusta made them walk to church that Sunday to save fuel. Meg did not wear her newly sewn dress, although John-John took every opportunity to question her as to its comings along. “It’s coming along just fine. I just want it to be perfect.”

“Perfectly awful, you mean.”

Augusta placed her body between the two. “We are going to church, children, and I will not have you attending with sour faces. This is Frank’s first Sunday back. Let’s try to get along for his sake.”

She scanned the faces of her children—all seemed weary and beaten, but Edward’s stood out to her. She told herself to touch him. It was a sheer act of will for her to relocate from her mediating position between John-John and Meg to several paces ahead where Edward stood waiting for the rest of the family to catch up. She lifted her right arm, and wrapped it around Edward’s waist. His demeanor warmed, she felt him sink into her touch, and she thanked God that she made the effort. Maybe this one step would make the other steps easier. Maybe this simple touch was her inaugural action through the threshold of reconnecting with the grief of her children. Maybe she could let Meg know that she *knew*. She wasn’t sure, but she hoped. And that hope lightened her step.

Frank walked straight, Augusta noted, but he seemed stiff and overly purposeful. She could tell when he was trying to be brave. “Frank, maybe we should rest a bit. You look a little peaked.”

“Mama! I am ship-shape—a regular Evar Swanson.”

“Who is that?” John-John asked.

“I keep forgetting that none of you had the portable radio during the day. You remember him, right? He used to play football for the Chicago Cardinals. He changed to baseball and played for the Reds and ran the bases in thirteen-point-three seconds flat—a world record. Did it just this spring in thirteen-point-two breaking his own record. He should try for the Olympics with you.”

John-John smiled, broad and toothy. Frank knew how to cheer him, Augusta knew. Just having her oldest interact with the other children made her feel like a piece of the family puzzle was now in place. The puzzle would never be complete without Thomas, but at least Frank was back, full of life, and for today—in the breezy lilac-scented May morning—that was enough.

The children engaged in lighthearted banter all the way to the Methodist church. Its steeple was the tallest point in Centerville, a fact that made every Methodist proud, and every Baptist just a little jealous.

Frank elbowed Edward at the sight of the steeple and the two-story roof. Right before the steeple pierced the Ohio sky, a horizontal section of the roof slanted where the brothers situated Farmer Nutt's wagon one unguarded Saturday night two summers ago. The town's worshipful gawked at the wagon all that Sunday. Even the Baptists snuck peeks at the oddity. Thomas shook his head and laughed when he saw the wagon sitting on that overhang. He later told Augusta that it looked like it was meant to be there. He also knew that Edward and Frank were a part of it; something of a look passed between Thomas and his boys—a look that communicated *I know*.

It was commonplace for Thomas to live what the hymn-writer called “Amazing Grace,” and he graced the boys that day. He joined the party of men who hoisted and levered the wagon down to a bemused Farmer Nutt. Thomas never spoke a word to his boys in his quiet, playful dance of fatherhood. Augusta felt empty without it.

They mounted the steps of the white edifice to the sound of clanging bells. Cars littered the graveled parking lot to its north. To her left, Augusta saw Olya maneuver an ox-driven wagon. Augusta motioned for the children to go in, to find their pew (fifth row back, left side), then approached Olya who parked her wagon beneath an opened window under the shade of an ancient Maple.

“What brings you here?”

“Oh Missus, I have come to church.” She looked over her shoulder while still keeping a steady hand on the ox's reins. Augusta followed her gaze, surprised to see Alex seated in the back of the wagon.

“Well, hello Alex.”

He nodded a painful, almost embarrassed nod. His hat shielded his eyes, and his legs lay side by side like stiff matchsticks jutting from his torso.

“May I sit with you?”

“Of course. Yes. But what about—”

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“Oh, my Alex—he will just stay here. I cannot leave him, you know. Not for a moment. So, he will sit here.”

She tied the ox's reins to the wagon and patted its gray flank. “It'll just be one hour. You rest. You rest.” She adjusted her *babushka* and started toward the church entrance.

He nodded that same ashamed nod, not uttering a word. Olya intertwined her arm in Augusta's and walked up the white steps with purpose. “Amazing Grace” resonated off the walls of the church as they found their seats.

The same order of service Augusta had known since the family occupied pew number five marched onward, but she felt Olya's nervousness. Having a guest who had never been to any church heightened her perceptions. Thankful to flank her immigrant friend, she opened the hymnal to the correct page and indicated when she should stand.

Olya rose and sat with the rest of the crowd. She sang from her diaphragm, with no hesitation—loud and bell-like, making Tiny Lucas turn around in the Lucas pew and look, amused. If she felt conspicuous amid the crowd of non-immigrants, she didn't let on. Just as she had been when they first met, she held herself like a perched bird—proud, fastidious.

Preacher Bourland kept his sermon to thirty-five minutes. Augusta worried that Olya would be bored or confused, but she sat with her chin resting on her folded hands in rapt attention. The congregation rose one last time to sing.

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

The Brinkworth matriarch looked beyond Olya at her children, sitting in order of age from Frank down to Helen. Sitting there, while the light filtered rainbow-like through stained glass window, Augusta let out her breath. She'd been holding it over two months since the March phone call bludgeoned her with contemptible news. But today, her family remained intact. Frank was alive. And Olya sang about Jesus. Her poetry might've been buried in the Centerville cemetery tucked next to Thomas's heart, but today she felt a twinge of resurrection and even a little longing for the pen. Perhaps in the summer, I will write, she told herself as the organ resolved its final chord.

“You must come to supper today. Please, I insist.”

“Missus, you are so kind, so kind. But Alex, he—”

“Never you mind about him. We'll take care of him. I've got strong boys, you know.”

Frank's friends formed a loud circle around him just below the stoop where Farmer Nutt's wagon once perched. Although he looked tired, his eyes animated his face. The isolation of his illness had been worse than the pneumonia itself. Augusta had sufficed him by letting him have the radio every day, but not a day passed when he didn't reduce himself to shameless begging just to get out of his room. She smiled, a broad genuine smile at Frank interacting once again.

"I'll catch up with you, Mama, alright?" Frank spoke above his friends' banter.

"Supper's at two o'clock sharp. I'll need you about a half hour before that to help with Alex."

"Sure, Mama. I'll see you then."

She started to warn him to be careful, but he read her mothering mind before a word left her lips. He shushed her with his finger to his own lips, lips that smiled.

The remaining children bustled toward Olya's wagon, following behind her and Mama.

Augusta was the first to notice Alex's companion—Welcome.

"What are you doing in that wagon?"

"Uh, ma'am. I mean Mrs. Brinkworth. You know I can't be in that church building. I'm not allowed. Too much interrupting I guess. So, I saw Alex sitting here and thought he looked lonely. You were lonely, weren't you Alex?"

Alex flushed. "Not exactly."

"Besides," Welcome added, "I needed help with these birdies. They're awfully small, and I didn't want to hurt them."

"What have you done now?" Augusta shook her head.

"Look here." He pointed to Alex's lap where a stick-woven nest lay populated with three tiny cardinals, mouths agape.

"I warned you about not disrupting God's creatures. Where did you find the nest—in a tree?"

"No, I learned, I promise. I spied it on the ground. It had fallen and these birdies, they were calling for me, so I took them. Alex, he's a good daddy, he is. He is helping me." By now the children were gathered around the wagon, cooing at the tiny birds. Alex looked relieved.

"I'm keeping them." Resolve resonated in his voice.

Olya exchanged a surprised look with Augusta.

Welcome clapped his hands together. "Hip-hip-hooray for the birdies. They found a home." He leapt from the wagon and danced in a circle, arms flying, legs kicking, dust flying.

The Methodists, at least the ones parading by at the moment, turned their collective noses up at the grown man's child-like display. Yet, Augusta admired him; there was a Welcome inside of her yearning to dance—to throw away inhibitions, but her propriety and stoicism stood as harsh sentries barring her from a freedom she ached to experience. Even when Thomas swung her dance-like in his wiry arms, she could not abandon herself to the experience.

Olya interrupted Welcome's reverie. "And what will we do with Ivan? Cats love to eat birds."

"He's been outside since the lilacs bloomed. We'll just keep him out there until the birds grow." He stroked the baby birds' heads in a way that honed his universe to just birds and a crippled man. "We're keeping these birds, Olya."

His wife shook her head and mounted the riding seat. She untied the ox's reins and looked at Augusta. "So, we'll see you at supper?"

Augusta nodded and turned to Alex. "You best be getting those birds a warm place and some worms." She regretted saying it. She wished she could lasso her tongue, the way it flapped so. Her comment just further inflicted Alex's spirit; she could see it in his squinting, pain-etched eyes. When a man can't use his legs, he can't very well dig for worms, now could he? Her inner critic assailed her, and would assail her for weeks every time she thought of the squinting face of Alex.

Olya—the immigrant who did not know grace—proffered it anyway, covering over her friend's misstated comments with a blanket of salve. "Oh, yes, Missus. I will be sure these birdies have plenty of worms. My papa used to show me how to dig them. He was a farmer—the best in our village. He had all of us digging worms once we started walking. 'Worms make the soil sing,' he used to say. So, I know worms—even better than Alex."

Augusta nodded and headed toward her gravel driveway. Helen and John-John skipped ahead of her playing tag. When it was Helen's turn to be 'it,' John-John would accelerate, not looking back. His stride had purpose. Only when he reached some sort of imaginary finish line did he turn around, almost letting Helen tag him.

Just when she was within an inch of touching him, he'd dash away. "I'll be seeing you in the Olympics, Helen." How he yelled his taunting with such ringing clarity, Augusta did not know. Even in full sprint, he had his voice—no huffs.

After hearing Frank wheeze for two months, she was glad to hear one of her boys without a rasp.

Chapter Thirty-Three

They lunched outside beneath the swaying Maple tree flanking the front porch. Augusta had clipped the flowered tablecloth to the plywood table with clothespins. They made a motley bunch—the six Brinkworth children, the immigrants, and the slow of speech.

Welcome came. An agreement existed between him and Augusta—that whenever company came, he'd be welcomed.

“Welcome is welcomed! Welcome is welcomed!” he said when she explained her proposal to him way back when. It seemed to her that he always clapped when he spoke; it made her examine her hands and wonder when they would come together in a like display.

“Who wants pie?” Her question was greeted with hearty yeses. “In a month we'll be eating strawberry pie.”

“Are we picking again this year, Mama?” John-John meted out excitement when he said it; he still had that youthful naiveté when it came to the adult world of work. He still enjoyed doing the dishes.

“Oh, yes, we're all picking. Even Frank.” The older children let out a collective groan. “We could use the money.” She was not one to share her financial shortcomings with others, but this gathering seemed more like family to her than her own, and they were all well acquainted with the woes of the depressive times in which they lived.

“Do you think they will hire me, Missus?” Olya asked.

“I don't see why not. They are desperate for workers.” Again, she regretted her words. Desperate was the state Olya lived in; she didn't need a reminder.

“Good. We need money. Alex can't work.”

Augusta smiled at her frankness. Olya had not yet learned the art of American reserve, nor did she seem to notice how her words afflicted her husband. He had to be carried from the wagon by Frank and Edward to the picnic table outside. While others milled about, he sat imprisoned by his fractured legs, held hostage by the folding chair that rooted him to the ground.

“I hate having red fingers all June.” Meg cleared the plates from the table and helped dish out the dried apple pie. Still warm from the oven, it steamed when she cut it, sending escaped whiffs of cinnamon and cloves to the air around them.

“I don’t mind the red fingers,” Helen said. “I like eating strawberries—lots of them.”

“That’s stealing from Farmer Nutt, and you know it,” Meg said. “If I catch you doing that, I’m going to turn you in to the row foreman.”

“Don’t worry Helen,” Edward said. “Meg’s just taken a liking to Sammy. She’s fierce in her protection, isn’t she?” Edward angled a look at Meg.

“I am fierce for doing what’s right. Edward just has a hard time understanding principled living.”

They bantered over pie, Meg and Edward. Their disagreements settled as a backdrop in Augusta’s mind. The words no longer registered meaning. Hearing Sammy’s name reminded Augusta that Meg had kept things from her—the fact that she liked Sammy, and the deceptive outing. Part of her wanted to blurt *I know about the drive*, Meg, but something held her back. It seemed everything held her back, not just from her children, but also from engagement in life. If only the puppeteer would obey. If only she could make herself be what she wanted to be. If only.

After pie, the children and Welcome were excused. She sat with the smoldering married couple—Olya with her cutting optimism, and Alex with his glum defeatism.

“Alex, how is walking coming along? What does Doc Fenn say?”

“He’s not very...how do you say it? Possible?”

“Positive?”

“Yes, that’s the word. He’s not very positive about my legs walking again.” He shook his head and placed his hands on both knees.

“You will walk, Alex.” Augusta didn’t know why she said it. She had no medical expertise beyond a Hubbard apron and carbolic acid, but the words wanted to be said, so she said them.

“Even if he does not walk, we will survive.” Olya stacked the dessert plates and disappeared through the front door.

Augusta remembered her finger prayers. She knew now who would take Thomas’s place. Finger number ten belonged to Alex.

One day, he would walk.

Chapter Thirty-Four

John-John winced when Edward corralled what he called “the Brinkworth men.”

“John-John. Frank. Take a walk with me,” Edward boomed after they’d finished pie.

Although Frank was the oldest, Edward assumed the position of leader, so the other two followed their dark haired brother through the brambles on the quarry lake’s western shore; they stopped above the quarry on a limestone outcropping. The accident had long been cleared, but they all directed their gaze at the site where the slab crushed their father.

“We need to keep the house. Mama doesn’t say it out loud, but she needs us to work.” Edward said it as if he had already plotted a solvency plan.

On one hand, John-John loved that he was a part of this meeting—a meeting to save the house. It made him feel like a man, like a contributor. On the other, he fretted his older brothers would quarrel again.

“Don’t you think I know that, Eddie boy?” Frank spat his words, coughed, and then spat on the ground.

John-John wished he could spit like that. Somehow, no matter how hard he tried to propel his awaiting saliva, it dribbled down the center of his chin.

“Don’t be mad. I’m just saying we need to think this through.”

“I spent my life *thinking* the past two months.” Frank turned to his right and found the trail that hugged the limestone cliff. The others followed. He looked back. “Don’t you think I have tried to figure this out?”

“It never occurred to me. I thought you were just a zombie.”

“Well, you were wrong. Next month, while you are up to your elbows in strawberry juice, I will be working here.” He stopped. The three now stood on the quarry floor. Frank huffed a bit, a fact that he tried to cover up with clearing his throat. “I’m going to take Father’s position.”

John-John looked around the silent quarry. “They’ve already hired someone, Frank. How are you going to do that?”

“By being the best worker they’ve ever seen. I’ll be down here at dawn and leave at dusk. I’ll come on the weekends.”

“Even Sundays?” John-John asked.

“Even Sundays.”

“God will smite you. I know it. Besides, Mama will never allow it.” John-John tried again to spit, to make his point, but the spittle dribbled down middle of his chin, again. He tried to wipe it away. He hoped that Edward didn’t notice.

“Listen. If this family’s going to survive, it’s up to me. I’m the father now, you understand?” He directed this to Edward who looked at him, amused.

“You are not the only able-bodied worker in this family, Frankie boy. You forget that I have a job already. I give my pay to Mama every week—all of it. What have you done to help?”

“Take it easy. You know Frank’s been sick to death.” It amused John-John to see Meg and Edward spew words at each other because he knew they both adored each other deep down. But, Edward and Frank—that was different. There existed a rivalry that love didn’t seem to salve, a sort of anger that poisoned even conversations.

“Yes, of course I know that, Dreamer. It’s just that I want Frank to understand that I have had to pull his weight. He doesn’t seem to understand that I may have a plan that is worth looking into. He—”

“I am right here. Don’t be talking through John-John. I can hear you.”

“All right, then. So you’re going to work for the quarry. So what! You don’t even know if they’ll hire you. They might think you are lazy—a risk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I was sick the day Father died. Just say what’s on your mind. Quit beating around the boulder.” He said it on purpose. Their father took pride in making up the saying, uttered it nearly every day to rouse his quarry workers. He’d say it with hardness in his voice and a twinkle in his eye, but Frank’s eye didn’t twinkle.

Edward leveled his gaze at Frank. “You should have been there.”

The words hung out there, like a wet blanket on a bending clothesline. John-John squirmed, kicked the shale fragments at his feet, and whistled. Edward held Frank’s gaze in a game of who-will-blink-first. Frank blinked, then looked at the shale. He turned and headed back up the trail toward the bending grass that rimmed the quarry lake. John-John watched his oldest brother try to walk erect,

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only to be mastered by spewing coughs. When Frank reached the top, he turned and looked down on his two brothers. The sun lit Frank's face. John-John saw a cruel dichotomy etched there—the bright luminous sun, and the tortured grimace of his brother.

“Best go back to bed, Frankie boy,” Edward shouted.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The bed shivered her, the sheets icy. The May night still nipped at Augusta. Every night she hated the moon, if it made an appearance. It reminded her that bedtime neared, that her bed stood silent, beckoning. After so many years of marriage, Thomas became her hot water bottle on cold nights. She would slip into bed, reeling at the sheets' icy greeting. Then he would pull back the covers in playful glee, letting a whap of cool air enter.

"Thomas, you're bringing in cold air," she'd say.

"Ah, Augie, it's fresh air. You don't want to sleep in stale air do you?"

"I very much do. Now you have to warm me."

"That'd be my pleasure." He pulled her close. She often wondered how such a lanky man had such body heat; she was plumper after all. But in a few moments, the air between the sheets grew stale and warm and she would be asleep, her head resting on his beating heart.

This conversation haunted her every time she walked into her room at night. Tonight she took her dress off over her head and pulled on Thomas's pajamas. She hadn't washed them since his passing—she didn't have the heart for it. Her house might've preened spotless, germless, but she would not wash these pajamas. It linked her to him, to his smell.

She slipped into bed, no flap of air. She stayed cold, shaking in the moonlit room. Inferno sat at the doorway, meowing. Even though Augusta shivered in bed, she didn't want to leave it. Instead of meowing more and insisting she put him out, Inferno padded across the wood floor and leapt on Thomas's side of the bed. The cat circled around and around and pushed his claws in and out, rooting. The red cat settled himself right there, in the center of Thomas's spot, purring. Augusta felt the warmth he generated. Her own shivering stopped.

Moonlight filtered through her window and fixed itself on the curled cat.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The sky drizzled on Meg's shoes while they walked to school. Mama didn't believe in the English invention of the bumbershoot when rain spat intermittent. "It spoils you," Mama said when Meg asked if she could borrow hers.

Glum permeated them all. The drizzle pelted their bare heads, and a dull sadness held them zombie-like. Edward didn't say anything, even though Helen had given him a perfect opportunity to taunt Meg when she mentioned Sammy Nutt. He didn't want to be around anyone, it seemed. He walked ahead of them, aloof and sullen. Lily wasn't there to temper them all. She still did her penance at the Wheeler house—every weekday. Meg was left to rally John-John and Helen, but she had no energy to try.

Of all the sadness, it was Helen's that stung. Meg realized on the way to school that she had not given any attention to solving the Hornby Problem. Helen would have to face the ghoul herself, and all alone at that. Helen already cried several times during the weekend.

But Meg, preoccupied with dressmaking, couldn't be bothered, forced to heed Grandma Ellsworth's advice on more than one occasion—she sewed her dress, then she ripped the uneven seams out. She sewed. She ripped. All she had to show for her once-animated efforts was the same rectangular piece of fabric that still held traces of flour, this time with frayed edges and disembodied stitches.

"It will be all right. You'll see." Meg found her own advice stale.

"No. It won't. She hates me. Besides, how am I going to tell Mama about the zero on the spelling test?"

"You didn't tell her?" John-John said.

"No. I couldn't. You see how worried Mama is about everything. I figured that it would add to her fretting. Best keep her out of it."

"But, that's lying," John-John said, in his matter-of-fact tone. The world for him was in shades of black and white—no variation.

Meg wished things were that simple. She didn't like living in the gray, although father's death made every day that way. She remembered her secret societies, her betrayal of Mama's confidence, and wondered if she should tell the truth. She shook her head to herself, tightened her resolve, and sided with Helen. "You were right. Mama doesn't need any more grief. Lord knows she has enough of it with Frank and Edward carrying on. I'll keep thinking. There has to be a way."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Augusta's sewing and mending piled up on the dining table. The Methodists, in their charity, had brought Augusta all sorts of things to mend. Tiny Lucas brought his father's suits, but everyone knew that Jim Lucas never wore one. He probably wouldn't wear one when he was six feet under, either. But, they would pay her two dollars to hem them all. Hem, she did—all day long. The Catholics were more straightforward in their charity. The Church of the Holy Name sent family-sized quantities of beef on Sundays via their neighbors, the Hanson family. The Minn family Dairy sent them milk and refused Augusta's attempts to pay them back.

Her thoughts returned to seaming. She despised thimbles. They made her hands lumber, so she never used one. The wages for shunning the thimble were two bleeding index fingers, which she bandaged with the trimmings of Jim Lucas' pant legs. A quiet knock at the back door broke the monotony.

"Olya!"

The Ukrainian walked in, plodded across the floor and sat down with a thud. Augusta cleared the table of mending to make space for her friend.

"What is wrong? Are you all right?"

Olya sat, head in hands, her hair let down and tangled like it had been slept on, but not brushed. "Does God love the world, Missus?"

"Yes, of course He does. He made it."

"Why does He not help my people, then? Why?"

"What do you mean?"

She reached into her apron pocket, pulled out a letter and showed its front to Augusta. The words were written in block script, but the stamp looked unfamiliar to her. "It's from my homeland, the Ukraine. God is letting my family die."

To Augusta's surprise, she did not cry or show any emotion when she spoke.

She removed the letter from the envelope and unfolded it, pressing out the creases on the table. She read, "It's from my niece, Zina. She writes this: Dear

Aunt Olya, Will you import me to America? I am hungry. There is no food here, no bread, and no chickens. Father killed our cow today, but even she did not leave much meat. We had cow-bone soup. It tasted like warm water. We eat boiled weeds for breakfast. Mother lays on the bench in the kitchen all day long and stares at the walls. Ivar's stomach—" Here Olya interjected, "Ivar is my nephew."

She cleared her throat and continued. "Ivar's stomach is big, and I don't understand why it is. It bulges over his pants, but his arms are like match sticks. He cries at night from hunger. Sometimes he eats rocks just to fill his stomach."

Olya, the sometimes-regal czarina, allowed a tear to run down her cheek, resigned to the tear's inevitability—she did not brush it away.

"Missus, Ivar is John-John's age, just a young boy. When I saw him last, he ran from Alex. Both chased each other. Those were the days when boys played games. Those days have ended."

Augusta understood grief when she heard it. She couldn't mine it, unable to unlock Olya's pain for fear that her own pain would storm out like Ohio's violent thunder storms. Instead, she said, "I thought you were from a place with good soil and plentiful crops. What happened?"

"Yes, they called our Ukraine Russia's Bread Bucket."

"You mean bread basket?"

"Oh, yes. We made all the wheat for Mother Russia, but we always had more left over to sell and buy our own food. We had our own gardens, too. My mother, she made our cellar full in the autumn, and we ate all winter long on the produce."

"Why are your people starving?"

She scanned the letter. "I don't know. Zina doesn't say. Perhaps bad weather?"

"You must find out."

"Didn't you say that God made everything and that He loves all people?"

"Yes."

"Then why does this happen?"

"I don't know, Olya. I used to have the world figured out. I believed that if I worked hard enough and loved my children, that my world would be untouched by tragedy. Well, it didn't happen that way, did it?"

"No, not for you. Not this year. God must be weak. Perhaps He starves like my Ivar. Perhaps He is bleeding and cannot help us."

"I hope not. I have to believe He can help us. It's either that, or there's no hope." Augusta stood, then paced to the stove to pour some tea. She wished she had new tea bags, but she didn't have enough money to order them from Decker's store this week. She placed two used ones in Olya's cup and let them steep. She

pressed them against the cup, trying to eek out more flavor. In her cup, she poured water and nothing more.

“There is another way of viewing things, Missus.” Olya’s gaze penetrated Augusta’s. “You can believe the way Comrade Stalin believes—that God is nowhere. There is no God.”

“I may be unhappy with my life right now, but I cannot yet believe God does not exist.” Augusta continued to press the spent teabag to the side of Olya’s cup.

“Alex says there is no God. He calls me stupid for attending church with you. ‘Fables,’ he says. ‘The church is full of fables of a God who does not live.’” Olya’s voice held an edge to it that Augusta had never heard before. “He cannot live if He does not feed my family.”

Augusta handed her friend a teacup, and the two sipped in silence.

Augusta’s voice tore through the quiet. “I’m adding another finger, Olya.”

“What Missus?”

“When I pray to this God—this God who I think is real, I pray for one person per finger: six for my children, one for my mother, one for me, one for the world, and one for your Alex. I am out of fingers.”

“You pray for Alex? Why?”

“I’d rather not say right now. But I need another finger—to pray for your family, your homeland.”

“I think you need all ten toes for them. It is a big prayer.”

“One big toe will do it, Olya. I’ll ask God to remind me of them. Perhaps He will stub that toe as a reminder.”

“He’ll need to do a lot of stubbing, Missus.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Meg thought for a week about the Hornby Problem, with no solution. Mama had been preoccupied again. At times, Mama participated in the life of the family; but most of the time, she held herself away. She lived at their house, offering mute hugs for scraped knees, but her heart left—gone from Centerville, gone from living.

Meg could not ask Mama for help, and besides that, she knew that Mama would not let her pay retribution to a teacher. In her days before glum, Mama would quip, “If someone hits you on the side of the head, offer them your other head.” It didn’t make sense, of course, but she said it in a way that made you laugh—even if you were Butcher George Weller from Decker’s, who was known for his long, serious face. He drooled out of the left side of his mouth—the side that didn’t work right since his stroke. Mama could always make him smile, albeit a crooked, right-mouthed smile.

Edward and Frank didn’t speak to each other that entire week. They would speak to Helen only and make her deliver messages to the other. Helen did their bidding, feeling important to her big brothers. As soon as Meg got wind of it, she told Helen to ignore them.

The drama of Meg and The Great Dress Caper continued, with John-John’s taunts and her methodical sewing and ripping. Lily tried to help her, but Meg’s temper flared with greater frequency to the point that even patient Lily could not tolerate her. This seemed to compound the Hornby Problem in Meg’s eyes. Every day her dress looked more like the flour sack.

On the way to school, Lily sung a hymn. John-John skipped flat stones on Lake Frank, trying to reach clear to the island. Meg watched the sun dance on Lake Frank. Edward walked ahead of them, all to himself. Helen cried.

Meg turned to her. “Stop it. I can’t think of anything. If we do something juvenile, like putting a garden snake in her drawer, she’ll blame you, sure as spring.”

Edward threw up his arms and turned to face the motley bunch. “Enough!” His voice boomed so much that it seemed even the birds stopped their chirping to listen. “I have three words for you.”

“What three words?” Helen stopped crying.

“Farmer Nutt’s wagon.” With that, he turned away and continued his solitary walk in front of them. He offered no explanation, no hints—nothing. He just kept walking.

Helen and Meg looked at each other, perplexed. *What on earth does he mean*, thought Meg. She remembered the spectacle of Farmer Nutt’s wagon—his prized possession—on the church roof, and how her father had helped to bring it down. Other than that, she couldn’t know what Edward was getting at. Maybe he meant they should do something memorable, spectacular.

Ida Hornby didn’t like the spotlight, to be sure. She languished in a tiny white house on East Ridgeway, kitty corner from the school. Blackberries grew wild in her weed-infested back yard, so much so that they spilled into the alleyway. She shook her fist at the children who tried to pick the seedy fruit in September and chased them with her cane. Rumor had it that last year she bought poison at Decker’s store and sprayed the berries, making them white as snow. No one was going to get her berries, not even her.

She had one love—Buttercup the pony. Cars became the means of transportation in Centerville, a sight that made the patriarchs nervous and the youths revel. Mrs. Hornby lived forty years earlier, in the days of horse and buggy. Every day, she rode Buttercup to school, clip clopping a block down East Ridgeway. She halted at the stop sign at Twelfth Street, and pointed left with her hand, as if signaling.

She parked Buttercup in a bona-fide parking space—number three to be exact. At lunch while children played jacks on the playground, Mrs. Hornby sat by Buttercup while they both supped—Buttercup on oats that the teacher brought in a galvanized pail, and Mrs. Hornby on pickles and bread. As nasty as she was to the children all day, she lavished twice that amount in attention to the small palomino pony. She might be stooped, smell like mothballs, and never attend to her own grooming, but buttercup shone every day—mane cut in the straightest line, coat shining. She even brushed Buttercup’s teeth with an old hairbrush and some baking soda.

“I know what to do.” Meg offered no explanation, although Helen and John-John took turns asking her on their journey to school.

“C’mon, Meg, tell us!” John-John used the power of his eyes, the longing blue eyes that usually melted her into truth telling.

“And yet, I am unmoved,” she said. “Tomorrow, I’ll take care of Mrs. Hornby. Just wait and see.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Centerville. The very name connoted centrality, as if the world spun on its axis around the tiny Ohio town. Not much happened. People knew each other's business—a bane to naughty children because eyes spied everywhere and the keepers of the eyes had large, vocal mouths. No secrets, to be sure. The big name newspapers invaded its borders when the stone crushed the quarry men. They scurried and scampered like nut-hungry squirrels for the sake of a sensational story. Now silence. Until today. Never had there been such a flurry as the day Buttercup came to school.

Meg told Mama that she had to be at school early, to help a teacher with some correcting. "It's a paying job," she had lied.

"Just be sure you attend to your chores."

"All right, Mama. You can depend on me." She left in the dark, before the sun was full above the eastern horizon. Mrs. Hornby arrived early, she knew. If typical to form, she'd park Buttercup, hang her shawl in her room, and then go to the teacher's room for some sort of mysterious camaraderie. Usually, the teacher reentered her classroom just as the first students arrived. Meg knew she had little time. She arrived to see Buttercup minding his own business in parking slot number three.

"Easy, Buttercup. Easy." She stroked his short neck, feeling his pulse. Buttercup blew his nose in a snorting sort of way, spraying pony fluid all over Meg's dress. It took her awhile to untie the restless pony; Mrs. Hornby knew her knots, tying up Buttercup as if he were a moored boat.

"C'mon Buttercup. Easy now. That's a good boy." She led him to the school's back door. She figured there'd be less clopping here than if she went in the side door. The door was locked. Meg let out a long sigh. This would be harder than she planned.

"Stay here, Buttercup." She tied the palomino to the back doorknob and tiptoed to the side door. Locked. The sun shone higher now—just twenty minutes

or so until students started arriving. With a bit more panic, she ran to the front of the building, trying the conspicuous door. Unlocked. Janitor Nolan had oiled the wood floors, Meg could tell. She removed her man-shoes and ran toward the back middle door right down the central hallway on the first floor, but the floors were so slippery that instead of running, Meg slipped and careened like an inexperienced ice skater on Sutter's pond.

"Miss Meg!" Miss Allen's voice echoed off the hallway.

Meg stiffened and turned. "Why, hello, Miss Allen. How are you today?"

"Just fine. What brings you to school so early?"

"I...am...well, it's sort of a surprise."

"Does it involve your shoes?"

"What? Oh, yes. My shoes. I didn't want to scuff up Janitor Nolan's floors."

"Well, Miss Meg, I love surprises. All journalists worth their salt do. Care to let me in on it?" Her voice sounded animated, lighthearted.

"Well, then it wouldn't be a surprise, now, would it?" Meg tried to look lighthearted, but she knew she had a fake smile pasted on her face—the kind Mama used to rile her about when they got pictures taken.

"I suppose not. Well, I'll see you soon, Miss Meg."

"Yes, soon."

"Oh...um...Meg?"

"Yes, Miss Allen?"

"How is that quarry feature coming along?"

"Not so good. I promise I will get to it soon. I'm going to interview Mama's friend Olya." She hoped that Miss Allen would stop her chattering. She could hear the hall clock tick-tick-tick. Every tick brought angst.

"An interview would be a nice touch. I'll expect the piece on my desk by the end of school, May twenty-fifth." Her cheerfulness had a serious edge to it.

"Great. I will have it then. See you in class." She tried to say it breezily, but it came out strained. She waited until Miss Allen pivoted and walked toward the teacher's room. Meg ran and slid to Buttercup's door and opened it just a little, remembering that ponies can be skittish. The golden pony found some long weeds by the back door and munched contentedly. Meg untied him.

"Walk, Buttercup. This way." She tried to coax him through the door, but Buttercup planted both hooves at its threshold, happy outside where tall weeds sufficed him. She pulled his head, but his hooves stayed planted; now he just looked like a pony with an elongated neck. He pulled his neck back—his neck after all—and snatched another mouthful of grass.

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“Grass!” She dropped her shoes, pulled up the grass from around the door, and walked three steps into the hallway; she held the grass in front of Buttercup’s nose. He stretched everything—his neck, his head, even his lips—toward the green fodder. Finally, he took his first step into the school. She hadn’t figured that one hoof step would make so much noise. She looked left and right. No one around, still.

For what seemed like an hour, but really only three minutes, Meg pulled, prodded, coaxed and encouraged Buttercup until they both stared horse eye to human eye in Mrs. Hornby’s room. Meg tied the pony to his owner’s desk. She opened the middle drawer, in search of chalk. On the chalkboard behind the desk she wrote these words: BE NICE TO YOUR STUDENTS. I AM WATCHING YOU. LOVE, BUTTERCUP.

Meg wiped the chalk from her hands onto her dress and hurried out. She started up the stairs, when she remembered that she had dropped her shoes near the back door. She grabbed them and ran up the back steps to Miss Allen’s room. Locked. She slid her back down the smooth plaster wall; she pulled out a notebook from her satchel and started writing the quarry story—finally. Her mind stayed full of ponies and chalk, but she managed to write the first line.

Centerville’s Limestone Service Company exists because of its workers. The workforce, a patchwork of people from all over the world, but particularly Eastern Europe, is an interesting montage of culture. Many speak little English. Others speak just enough to buy grain at Decker’s store. But all of them share a common love: America.

She hoped Olya would fit into this paragraph, that she would extol the virtues of American life. Meg hated to re-write and she liked what she wrote. To cross out words felt like killing a well loved pet. She’d frame the questions to fit her premise, interview Olya, and write the story. Miss Allen would have the procrastinated article next week.

Children trickled into the building as she stood, surprised at how little remorse she felt for Buttercup and Mrs. Hornby. Preacher Bourland said that when you stopped feeling guilty, you were on the path of becoming a perfect heathen. He didn’t say *heathen* though; he said *heathern*, which to her sounded even more dammed. So, she was to become a *heathern*. She smiled. At least *heatherns* got to bring ponies into classrooms.

She stayed in classrooms all day. Her cover? Mock studiousness. During lunch and recess, when most children jumped rope and picked sides for stickball, she feigned sudden interest in her quarry story and wrote five pages of made up things that, of course, she would verify later.

Instead of picking up her younger siblings, she dashed down the back stairs through Buttercup's door, or at least the door she had coaxed the pony through. She looked in parking slot number three—no Buttercup. *That's strange. She must've taken the animal home and dismissed early.* Meg hurried around to the front right corner of the school and spied John-John. He made no mention of any ruckus. She let him prattle on and on about a game he called "Andy Over," while she waited for Helen.

"It's this great game, Meg. You should've been there. Why weren't you at recess, now? Well, anyway, you know the outhouses we use when the draught comes? Well, we form two teams, one on either side of the outhouses. Then someone tosses a ball over. Once the ball leaves the guy's hands, his team can run around the outhouses and tag as many opponents as they can until the ball falls to the ground. Our team won because we have Doby McCray. He's tall, you know, and can throw a ball to the treetops. One time, we tagged the whole team."

"Hmm? Yes, that's nice." Meg saw Helen at the top of the school's cement steps. Her heart leapt, especially when Helen broke into an uncharacteristic run toward her.

"Meg! You'll never guess what Mrs. Hornby did today!" Her face radiated, a face none of the Brinkworth children had encountered since Father's death.

"What?"

"She brought Buttercup into the classroom."

"*She* did?"

"Yes. When I got to school late—no thanks to you—there was Buttercup tied up to her desk, munching away."

"Munching on what?" Meg didn't know what to do with this information.

"Why, hay, silly Meg. Mrs. Hornby put a whole pile in her garbage pail, filled the whole thing up."

"You mean," John-John interrupted, "Hornby brought Buttercup in your classroom to *stay*? For the whole day?"

"Yes, and I'm mighty glad she did. She was a whole new Mrs. Hornby. Buttercup brought out the best in her."

Helen laughed and then started singing. "Hornby had a little horse, little horse, little horse. Hornby had a little horse in school against the rules. It made Helen laugh and play, laugh and play, laugh and play. It made Helen laugh and play to see Buttercup at school."

John-John laughed and joined her in round two of the song, making up more verses about horses, education, and rides at recess.

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After the verbal mayhem, Meg turned to her. “When you got to the classroom, was there anything written on the board?”

“Let’s see. Oh yes. Long division—loads of it.”

Meg longed to let the horse out of the bag, so to speak, but there was something intoxicating about having this information all to herself. This was not a secret society, because societies needed other people. This was a secret of one, her very own secret, which, in a family of six need-to-know children, became a precious commodity indeed.

Perhaps the *heathern-izing* of Meg had commenced. Or maybe it was complete.

Chapter Forty

The school year ended late May to cries of “School’s out, school’s out, teachers let the monkeys out; no more pencils, no more books, no more teacher’s sassy looks.”

A reformed Mrs. Hornby no longer gave sassy looks. Helen said she missed the teacher’s crotchety ways. The last two weeks of class Buttercup came in the classroom on many occasions. Mrs. Hornby said he was school-trained. If he needed to use the WC, he would paw at the oiled floor, and the now diffident Mrs. Hornby would lead him outside, to parking place number three and let him do his business. The children, instead of laboring over long division, wrote animal stories, even allowed to illustrate them. Rumor had it that horse stories fetched As, so the entire class wrote in the short-story genre called Equine. Helen’s was about a golden pony named Sunflower. She got an A.

Meg handed in her quarry story on the last day of class. She never did bother to interview Olya, nor did she discipline herself to check her facts. She just felt relief that the story was finished and she could go on with the business of summer living. She hoped Miss Allen would overlook, or better yet, misplace the story. One could hope.

Her mind preoccupied itself with holding down her lies—her ride with Sammy and her introduction of Buttercup to learned society topped her list. She fretted at how far she had gotten from the religion of her honest mother, but not enough to tell the truth. Besides, Mama didn’t need more worries.

Olya helped the Brinkworth family with its kitchen garden. Besides the hen house, Strawberry the horse, and the milk cow Meg now called Bertie-Bee, they had their one acre garden—one half acre for potatoes and the other half for everything else. Mama never strayed from her crops year after year: trellised peas, string beans, sweet Ohio corn, pumpkins, tomatoes, shelling beans, beets, crisp iceberg lettuce, sweet yellow onions, carrots, parsley, green onions, radishes, and winter squash—all flanked by a fence made by sunflowers. A careful seed saver, she

didn't need to go to Decker's to buy seed. The well on the property drank deeply. Even during last year's dusty summer, water still flowed in delicious abundance. To keep the family fed, Mama said, she would need the cooperation of what the French called *le soleil*.

Mama offered Olya the use of the garden since her small home had no such plot and she seemed to need to get away from Alex's shifting temper. His baby birdies died, all three of them. They starved to death because they wouldn't trust his hand. Olya would catch worms and Alex would try in vain to feed the little cardinals, but they shut their beaks. One by one the life drained from them, and one by one Olya buried them. She said later that Alex never cried about his birds, but that his face grew harder with each death.

Under Olya's hand, the garden exploded. Purple stocks were her favorites; she told Meg they scented her rough hands when she picked them. Fingers of their fragrance alit on breezes that blew indiscriminately through the kitchen's opened window, making Meg glad for Olya.

Olya needed to work the dirt, she said, and that truth played out in the garden's early abundance of green onions and iceberg lettuce. Her deep worries were worked out through quiet sowing and violent hoeing. The dirt itself, at times unyielding, became the canvas that Olya worked out her life story. Meg watched her and wondered at her paradox. She would speak in her native tongue to tiny flowers in one breath, and rape the earth with her hoe the next. There were times when Meg felt a kinship with Olya's mood swings. Meg's moods leapt like rabbits between elation and despair, elation and despair.

Together Olya and Mama would plant tiny seeds, pull up chickweed and talk about letters from Olya's Ukraine. Only Meg joined them while they worked or read. There existed an unspoken rule that no one was to interrupt the two when they gardened and grieved together, so Meg kept quiet, pulling weeds.

Olya forced her cheerfulness—except when it came to John-John. She gave him the job of digging red wiggler worms—a task which he took great pride in. She petted him like a dog every time he brought more worms to the garden site. Sometimes without provocation, her face would fall and she would pat John-John's belly, something a growing eleven-year-old would normally despise. He would let her anyway. He didn't correct her when she called him Ivar. He seemed to know she had deep sorrow, a fact that Meg marveled at. How was it that her kid brother possessed such insight into the heart of a sad immigrant?

Aunt Bertie came for a visit just when the school year ended—a short visit that just kept extending itself week after week. She came to bring religion, and a

healthy dose of that to boot. She told Meg, "My job's to keep you feeling guilty. The more guilt, the better. That's the way to reform this wayward family."

Meg squirmed.

They laid off Frank at the quarry just a week after he started. He worked days and evenings that week, but was let go anyway along with thirty Centerville men. Road contracts with the state of Ohio had been cancelled, but he blamed the immigrants for their cheap labor and became what Aunt Bertie called "a political fool."

"This town needs changing," he said that night over dinner.

"How so, Frankie boy?" Edward asked it with mild amusement. He still held his place in the family as its main breadwinner, a fact that he lorded over Frank whenever possible.

"A new politic, that's what it needs. Of five-hundred folks in this quarry town, there are four-hundred and ninety-eight republicans and one independent."

"That'd be Doc Calverley, the man-animal doctor," Helen said.

"He's a smart man, Doc Calverley." Frank said it in such a serious way that the other children snickered. Everyone knew Doc Calverley had a pet mole named Frumpus. Frumpus perched on the doctor's shoulder during office visits by either beast or human. He only extricated the mole when he delivered babies. He said all the blood and wailing would scare the poor thing.

"You thinking of becoming a Roosevelt-lover?" Aunt Bertie shouted. Her hearing had deteriorated even since her last visit. She shouted her way through life now. Inferno was so frightened of the shouting licorice-eating lady that he hid under Meg's bed most days.

"As a matter of fact, I am," Frank said. "He's got some good ideas to put us hard-working Americans back to work. I just might be the first democrat in Centerville." He raised his voice, so Aunt Bertie heard it.

"Democrats. Phooey! Don't you know the root of Democrat is Demon? Ain't any of them going to heaven, and I don't mind telling you either. You better watch yourself Frankie boy. God doesn't take kindly to Democrats, or for that matter, Independents. God is a Republican, through and through, and if you're interested in your eternal soul, you'll change your card."

"Don't be silly."

"Who are you calling silly? I'm an old woman. I can't be silly. I may not even be on this blessed earth long enough to see the Centerville strawberries ripen. Silly? You just call me that because you know I am right, and you're too stubborn to admit it." Aunt Bertie stood now, which really wasn't very high,

and certainly not intimidating, and shook her crooked finger at Frank. “Mark my words, Frankie boy. The first step is Democrat. After that it’s communism, and then hell.”

She pushed her chair to the table and walked up the back stairs. For a moment, the table was silent and everyone looked at their rabbit stew. The first snicker came from Lily, which surprised everyone. That one gentle laugh catapulted laughter for the rest of the family. Even Mama laughed—the kind of laugh that comes from your belly and comes out your eyes in the form of escaped happy tears. Yet, as if on cue, Mama seemed to realize life was no longer a comedy, and she straightened her smile into a thin, pressed line.

After the ruckus died down, Mama looked up. The light fixture moved to the rhythm of Aunt Bertie’s deliberate stomping feet. Everyone knew she’d be on tomorrow’s ten o’clock train.

John-John whispered, “Choo-Choo,” at which point everyone, except Mama, laughed again.

Even after the lighthearted moment, Mama cleared her throat. “I don’t think Roosevelt’s against immigrants the way you seem to be. Besides, we’re all immigrants.”

Not one to cross his mama, Frank hung his head.

“Don’t you know what they jump-roped to on the playground this year?” Edward seemed to be waiting to rub anything into an already defeated Frank. “Democrats eat fried rats and chew ‘em up like gingersnaps. Got any fried rats for dinner, Mama?”

“Edward!” Mama never raised her voice, at least not to the level of Aunt Bertie’s, unless she was crazy-mad. Before she could reprimand him, Edward pushed himself away from the table and left. Meg wanted to leave to, but she stayed. Mama didn’t need more desertion right now. Meg felt guilt for leaving her mama by her betrayal; the least she could do was to be there for her now.

When she cleared, washed, and wiped the dishes, Meg corralled all the Brinkworth girls into her room for an unofficial girl’s club meeting.

“I have a plan,” Meg said.

“Oh no. The last time you said you had a plan, we got a licking from father,” said Helen, who never let Meg forget that her plan to skip out on the cousins on quarry island ended in corporal punishment.

“Nettie still won’t write me letters. When she got un-lost, she had mosquito bites, burrs in her britches, and blisters on her feet.”

“Nettie’s a sissy, and you know it. We were just having some fun, that’s all.”

Lily interrupted, "Meg, we really should have gone back sooner to retrieve them, and don't forget that you lied to Nettie, James, and Edna when they found us back at the house."

"Lied? I didn't lie—just stretched the truth a bit. I said 'We looked around and you weren't following us so we thought you had gone back home.' It could have happened. They could've even beaten us back home."

"Not likely. I hope this new plan of yours is of better intention, Meg," Lily said.

"Yes, it involves free cosmetics."

"What am I going to do with cosmetics, Meg?" Helen smirked when she asked it. It would take some convincing to bring Helen into her scheme.

"You could sell them—for money. And then you could buy whatever you wanted at Decker's."

"Sounds interesting. All right, I'm in. What do I have to do?" Helen beckoned Inferno to join her on Meg's bed. Inferno jumped onto Meg's quilt and curled himself between Helen and Lily, purring.

"This isn't illegal, is it?" Lily shot a look to her younger sister.

"No! It's as legal as coupons."

"Coupons?" Lily looked confused.

"Yes, coupons. You know Mama's magazines? She doesn't get many anymore, but she still has that stack in the kitchen to help start the stove. All we have to do is remove one or two, cut the coupons we need, and put them back. Then, we get two more, until we've gone through the whole stack."

Helen, the pragmatist, asked, "But why not just ask Mama? She's just going to burn them anyway. What would she care?"

"The coupons are for cosmetics, weren't you listening? Mama doesn't like cosmetics. Makes us peacocks, she says."

"Perhaps there is a reason for that, Meg," Lily said.

Meg ignored her. "My friend Celia told me how to get free lotion and lipstick. You just clip the coupons for free samples—one from the Andrew Jergens Company in Cincinnati, and the other from Tangee, the company that makes orange lip rouge. We just paste the coupon to a one-cent postcard and send it in. Simple as pie."

"And where are we going to get a penny for a postcard stamp, Meg?" Helen still looked skeptical.

"I've saved a few in here." She directed her sisters to what she called her dressing and writing table. On the table sat a tomato soup can that Meg had scrubbed

clean and filled with pencils. She pulled out the pencils and shook out a few pennies and counted them—nine in all.

“Mama would be upset if she knew you were hiding money,” Lily scolded. “We ate rabbit stew tonight, don’t you remember? I hate rabbit stew—the thought of eating Peter Rabbit, or Brer Rabbit for that matter, makes my stomach turn.”

“They are just pennies. And besides, I found them. That will give each of us three samples. Wouldn’t you like some cosmetics? I hear the lotion smells like roses.”

“Aw, you know I love to smell good. I suppose it won’t hurt anyone,” Lily said.

Helen stroked Inferno’s orange fur. “You say the lip rouge is orange? Isn’t that a strange color for lips?”

“It’s all they have. The lotion and the orange lip color—those are the free items. It’s either those or nothing,” Meg counted out three pennies for each sister. “I thought it could be a summer competition for us. We can each keep one lip rouge and one lotion, but whatever your third item is, you’ll need to sell it. That’ll be your seed money. Take that money and see what you can do to multiply it, like Jesus did with the loaves and fishes. Whoever has the most money at the end of the summer, wins.”

“What do we win?” Helen asked.

“I have secrets. Whoever wins gets to hear them. Believe me, they are good ones.”

Helen, who longed for a world of fairness, said, “But what about you, Meg? What if you win?”

“That’s the best prize of all. I keep them all to myself.”

Lily put her hand on Meg’s shoulder. “I suppose that’s a good prize. But you know you shouldn’t be sneaking around life with secrets, Meg. Why not just come clean right now?”

Meg turned to face her. “No. You have to win to hear them. That’s the way of the game, and in this, I am the game-master.”

“Wait a minute. What about the mail? Won’t Mama find out about our conning when she picks it up?” Helen examined her pennies while she asked the question.

“You forget, worried one, that Lily Pie picks up the mail after surviving the Wheeler children—every day except Sunday. So, you see, Mama will never need to know.”

“You know I don’t like this. It seems like blackmail to me. I just have to know.” A usually subdued Lily came out of her careful shell that day, caught up

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with the competition and prize. "I'll tell you what. I am in—if we give the money to Mama at the end of the summer. All the money."

Meg smiled. "That's a great idea. What do you think?"

"Wait. I didn't finish. We give her all the money, and we tell her the truth about how we got the money." Lily untied her white apron, folded it, and placed it on the bed.

"Lily Pie, you make life so . . . so . . . obedient and good. Can't you live with a little wickedness?" Meg took off her work apron and threw it across the room. It landed on Inferno, who meowed in protest and jumped off the bed.

"No, and neither should you. But, if you agree, I am in."

"All right then. Operation Cosmetics is hereby executed."

Chapter Forty-One

Augusta seldom had time alone, now that her younger children were home. It used to be that she could sanitize the house, from the rafters to the stone floor and have it stay that way. The children, with their wide-eyed wonder and lack of sanitary sense, messed everything up for her. Normally this didn't bother her, but for some reason, a clean and germ-free house was a security blanket. Something measurable. Even if they had to eat boiled dandelion greens for dinner, at least she could measure success by the shine of her floors. No more. Now she lived without definition, without measures, without a sense of self.

Welcome didn't seem to notice her frenetic need for cleanliness. He was all thumbs, and messy thumbs at that. *God must've put Welcome in my life to try me*, she thought one day while she wiped dirty Welcome prints off the back door's window. Just as she finished, Welcome appeared. He stood opposite her, separated by the door's clean windowpane. He didn't knock. He didn't raise his hand to say "Hey." He just stood there, smiling a crooked smile.

"Well, come on in, Welcome. Wipe that goofy look off your face and tell me what you need."

"Nothing, Mrs. Brinkworth. Just wanted to see you. I've been crying, you see." He pointed to both eyes with each pointer finger. Tears had created dirt streets in neat vertical lines from his eyes to his jawbone.

"Why ever for, Welcome?"

"I miss my brother. He made things real easy for me. He took care of me."

"Doesn't Hattie take care of you, son?"

"Well, she makes sure I am clean, if that's what you mean. But, she's not soft in her heart, like Jimmy was. She's always angry with me. She spends her nights writing up in that scary room, and in the day she sleeps. Do you think she's a vampire?"

"Of course not. Writers just do strange things sometimes. When they get the inspiration, they just have to get the words out—no matter what the hour." She

couldn't remember the last time she felt that primal urge to write like that. Perhaps even the writer in her had died. She motioned for Welcome to sit down. He sat in Thomas's chair—a thing no Brinkworth child would dare do, but Augusta allowed it of Welcome.

“Do you make a fuss?”

“Not more than usual. She says I make messes—big messes. She points her finger at me. And she yells. That's why I was crying. Jimmy, he never yelled at me.”

“What kind of messes do you make?”

“Just the normal messes, Mrs. Brinkworth. I bring in my friends to show Joshua and Emmy Jo.”

“What friends?”

“Just squirrels and bunnies and moths and snakes.”

“Welcome! You must keep those things outside. They bring in germs!”

He cupped his ears in large hands. “Don't yell at me. You sound like Hattie. Besides, what are germs?”

Augusta could see that this conversation ventured in circles, like a dog chasing his tail in hot pursuit.

“I'll tell you what. I bet that things will get better if you would just ask Joshua and Emmy Jo to come outside to see your friends. Remember to take your shoes off when you come in the house. And wash your hands and face.”

“You sound like Hattie, Mrs. Brinkworth.”

“Welcome, you don't need to call me Mrs. Brinkworth. Call me Augusta. We're friends, aren't we?”

“A...gust...y. I can't say it. I can't. It's too hard.”

“Sure you can. Try again.”

“Gusty!”

“Well, Gusty it is. Call me Gusty.”

He rose from Thomas's chair, grabbed the doorknob with one hand and pressed his dirty fingers to the windowpane. “Bye-Bye Gusty. I'll be real good. I promise.”

Without a thought, she grabbed her cleaning rag.

“Goodbye, Welcome.”

Chapter Forty-Two

The dawn of June meant strawberry-picking time approached. Meg dreaded the mid-month invasion of the juicy red berry because it meant she would be giving up her carefree existence. She had spent the previous two weeks of summer break ignoring chores, or doing them with half-hearted enthusiasm. In their place, she took to what she called “adventuring.” After the thrill of spiring away magazines for “Operation Cosmetics” ebbed, Meg decided to fill the agonizing wait with hikes to new places around Centerville. John-John and Helen became her guinea pig adventurers. They followed behind her just for the thrill of something new, different. In a way, they all held an unspoken pact—to be away from Mama’s cleaning tirades.

Just yesterday they walked to Centerville’s highest point—the town cemetery—where their father laid beneath spent bouquets. It was a crisp and bright afternoon—with searing sunshine topping eighty degrees. The humidity had not arrived in Centerville and the three Brinkworth adventurers did not mind a bit.

After a quiet moment at Father’s gravesite, Helen decided to conduct plays in the cemetery.

“Let’s act out *Little Women*. I’ll be Meg.”

“Don’t be silly, Helen. I was born to be Meg,” Meg said as she made a dramatic gesture with her right hand.

“I am not being Laurie,” John-John said. “I always have to be Laurie. Why can’t we be pirates? Why not act out *Treasure Island*?” The Brinkworth family was a democracy through and through. Their father had seen fit to verse them in parliamentary procedure, which he dispatched from his Morris chair. John-John was vetoed and voted down every time. The female agenda always won.

“Let’s do Amy’s wedding, then,” Helen urged.

“That’s not in the book,” Meg said.

“So, it would be interesting, and we could let John-John be the preacher for once. I’ll be Amy. I have her nose,” Helen said.

“Who will be Laurie?” John-John asked.

“This tree here.” Helen wrapped her arms around the oak trunk.

“Who will I be?” Meg asked. “There’s no one else to be.”

“You can be the mysterious flower girl,” John-John said. “There’s nothing more interesting than a flower girl with a dangerous secret.”

John-John cleared his throat, much like Preacher Bourland did on Sundays before his hour-long sermon that Meg had called “Bourland’s Ramblings.” “Amy” held a bouquet of plastic mums, while “Laurie” swayed in the breeze. The mysterious flower girl stood behind them, looking cryptic.

“Ahem.” John-John straightened his spine, almost as straight as Edward’s, and looked at the nervous couple. “Four score and seven years ago.”

“That’s not a wedding sermon. That’s Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address! Come on John-John. Be serious. This is the wedding Louisa May never wrote about. We need to make it realistic,” Helen said.

He made a sweeping motion with his hand, erasing Lincoln’s words. “Dearly beloved.”

“That’s better,” Helen said.

“Shh. The bride is not supposed to talk. Just look bridely,” John-John continued. “Dearly beloved. We are gathered here in the presence of God and these trees—oh, and this mysterious flower girl—to join these two people in holy matrimony.”

“I do,” Helen said, never much for long sermons or mushy sentiment.

“I am not done yet. Let me finish my sermonizing,” John-John said as he pointed his finger at the defiant “Master Laurie,” the wooden groom.

“Can’t you just hurry? I have a twist I want to add at the end of the scene,” Meg said.

“Ahem. Do you, Laurie, take Amy to be your awfully wedded wife?”

“Not awfully, lawfully,” Meg said.

“Lawfully wedded wife?”

The tree said nothing.

“Now, do you, Amy, take Laurie to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I suppose.”

“What do you mean, you suppose?” John-John shook his head.

“I just think ‘suppose’ is a more poetic word than ‘do.’ Don’t you?”

“I suppose,” Meg said.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the tree.”

“Wait! You forgot to ask if anyone has any objections to the union,” Meg interrupted.

The Quarryman's Wife

“Oh, right. Does anyone have any—”

“I do! I love Laurie with all my heart. And I don't suppose it either.”

John-John flushed, “You are supposed to be a flower girl. How can you love Laurie?”

“We are meant to be wed this very day. I was promised to him and he knows it. If he were a man of honor, he would not kiss her, thus sealing his illegal wedding.”

By now Helen laughed. She said, “Meg, this is not *Sense and Sensibility*, it's *Little Women*. Laurie must wed Amy or the whole book will be thrown into a shambles.”

“I know. I wanted to make it interesting.”

“That's all right. I didn't want to kiss a tree anyway,” Helen said.

They spent the entire day at the cemetery acting out books and creating stories. The Burchnell Vault became John-John's pirate ship. A baby's tiny headstone became a place for a lamenting funeral, complete with wails and tears. When the day was spent in dramatic revelry, they lay flat on their backs, looking up at the deep blue sky through the leaves of the shade trees.

“Remember Thomas's lessons?” asked John-John.

“About the stars, you mean?” Helen asked.

“Yeah, about the stars. He knew every one of them, every constellation.”

Meg felt a catch in her throat. “I miss Father.”

The words seemed to stay there, like they were meant to be said just then—to be echoed from that time until eternity. Meg hoped the words would sail over the infant grave, through the masts of the pirate ship vault, to the leaves of the Maple trees. She hoped Father could hear them—that he could reach down from heaven and grab those words that had gotten tangled in transit by the twisting limbs, and free them so they could fly up to him in a daughter embrace.

She missed Father.

Chapter Forty-Three

Augusta felt a trouble in her bones she couldn't shake. Olya's last letter from Zina didn't make much sense. The Russian government demanded a forty percent increase in wheat production from the Ukraine. She wrote of officials coming to town, taking all their wheat stores, and ripping their kitchen crops from the ground.

The day Zina penned the letter Olya held in her shaking hands, one official barged into their small home. Without greeting, he walked straight to their oven and pulled out their meal for the day—a loaf of bread. He told them the bread belonged to the state and that if he came back to find as much as one loaf, he would deport all of them to Siberia. Ivar was shrinking, Zina said. He seemed skinnier and shorter each day, his eyes growing bigger. Zina's own hunger seeped through the words of her young adolescent vocabulary. Augusta still remembered them, even a day after Olya read to her by lamplight. "Please take me to America. I am young, but I feel old. I don't want to die. Please. I'm afraid it's too late for the rest of us."

Augusta chided herself for being discontent with boiled field greens. She could almost see Zina, Meg's age, as a waif who melted away with the hours. She ached with the mother and father who were helpless to make the wheat quota and feed their family. She worried for Ivar. She imagined him a thin and bug-eyed John-John, and wondered if she could endure such a trial. She'd rather starve herself than see her children wanting.

The phone, with its modern bent on intrusion, announced itself with a double ring on the kitchen wall. When she rose to answer it, her knees cracked.

"Hello. Hello." Thomas had always answered double like that, and she held to the practice even before his death. "Hi Agnes ... Yes he does... That would be lovely, I'll send him on down. Bye now."

She turned and shouted up the stairs. "Frank. Come down here, son."

“Yes, Mama?” He came down, all dressed up, looking more like his father.

“I just got a call from Mrs. Hanson. She wants you to work for Mr. Hanson again this summer, farming and taking care of the quarry horses. I told him you’d be right down.”

“But Mama, you know I’m not a farm-hand. I can’t make anything grow, at least not like you or Mrs. Verkhohlyad.”

“You will go, Frank. We need to eat. We have to pay bills. I need you to go. Besides, I feel beholden to the Hanson family. They keep bringing us meat. They say it’s from the church, but I have my suspicions.”

“I was heading to the bank, Mama—to look for a desk job. You know how much I love numbers and figuring.”

“You and I both know that since the Dayton Building and Loan crashed, one bank survived in this town. Now it’s just Bob Pruitt—no secretaries, no tellers, no officers—only him. And you know how tense and stingy he is.”

“But maybe things have changed and—”

“No, son. You cannot turn down a good job for the sake of your wants or your pride. No man ever suffered who had to work with his hands. Your father did. Now, go.”

He, in his pressed clothes, left. Her fear of the family’s future overstepped her gentleness, and now she was left with guilt. Frank had been at the point of death, and now she pressed him into back labor for the sake of her own fear.

Augusta checked her baking bread and returned to her mending in the kitchen. The pile grew smaller these days, but she needed the money, so she sewed day and night. She kept piles on every chair—piles that had to be removed before supper every night. Why did she insist on sewing in the kitchen? Inferno liked the kitchen too. Each day, he chose a pile of mending and slept on it, kinglike, and each day, she had to upset his kingship for the sake of more mending money.

Today, Augusta felt a deeper stirring, to write, to untangle her web of inky thoughts, but instead she mended. Her own mother had once said of her writing bent, “You can’t mend socks with your writing—can’t make a living at it—it’s best you learn stitches.”

Her mother was right, of course.

She pricked her finger when a knock at the front door startled her. Banker Pruitt stood there, dark suited, his black fedora in his right hand. Inferno leapt from his mending pile and sauntered over to the banker and hissed. Augusta scattered him and gave the man an apologetic look.

The Quarryman's Wife

“Sorry about Inferno, Banker Pruitt. He’s usually fond of guests.” She motioned for him to come in, but he stayed on the porch making her regret her hospitality. “Frank and I were just talking about you. Come on in.”

This time he nodded to her but made no noise as he walked into the parlor and sat on the red velvet chair—the guest’s chair as she had called it.

“You baking bread?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“This is a lovely house you have here, Mrs. Brinkworth,” he looked around the parlor. He took out a small notebook from his suit pocket and began writing. “Nice transom windows.”

“It’s good to have them in the summer. They let the breeze in. Can I get you anything? Some coffee?” She watched him scribble away. It made her nervous.

“No, ma’am. I’ve come here on business. Bank business.”

“Oh, I see. What can I do for you?”

“Seems you’re behind on your payments, Mrs. Brinkworth. I’ve been letting it go the past four months.”

“Four months? What do you mean? I paid April, May and June, sir—and on the first at that.”

“Yes, I am well-aware of that, Mrs. Brinkworth, but there was no payment made in March, so you are behind one month. I will need that payment in fifteen days, or we’ll foreclose.”

“But the accountants promised me that as long as the quarry’s in receivership, we keep the house. I don’t understand.”

“You still have to pay your bills, ma’am, regardless of receivership, and you are behind.”

“You mean Thomas didn’t pay our mortgage in March? That’s not like him. Can’t you check your records again?”

“I have checked them. Mr. Brinkworth and I had an agreement. He could pay the twentieth of the month because that’s when the contract money would come in from the state. I knew he was good for the money, so I agreed to it. The March payment was due the twentieth, but it never came.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? He died the fourteenth. You should’ve told me.” She wiped her forehead with her cherry apron, her voice catching.

“Didn’t seem proper, with Thomas being dead and you being a widow. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Bother me? Bother me?” She stood and looked at Banker Pruitt and then turned, leaving him alone in the velvet guest chair to fidget. She put on some oven

mitts and pulled out her large loaf of round bread. She came back into the parlor with the bread in hand. The banker didn't fidget as she had hoped. He seemed at home in her home, reclining on the special chair, and writing with such apparent passion that he didn't acknowledge her presence.

He must have smelled the bread and looked up. "I am sorry, ma'am. You have fifteen days. I'd float you more time if I could, but since the crash, banking has taken a hit, and the big boss in Cincinnati isn't running a charity." The dark suited banker stood and tried to reach out to touch Augusta's shoulder, but she pulled back.

She wanted to chase him out of her home with a bread knife—so dark were her thoughts—until she remembered the hot loaf in her hand.

"Here, sir, take this loaf."

"I can't take your bread, Mrs. Brinkworth." He fidgeted.

"Why sure you can. You can take my last loaf if you want to." She handed the hot loaf to Bob Pruitt. She could tell it burned his hands, but he was too proud to admit it, so he held it with his fingertips dancing and a pained look on his face.

"You know the way out, sir. I will see you with forty dollars in fifteen days."

With that, she heard him shuffle out the front door. When it shut, she let out her breath and went back to the kitchen where mending greeted her. Inferno sat below Thomas's chair and looked up at her, expectant.

"Best get to my mending, Inferno. I'll need to stitch a mountain to garner forty dollars in fifteen days. Either that, or a miracle. Neither one seems possible."

Whether every child was thinner that night at dinner or her fears colored her vision, she couldn't be sure. She regretted giving Banker Pruitt the children's bread. They did seem paler, each one of them, when she told them the banker's news.

"It's strawberry picking month. We'll have that money sure enough," John-John often saw things clear like that.

"If only it were that easy. We don't get paid until the end of June and we'll need that for July. We need that forty dollars in two weeks," Meg said.

"You forget that I still have my bus money," Edward said, as he looked triumphant at Frank.

"Edward, *son*, I will not say this again. There is no room for boasting in this family. Remember what Jesus said in the gospels. 'A kingdom divided upon itself will not stand.' We have to stick together, like Elmer's glue-all. Do I need to get the boxing gloves out of the attic?"

The Quarryman's Wife

Her question was met with snickers. Whenever Edward and Frank picked at each other, she brought up the gloves. Thomas had grown weary of their relentless scuffles so he bought them boxing gloves one Christmas. He forced the two antagonists to spend an entire day boxing each other. After that tiring day, the fight ebbed from them. All scuffles stopped. For a time.

She looked at Edward and asked, "Now, how much will that bus check be?"

"Eight dollars."

"Eight? I thought it was twelve." She tried not to sound alarmed. She told her internal puppeteer to make her voice sound calm, even reassuring.

"May was a shorter school month."

Frank sat in front of an empty plate. He had not eaten although he encouraged the younger ones to eat their fill. "Farmer Hanson will pay me fifteen a month, but my check won't come in until the end of June. I do have a few days owed me from the quarry. That should be five dollars."

"That's eleven," John-John said. "Hey, what about you Lily? You've got Wheeler money coming, right?"

"You forget that my money was already spent on June's payment. I have nothing more to offer. What about our savings?" Her voice had a hopeful lilt about it, a lilt Augusta hated to crush.

"Nearly gone. We've got ten dollars left. I have three owed me for mending." Augusta initiated plate washing as she did every night by rising from the table. Everyone knew her signal and pushed their chairs away and gathered the dishes to the limestone sink.

"That leaves fourteen to go," John-John said.

Augusta touched her amber brooch. "I can sell this. I'm sure it's worth more than that."

"No, for heaven's sake, no," John-John said. "Father gave it to you. He dug up that very stone. We will figure out a way. Please don't sell it."

Helen brought her dish to the sink and raised her hand—a habit she picked up from being under Mrs. Ida Hornby's strict tutelage.

"You don't need to raise your hand," Augusta said. "What is it?"

"It's just that fourteen—that's two times seven. There are seven of us. That means we all just have to come up with ways to make two dollars each. Shouldn't we be able to do that?"

What started as a glum dinner ended with dishwashing in camaraderie. The Willowware plates, unaware of the situation, seemed to clank louder with joy as voices buzzed higher and higher with moneymaking schemes.

Fifteen days: Instead of a death knell to the family, the deadline became a blessed challenge. The children left in groups discussing projects and sales. Even Edward and Frank talked without discord. A good day in the end, she thought.

And so far, she could keep the amber brooch—her tangible link to Thomas's love.

Chapter Forty-Four

Fifteen days—just two weeks to pull off their miracle. Meg thanked the good Lord that the strawberries had put off their ripening this year thanks to the rainy winter; Farmer Nutt said picking would start the twentieth of June instead of the fifteenth. Rain in the winter was good for strawberries, though—as long as winter’s soggy rain was followed by uninterrupted weeks of sunshine. The strawberries sweetened to sugar under those circumstances. Sammy told Meg his father feared more rain—if it came in June, the berries would become colossal in size, but watery and tasteless. Meg just hoped for sun so she wouldn’t have to crawl among the rows in the mud.

One by one the family came up with schemes to raise two dollars each, all except for Inferno, of course—although Meg wanted to place the noble cat in center ring at a Brinkworth Family Animal Circus. Mama kept to her mending, stitching well into the night.

Frank spent his strength at the Hanson farm all day, but dragged his weary body out to the barn at night to make stools to sell at Decker’s store. Grocer Decker said he’d pay him a dollar for each stool so long as it was painted or varnished. “I can make three stools by our deadline,” he told Meg. “So we can have an extra dollar for savings.”

Lily told Meg she wished her free cosmetics would come so she could sell them to Hattie Wheeler. The only thing she could think to do was to take to working weekends for the Wheelers. Hattie had been asking her for weeks to do it. Joshua and Emmy Jo were too much of a handful for her these days and besides, she needed to write. Lily complied when Hattie said she’d pay her a dollar per weekend. “My life is over, Meg. I feel like a slave working all week long even on Sunday.” True to form, though, she shrugged off her fatigue and took to her duty with joy, organizing the two unsuspecting children into cleaning brigades. Whereas Lily would play all sorts of games during the week, on the weekends, she became a platoon leader, organizing her unwilling troop into a wily band of cleaners. She even opened the mourning drapes.

Father's death had silenced Edward's trumpet. While knocking on the doors of every merchant at Four Corners and getting no work, he remembered the trumpet that sat forlorn and un-played in the corner of his room. Inspired, he went back to the same businesses and asked if anyone wanted trumpet instructions at twenty-five cents a lesson. He found three pupils that day—Doc Calverley, who wanted to learn to play "reverie" for his lazy non-crowing rooster, Russell Brown, the future ophthalmologist who wanted to be well-rounded in the arts for the sake of snagging "a right pretty gal," and Mrs. Ida Hornby who gave no reason at all. In two weeks, that would bring in a dollar fifty.

For the latter fifty cents, Edward remembered how the quarry boys who rode his bus longed to shoot guns. He set up a small business right in the heart of the quarry's immigrant housing. He painted three red and white concentric targets and leaned them against a dirt embankment. He charged one penny a BB gun shot, with rewards. If a quarry kid hit a bull's-eye, Edward would give him one of his small metal cars—leftovers from his childhood. He'd tell the kids stories of his own hunting adventures.

The kids always asked to hear the Loon story and Edward obliged, stretching the truth a little with each telling. "We couldn't sleep," he'd say. "That darn Loon was lonely. All her friends flew south, so she decided to torment the Brinkworth family by cooing at night right below our windows. Well, Frank and I, we decided to take care of that pest. We each raised our guns and shot. Frank's a terrible shot, and missed, but I snagged the Loon. When we told Father, he gave us a severe talking to. Said that Loons were endangered and we killed beauty. We were really sorry. When it was all said and done, Father told us to shoot raccoons, not Loons. So, let that be a lesson for you. Shoot the bandits, not the crooners."

After two weeks, Edward presented Meg with four dollars. "The gun idea's what brought in the most cash. Those boys—they went crazy for my metal cars. I'll have to keep up this little business."

Meg spent too much time daydreaming up ideas and too little time implementing them. With five days to until Banker Pruitt's deadline, she'd made thirty cents from selling some of her old dresses to the quarry wives. In desperation, she knocked on Miss Allen's door. The front stoop of her home boasted planters full of flowers of riotous colors. Meg asked her teacher if she needed any sewing done for her tailoring business. She said she did, but that she wasn't sure if she wanted Meg to help her. She brought up the quarry story—how it fell short of Meg's potential—and she told Meg she was worried she'd put the same half-hearted effort into her stitches. Meg hung her head, aware that her shoddiness had been

discovered—by the best seamstress in town at that. Miss Allen agreed to let Meg help her—on undergarments where stitches weren't so important. For that, she paid Meg fifty cents.

Fifty cents earned through sheer sweat. She went to the Hanson family and asked if she could brush all the quarry horses and clean their stalls. Going rate for that was fifty cents, but Meg offered twenty, a deal Mrs. Hanson snatched up in a jiffy. She sounded disappointed when Meg declined to do the whole sweaty chore again the next week for the same price, and as a charitable enticement offered Meg fifty cents. Meg still declined, blaming it on the strawberries.

Then she resurrected her flour sack and spent days sewing it into a dress just her size. She knew that Emma Kate Turnell of the Turnell Farm was her size, and that the Turnells paid well for dresses. She tatted lace edging for the collar and the bottom hem, and sewed on pearl buttons from Mama's button box. Even John-John said the dress was pretty.

She walked the Indian trail that led to the Turnell Farm in mild trepidation. Father had always told the family there were Indian ghosts that haunted it. When she approached the Turnell's door, her knees wobbled. She'd never sewn anything on speculation, and she felt a little like a gambler. Mrs. Turnell smiled at Meg, cupped her face in one hand. She asked, "How much for the beautiful dress?" Meg said one dollar. Mrs. Turnell invited her into the well-apportioned parlor, brought her some fresh milk, and handed her two crisp one-dollar bills. Meg thought she must've misspoken and handed one dollar back. Mrs. Turnell refused and told her to go buy some pretty calico for her own dress.

John-John decided to combine his Olympic training with money raising. On one of Meg's non-productive thinking days, she decided to watch John-John run for his money. He, unlike Edward, approached the town children for money because he knew they had more of it. He'd go looking for any boy near his age and dare him. "I bet I can run a mile and beat you." Any red-blooded boy who looked at John-John's skinny frame jumped at the challenge. They would cough up the nickel race fee, as John-John had cleverly called it so as to not fall into the betting sin.

They ran the same route the town's elders used to run by horseback from the school to the train station. If the racing boy won, John-John would give the money back and another nickel besides, but he didn't have to since he won mostly every time. So far he'd collected a buck-fifty from thirty races.

The one exception being the one race Meg watched. Elijah Frye, the quarry's aging engineer challenged John-John to a two-mile race—to the station and back.

John-John coddled an impish confidence and said, "Well, since it's two miles, the fee is ten cents, sir."

Elijah Frye shook his head, "You sound like your Daddy. You don't have to Sir me."

"Thomas told me once that you were better educated than him. Indeed, you deserve a sir."

Elijah Frye smiled. When he did, his face lit up. "Shades of your Daddy, son." He took off his hat, rolled up his pressed sleeves, and removed his black shoes.

"Why are you doing that?" Meg heard John-John ask.

"Best way to run is how the Good Lord intended it. Adam and Eve, they ran without shoes, and so do I."

John-John shook his head, gave Meg a look of victory, and waited for her to signal the start of the race. She watched the dust devour the two and lost sight of them right away. She grew impatient waiting for them then sat down on the school's front steps. Eventually the same cloud dust birthed a dark-faced, shoe-less man. Elijah Frye smiled, wide and toothy and sat next to Meg without a heaving chest.

"A walk in the park," was all he said. They waited another three minutes for the dust cloud to spit out a huffing John-John.

"You beat me, sure enough Elijah Frye. Here's your dime back, and mine to boot."

"Ah, just keep it, little runner boy. Someday you'll run as fast as old Elijah Frye. Someday."

John-John panted after his run-in with Elijah Frye. The racing spirit left him in defeat. Still, he contributed a dollar-sixty to the family's mortgage money.

No one expected much from Helen, even though she pioneered the two-dollar idea. She got hopping mad when others made more than the two bucks. "Edward, stop that," she said. "Don't be making more money just because you think I can't. I've got a scheme. I do."

The scheme: to market the Brinkworth Attic Museum to the townspeople. Helen, who thought capital letters and exclamation points were the most effective aspects of modern grammar, made flyers that read, "Get Your Two Cents Worth At The Only Centerville Museum! See Rare Fossils, Unique Rocks, And Various Other Natural Treasures!!!! Tours June 5th through June 15th At The Stone Quarry House, 3 PM to 5 PM, Except Sunday!"

Although Mama didn't like the idea of people marching up her creaky steps to see rocks and eggs, she didn't quell Helen's youthful enthusiasm. Consequently,

The Quarryman's Wife

Mama worked harder on making the house shine, a fact that flustered all the children. Whenever Mama got into spic and span mode, the children dissipated—all except Meg. The weight of all her secrets felt burdensome. She felt the need to penance her way through life, and if it meant cleaning their indoor bathroom one more time, then all felt worth it. But with each scrubbed floor, the guilt grew heavier.

More than anyone else, Helen's museum touched the sympathies of the town of Centerville—something about the youngest Brinkworth child leading folks on tours of the stone quarry house's attic made people give more than their two cents worth. At the end of the money gathering, Helen brought in more than Edward—five dollars.

Chapter Forty-Five

Mama convened an emergency counting day on the late mortgage payment's due date. She counted the money: forty-six dollars and sixty cents—enough to pay the stingy banker with a little to spare. Although she still felt disconnected with her children, this ordeal had cemented their exterior resolve as a family. They marched to Centerville that counting day, all entering the bank wearing smiles and their Sunday best.

Banker Pruitt, in his same dark suit, looked up. “Hello Augusta.”

“Hello Banker Pruitt. Here's your money.” She emptied a small cloth bag onto the banker's shiny marble counter, causing coins to roll and rollick everywhere. She stood there, statue-like, as the venerable banker scampered around locating and retrieving the renegade shrapnel. Augusta counted out the money penny-by-penny, nickel-by-nickel, dime-by-dime. On three separate occasions, she lost her place and pulled the entire pile back toward her and started again, “One, two, three, four . . .”

The children stood behind her. She could hear John-John's laugh, nearly Thomas's laugh. She didn't have the wherewithal to shush him, so fond was she of that belly laugh.

Banker Pruitt tapped his stubby fingers on the marble counter while Augusta continued her methodical counting. “All right. Great. I will deposit this payment, post-haste.” He took a letter opener and picked at his decaying teeth.

“Thank you, Banker Pruitt, you have been most kind. I will see you July first, bright eyed and bushy tailed.” Before he could scowl, she turned on her thick black heel and left what she later called “the bank prison.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Helen took to spying in the wood box outside the kitchen. She didn't want to become a *heathern*, as the Preacher called it, but she just couldn't help it. Olya had come to visit, and she just had to know what was in those foreign looking letters. When strawberry-picking time came, there would be no more time for eavesdropping.

She heard Olya crying. "Missus, I don't know what to do. Alex and I, we are poor, *dirt poor*, as the Americans say. I cannot rescue my dear Zina. What do I tell her?"

"I don't know, Olya. Tell her you are thinking of her. Tell you are praying."

"Praying? No, Alex forbids that. We Ukrainians don't pray. We work. But no matter how much I work, no matter how much I hit the dirt with the hoe, it doesn't help Zina or the pain in my heart. Praying? No, I cannot. I cannot dishonor my husband that way."

"Well, I am praying, remember?"

"Oh, yes, with your toes, no?"

"Just one big toe, Olya. And do you know what? The Good Lord stubbed my toe four times last week. He must love your family to remind me so much. That toe's black and blue."

Olya laughed, waif-like. "Would you like to hear my recent letter, Missus?"

Helen, crouched so that her legs cramped and fell asleep, leaned closer to the wood-box opening. This is what she came for.

"Dear Auntie Olya. We so much miss you and Uncle Alex. We speak of America and wonder what life is like. It helps us to pass the evenings when our bellies rumble in hunger. If we think of America, we forget our pangs. Little Ivar is fading away. It seems like the Russians have pulled the life from him. Every day, they come to our village and grow greedier. Yesterday, they took our laying hen. The gruff man mocked us and said we were living like royalty while the rest of Mother Russia suffered and starved. Imagine that. He blames us, and he is a fat piggish man with a...how do you say this—spout?"

“I think the word you want is snout. A pig has a snout.”

“Yes, snout. Where was I? Oh yes...a piggish man with a snout. The truth is we are starving to death. Every crop they take. Every animal they slaughter. Every scrap of clothing they burn. We are almost naked now, and the smell of burning fabric hurts our lungs. We are a fertile land, Aunt Olya. You know that better than I do. I suppose you still have Ukrainian dirt under your fingernails. Yet, they have stripped it bare. Every small bit we produce is stolen. What we used to celebrate with harvest dances, now we claw and scratch for. We are ghosts. Please bring me to America. Your loving niece, Zina.”

Helen didn't know what to do. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. How could such a thing happen? With all the sorrow that caked the recesses of her heart, this sorrow felt deeper still. Zina's hunger stamped out her own sorrow and replaced it with compassion for someone other than herself, someone half a world away.

She pushed the wood box lid slow and steady so as not to emit a creak. When she stood, she couldn't feel her tingling legs. Somehow she managed to get off the porch, through the yard, to the barn where she stamped her legs in earnest. The laying hens greeted her with cackles and feathers. Blood returned to cramped legs, biting her with pain. The pain didn't seem to bother her.

Instead, she thought of Zina who lived life with not one laying hen.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Augusta still smarted that Farmer Nutt had refused to hire Olya. She decided to share her earnings with her immigrant friend in protest. Olya managed the farm and garden with a farmer's intuition and deserved any pay Augusta brought in, however meager.

Strawberries lived under Augusta's fingernails and perfumed her skin in sickly sweet wafts. Dirt caked in the recesses of her hands. It used to be this was the children's job—to pick from sunup until three in the afternoon, but since Thomas had left her for heaven's dancing streets, she crawled Farmer Nutt's strawberry rows like a ten-year-old. For once, she wished she drove. At least the teachers piloting the round-up busses had it easy. She longed to sit with them under the shady maples and share in a little Centerville gossip.

She imagined the conversations—conversations that began with “Did you hear about poor...” or “Don't tell anyone I told you, but...” or “Did you hear the latest on Doc Calverley?” She was thankful for Doc Calverley, even though she wouldn't dare send her kids to him, being both a human and animal doctor. At least his antics wet the dry well of Centerville gossip.

Friday brought thanks. She survived her first week's initiation into the heralded business of strawberry management. The unforgiving bus arrived at five-thirty. Although she fancied herself a morning person, morning to her was defined by sunrise, by light. Groggy, she'd pull on her soiled clothing while Inferno purred and slept on Thomas's side of the bed. She and the children wore the same clothes every day—and by Friday, they all perfumed the bus with a combination of week-old sweat, overripe strawberries, and ground in mud. She wanted to incinerate the clothes each week, but instead she washed and dried them, readying the poor clothes for another week of strawberry pummeling.

She never did get breakfast that week. At five-thirty, she was not yet awake, let alone hungry or thirsty, but by the time the sun did rise above the glistening fields, her growling stomach and her parched mouth scolded her for her lack of foresight.

Frank escaped the strawberry's beckoning. The Hanson family needed him sunup to sundown working the soil and taking care of the horses. Edward, adept at driving machinery, operated one of Farmer Nutt's two tractors. Sammy Nutt drove the other one. Lily had it worse. She'd opted for double pay by bringing Joshua and Emmy Jo to the fields with her. Hattie paid her for keeping the darlings out of her hair, and Farmer Nutt paid her and her two charges for their picking.

At first on Monday, Augusta joined the other neophyte pickers in sneaking a few berries. She justified it by saying to herself that these were the bruised ones. She may as well eat them than have them go to waste. Her mother, full of thrift and economy, would be proud, she thought. She picked opposite John-John that day. He caught her eating one and smiled his broad strawberry-stained smile, and laughed his Thomas laugh. No words exchanged between them, but they had an unspoken understanding. John-John would not tell on his strawberry-chewing Mama; perhaps he knew how much she knew about his own renegade antics. He always told her that he wished she didn't have eyes in the back of her head. Caught, with red juice dripping down the left corner of her mouth, Augusta cashed in on her son's own insecurities with her knowing glance.

Initially, she took to standing and sitting, standing and sitting until her knees ached and her lower back burned. Squatting hurt her upper legs, and she didn't have the advantage of being close to the berry bushes. That first day, as she lagged farther and farther behind in her row, her supervisor made her go back to the beginning of her row to "clean" it. By Tuesday, she did the "Centerville crawl," as the other pickers called it. It didn't do much for her worst dress—being on her knees like that tore at the threadbare thing, leaving her knees exposed—but she kept up with the younger pickers. By Friday, she crawled and picked with the best of them.

The berries weren't for market; their fates awaited them at jam and jelly canneries. Farmer Nutt made more money selling them to jelly packers than he did to Ohio merchants. Yet, he still reserved his best ones for market and for county fair competition. The jamming meant better profits, but made for harder picking because he required every berry to be hatless.

Some berries were fickle. They looked ripe red on one side, but when Augusta plucked one from its stem, the other side revealed yellow, or worse yet, green. These were impossible to de-hat because the green leaves anchored themselves to the unripe berry with a vise grip. The overripe strawberries were no better. When she pulled off their green hats, the whole berry exploded in her hand. Often the

one place she could wipe her hands on was the muddy earth, the shiny leaves of the plant, or her tattered dress. The dress got redder and redder with each exploded berry.

Even Farmer Nutt offered Augusta a respectable counting job. It paid less, but boded easier. Besides, he had said, it's in the shade. She defied all the naysayers, as any strong-headed mother would do when money was needed to feed six hungry birdies. Resolute, she endured. The season lasted four weeks, maybe five. She could do anything for that short time when she put her mind—and body—behind it.

Dinner was to be a simple affair of ham hock and beans that she left to simmer when they all left the stone home bleary eyed at five-thirty. When they trudged in that afternoon, she smelled the acrid smoke of burning food. "Meg, get me potholders. *Now!*" She hated that she raised her voice, but her level of frustration rose with the smoke pummeling out of the cast-iron pot. She grabbed the pot's outer handles and ran outside, smoke curling behind her. When she opened the heavy lid, still more smoke bellowed, making her cough and choke. Edward rescued her with a garden hose, pelting the charred food with a constant stream of well water. It all seemed so pathetic, such a fitting end to a backbreaking week. She looked down at her torn work dress, her brown and red hands, and her bleeding knees.

"Leave me be, Edward. Leave me be."

She watched him walk to the kitchen door and wondered when it was that he became a man. Not one prone to pity, Augusta stood up, dusted herself off as best she could and went to gather eggs for supper. At least they could eat eggs.

She snapped at the children all through dinner. Meg wanted more fabric to make another dress. Before she could explain what kind of dress she wanted to make, she said, "No, you can't have anything. No more. We must save what we have."

John-John paid her a compliment. "Mama, you're the best picker—of your age group."

"Oh really, and how old is that?" She watched her sarcasm tear through the emerging man. She reprimanded herself, or at least the failing puppeteer who never did what she wanted her to do.

Helen asked if she could go explore tomorrow. "No. Certainly not. You will stay home and help me clean this house, you hear me? That goes for all of you. I can't keep this place spic and span by myself when I am off picking all day. Saturday is a work day."

Dishes clanked in her hands above the limestone sink. The Willowware plates didn't clap or make happy family noises. Any noise they made served to annoy Augusta more. Everything, every thing annoyed her lately, as if all her annoyances had piled up to form a mountain, and a giant hurled more and more problems to its growing top. Instead of blaming the giant called Life, she blamed the children. They became to her little instigators of annoyance, and she bit at them accordingly.

Late that night, when a sliver moon rose above the trees and she sat composed in Thomas's Morris chair, she recalled her words—her searing words. Each instance of sarcasm, anger, pettiness, and tiny wrath played itself out before her, picture-show like. As penance, she stole into the children's rooms. She watched each of them sleep: Frank, Lily, Edward, Meg, John-John, and little Helen. She smoothed the hair away from their faces. She watched their chests rise and fall, rise and fall. She wept, but without tears and without noise. She begged God to forgive her and to please not take her children away from her to the dancing streets of heaven. She apologized to Thomas, who she knew must be disappointed in her.

When she slipped into the cool sheets that night, Inferno jumped up and curled himself on Thomas's side like always, and purred. Augusta picked him up by his stomach, and threw him down. She wanted no affection tonight.

She deserved none.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Meg hated that Sammy Nutt saw her covered in strawberry juice. He drove the rows in his father's tractor, picking up and marking flats so each picker would get credit. It amused her how precise he drove the tractor with no margin for error in driving the rows; just one inch to the left or right and the big knobby tires would squash the tender berries. Farmer Nutt had set his field years ago when he still used horses. Now the tractor had to motor in the horse's hoof prints—not an easy task.

Truth be told, she wished for Jack-and-the-bean-stock strawberry plants that reached to the sky. Then, under the berry bush's cool canopy of leaves, she could hide from his happy-go-lucky gaze. No such luck. Strawberries wanted to hug the earth. She'd be glad when one more week would pass beneath her and she could get back to living and hoping and sleeping—far away from the dwarfish plants.

Even now when she shut her eyes tight at night, she dreamed of the red berry, menacing. Berries gnawed at her knees and entangled themselves in her hair. Dirt from the fields gritted her sheets, so that even when she awoke from berry nightmares they reminded her of their omnipresence.

Today Sammy smiled right at her, his eyes wooing. She performed the Centerville crawl on all fours, pulling and picking as fast as she could. She could pick a pint by the time she counted to sixty, a flat of twelve pints in twelve minutes.

The counting made her sane, but when she looked up to see a bemused Sammy, she shot him a look. "What are you laughing at, Sammy Nutt?"

She said it with a derisiveness equaled to Mama's. Mama had grown red in the face as her hands reddened with each week of picking. Anything Meg said or did she met with stinging rebuke, and now she did unto Sammy what her Mama had done unto her.

She regretted her sarcasm and meant to soothe the tall redheaded boy with her words, but when she looked up again, he walked away, head down, padding down the dusty row. After that, it took her a full half hour to pick a flat. Why did

she lose her temper? What had he done to her but smile? And why wasn't he on the tractor?

She glanced over at Lily two rows away, something she did when the strawberries and monotony got the best of her. At least someone out there had it worse than her. Joshua and Emmy Jo were not prone to labor. They seemed more like wrestling greased pigs, almost impossible to tame. Today the two rolled over each other. From the looks of it, Emmy Jo prevailed. Farmer Nutt himself had raised his voice to the two, threatening to fire them, until Lily begged him to reconsider.

"Children who don't pick their flats," he said, "are in danger of purgatory." His statement worked for a while. He said it in such a way that struck fear, particularly in Emmy Jo. But once Joshua learned what Purgatory was, he went on his haphazard way.

"At least it ain't hell," he said.

Meg wished Farmer Nutt would put everyone in rows next to each other, but he, being a shrewd businessman as well as a farmer, learned early on that a skipped row between pickers made for less conversation and more picking yield. So, they picked the odd rows one day, the even rows the next. To pass the time and break up the hopeless monotony, Meg jumped her row like Jack be nimble. She picked on one side, then on the other, hopping back and forth like a jackrabbit. She noticed other children crab-walking the rows. Others sang. Still others feigned needing an outhouse—anything to break the unflagging berry task always before them.

She had to shout to get Lily's attention. "Hey Lily Pie, how's it going over there?"

"How'd you like to watch these two wild animals?" she asked. Lily looked around. Meg knew she hated getting reprimands from the Row Police. Lily looked relieved when she saw no one near.

"Wish I could. Just one more week, Lily Pie. One more week and we can get on to the business of summering."

"Easy for you to say, Meg. I'll be taming these animals all summer." The wild animals stopped their rollicking and sat down next to each other. Emmy Jo beckoned Joshua to touch her tongue with his, which he did. The moment tongues met, they both flew away from each other, squealing anew.

"Stop that this instance," Lily yelled. Meg felt sorry for her sweet sister, now reduced to yelling.

Lily continued, "Now sit down and start picking—and no rocks or mud in the bottoms of the pints either. Farmer Nutt docked our pay yesterday." The

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twins sat next to each other and got to work. Both bent forward, intent on the business of berry acquisition.

Joshua popped his head up and yelled over at Meg. “Why are they called *straw-berries*? There ain’t no straw in them!”

“I don’t know Joshua, but if you don’t get to picking, Lily is going to make you eat straw.”

Joshua scowled and returned to work. He even seemed to be attentive to the *straw-ber*ry. Meg turned to her task, and deftly filled a pint, when *thud*—a straw-ber

ry hit her square on the cheek. Before she could alert Lily, another *thud* came, this time hitting her sunbonnet. “Lily! Your little people are—” *Thud*. When Meg wiped her face, she expected to see red berry meat, or pink juice, or tiny yellow seeds, but instead her hand held earth, wet earth. She looked down at a fallen strawberry missile—a large rotten one, mushy and fermented, and it was filled with mud.

Without thinking, she picked it up and hurled it right back at a smiling Joshua and tagged him hard right in the nose. He started crying, not the injured kind of cry that comes from true physical pain, but the kind of wail from injured pride. She found another strawberry mud missile and flung it at Emmy Jo, hitting her right between the eyes. She wailed the same cry, but hers was much louder, more theatrical. You’d think a cow stepped on her hand the way she carried on.

Lily looked at Meg, her mouth forming a perfect O and her eyes wide with—anger? Fear? Whatever it was, her eyes later showed gratitude, for the Wheeler twins picked like maniacs for the rest of the day. Joshua even got the Best Picker award.

On the bus ride home, the older boys, some of whom were row supervisors, loved to chew tobacco and spit—a forbidden habit, of course. That didn’t seem to deter these boys. Instead it spurred them on to secrecy and deceit. Clarence Boudreaux sat across from Meg every day. She hated it, of course, because Clarence smelled worse than any other boy on the bus. Even on Mondays, when the bus was free of sweat-smell, Clarence oozed. She wondered if the boy’s mom ever scrubbed him.

To conceal the brown slimy juice, the boys hollowed out anything they had in their lunch and spit into that. For Clarence this meant his daily apple. He’d hollow it out with anything he could find, since his family couldn’t afford a pocketknife. Today he used a sharp stone and whittled away the apple’s interior, leaving an apple-shaped spittoon in its place. Clarence smiled at Meg, his teeth brown and covered with tobacco leaves. Every time he spit, he looked over at her and

grinned, and every time he did it, she looked away, pretending to be interested in the ride home.

The bus lurched every time it left the fields and mounted the paved roads that ran to Farmer Nutt's farm, making everyone bounce out of their seats. The bus often lumbered over the edge, but this time Master McCray had capitulated to the cries of the younger kids to go fast. He revved the diesel engine while still on the gravel, which made the dust flap up all around the speeding bus. When he hit the pavement, girls and boys alike became like popcorn, flying hither and yon, ricocheting off each other like some sort of scientific experiment gone awry. Everyone laughed and clapped and screamed.

Meg screamed too, since Clarence's apple also flew in all the commotion, landing upside-down on her dress, spewing its tobacco contents on her lap first and then her face, her hands, her hair, and her man-shoes.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Sunday should be a day of rest, at least that's what Augusta told Olya. Her Ukrainian friend became a vital part of their small farm, working it every day. While Augusta picked and de-hatted strawberries, Olya tended the garden, talked Russian to the laying hens, and planted flower seeds from her starving homeland.

Augusta encouraged Sabbath rest for Olya, but she just had to bring some order to her life and today after church would be her only time to do so. Tomorrow would mark her last week of crawling the strawberry rows. It used to be they'd all have strawberry pie on Sundays during this season. She and Thomas would devour the pie, he in particular. He used to scold the children for picking at it. Now she understood their indifference. She, too, despised that red berry with a Cain-like hatred. She came close to blaming the menacing berry for her angry outbursts, but she was too honest for that.

Augusta's hands blazed red with sunburn, so she tried to hide them under her hymnal. Church felt gray to her. She rose and sat, rose and sat. She sang songs that no longer held deep poetic meaning to her and she said words that no longer resonated. When Preacher Bourland rose to his pulpit, she calculated how many chores she could get done that afternoon.

Olya, however, always sat on the edge of her seat, in anticipation of some unknown adventure. Although Augusta delighted that Olya received more from church, she felt guilty that she couldn't have her same anticipation, and for some unspoken reason, it made her dislike the czarina.

Olya should be angry. She should be railing against a Creator who seemed mute and deaf to the cries of her homeland. She should fling her *babushka* to the skies, in womanly defiance.

Instead of raging, she talked. She raised her confusion with Augusta, and vented about God not being around, but oddly, she kept coming back to church, Sunday after Sunday—even when Alex swore and forbade it. A study in contrasts, Olya. She had an ability Augusta didn't—to vent and move on. It was as

if Olya's verbal tirades helped her to forgive a far off God, a God who did not answer Augusta's toe prayers. Olya railed against Him and then let it rest. Augusta couldn't do that, she decided. She feared what would happen if she opened the tormenting storm of emotions, even just a crack. No, she had to be strong—keep up appearances. The children needed their mother to be an example of strength, not whimpering.

Something softened in Alex, Augusta thought. When they came out to greet him, he sat in the back of the oxcart with Ivan the Terrible, their wily cat. Ivan didn't look so terrible, curled and purring on his lap. He stroked his fur with a father-like gentleness and even met Augusta's eyes.

“How are you, Alex?”

“A little better.” He seemed resigned to accompany his determined pew-sitting wife. Alex put on an angry show, but all a person had to do was look into his animated eyes. It was as if he had privileged information behind them, and even while he yelled, you somehow knew his heart held tenderness inside. Maybe that's why Olya defied his word. She must've known him enough to call his bluff. Augusta wished for Thomas, alive, right here, right now. She missed trying to figure out his complexities.

“I've baked you a strawberry pie, Alex. Here.” She set it next to him in the oxcart.

He looked up from Ivan and thanked her, calm-like. Perhaps her number-ten finger prayer was having an effect. She scolded herself for her indifference to church today and vowed to be better. Why was it that she remembered to pray for Alex's legs and even stub her toe and pray for Olya's family, but she couldn't tame the storm of emotions living in her angry, cold heart?

Chapter Fifty

Helen wished the cosmetics would come, so she could sell them and give the money to Olya. When she saw Olya seated on the edge of the pew next to Mama, she made a decision. She had a little money in a cigar box under her bed. It would be Olya's.

At home she retrieved the dusty box holding her life savings. More than that, though, it represented another time in her life—when Father gave her sweets, when there was such a thing as extra money, when Mama smiled. She wished that money could repair the down-turned corners of Mama's mouth. She remembered Mama's admonitions in those days, the days before Father's gravesite.

"Now Helen," she'd say. "There's no sense in living life with a scowl. Turn that frown upside down." She wouldn't dare give the same advice back to Mama for fear of a tongue lashing, but she wished she could and that Mama would crack a broad laughing smile.

She dusted off the cigar box and opened it, revealing coins and bills. She counted the whole lot: three dollars and sixty-seven cents. She knew it was wrong to have held it back when the family struggled to pay mortgages and bills, and now the guilt she felt pushed in on her.

"God, I'll give it to Olya, all right? Will that fix things between us?"

She thought Olya might even like the box, so she spirited the whole thing away under her apron. She didn't want anyone asking questions.

She walked the familiar path near the quarry lake toward Olya's small house. While she walked in cadence, she thought. She spent all of her nine years breaking away from her family. She longed for her own identity, her own uniqueness. Helen rebelled against nothing in particular except maybe being lumped into the organism called the youngest of "those poor Brinkworth children." What she didn't like to face was that in her quest for identity, she became self-absorbed, even selfish.

This one act, this giving to someone who had a greater need, represented a revolution for her—of changing from a self-absorbed caterpillar to a compassionate butterfly. Helen the butterfly flew to Olya's door and knocked.

Olya looked puzzled when she handed her the jingling cigar box.

"Thanks, Helen. But, Alex, he doesn't smoke."

"Look inside," Helen said, still out of breath.

She opened the box, thumbed through the bills. "What is this? I can't take this money, little Helen. Here, take it back."

"No, it's a gift Olya. In our country it is rude for you not to accept a gift."

"Is it? But, it's your money, Helen. You need it."

"Pay no mind to that. It's not for you anyway. It's for your relatives—the starving ones." Helen realized she had let more than a cat out of the bag. Before Olya could speak, she turned and ran barefooted down the path that led to home—the home of those "poor Brinkworth children."

A home where she belonged.

Chapter Fifty-One

John-John thanked the good Lord that the Fourth of July interrupted their strawberry-picking saga. He loved fireworks, particularly the bomb-like ones. Helen could have his cache of sparklers; he wanted to see the rockets red glare and bombs bursting in air. Before he could enjoy pyrotechnics, he had to endure the annual Washington Township Independence Day Parade.

The Grand Marshall was always Doc Calverley, who led the parade with a quiet dignity. Frumpus the mole accompanied him, not on his usual shoulder stoop, but on the kindly doctor's hat—a black satin top hat collapsed in the middle so Frumpus could perch atop the doctor's head without fear of falling. Doc Calverley didn't believe in handing out sweets to children, so instead of pelting the gawking children with confections, he threw tongue depressors at them. John-John made sure to get one. He liked the way they tasted, kind of milky sweet.

Following behind played the Centerville Marching Band. All seven of them walked with heads held high, especially the trumpet section, which normally consisted of just Edward. Marching left-right-left-right next to him was Mrs. Hornby, blowing an ear-covering, indistinguishable tune. Around her waist she wore a rope, and attached to that rope, Buttercup, clopping behind her. Although some children put their hands to their ears at Mrs. Hornby's playing, Buttercup didn't seem to mind. He almost smiled. Every once in awhile she'd take the trumpet from her lips, reach into her pocket, and hand back a handful of timothy hay to Buttercup.

Tiny Lucas carried his squirrel circus in a cage, much to the delight of the younger children. It wasn't his shy way to walk proud down the center of the street; instead he zigzagged from one side to the other, showing eager eyes his "show squirrels" as he called him. All three of them donned flags and bunting—a grand tribute to democracy if there ever was one.

The three bushy-tailed patriots seemed to enjoy the parade fine enough, but Joshua Wheeler apparently thought they looked eager for freedom (at least that's

what he said later, when Tiny held him by his back collar, his feet dangling in mid-air). When Tiny showed Lily and Emmy Jo the squirrels, Joshua used them as cover, hunching beneath them. He pulled the catch-string to the cage, sending the bunting-laden rodents out to roam free. Unfortunately for the Centerville Historical Society Ladies, Joshua released them right below their skirts.

From then on, it was all fluffy tails, flying handbags, and shrill screams. John-John helped Tiny corral the frightened patriots, who had seen more than their share of lace, unmentionables, and corsets.

In all the commotion, John-John missed the Centerville Cavalry Club. Meg rode Strawberry in that part of the parade. Strawberry, their red roan mare, whose stooped back held up to three Brinkworths at a time, was docile enough to wear a hat. John-John helped Meg cut large ear holes for Strawberry's furry red ears, and although she had looked annoyed when they pulled her ears through, she seemed proud after the hat dignified her long head.

Frank walked alone wearing a sandwich board that read, "Centerville Democrats." All 498 republicans shot friendly jeers to him.

"Haven't seen one of those in awhile," came one.

"Don't you be canceling out my vote, Frankie boy," came another.

Frank, bemused, just walked down South Main Street, tipping his hat and throwing peppermint candies. The children loved him. Some even vowed to be Democrats someday.

Helen walked alongside Preacher Bourland's wife, Millie, with the First United Methodist's Girl's Auxiliary. All ten girls marched behind a hand-painted banner that read, "Purity. Providence. Piety." Their uniforms, if you could call them that, were white flowing gowns made from worn out sheets. John-John teased her saying she looked like child brides from the West.

True to tradition, Veterans brought up the rear each carrying a flag. Most hailed from the Great War. Some walked, others hobbled. One man was missing a hand. John-John couldn't help but salute them all. He stood erect, like Edward, and despite his efforts not to, let a tear escape his left eye. Even more than an Olympic runner, John-John wanted to fight for his country.

In the lapse of free time between the parade and a picnic supper, John-John and Frank met the afternoon train. No one came to visit, but an incoming train had a bustling mystique about it that even Frank enjoyed. When they ventured together, brother-to-brother, they exchanged conspiratorial glances. The last time they visited the incoming train, they hid in the bushes after they had greased the rails with Vaseline, and watched the train's giant wheels stall. The engineer always

managed to stop on greased rails, but he could never stop it right at the station. This last time, he passed it by 200 feet—a record for the two Brinkworth boys. They vowed the next time would be 300.

Their pranks were often experimental—like how would a penny look after being pressed to the rails by the giant engine, or what would happen to a stick in the same situation? Even though they knew a penny would flatten to an oval and a stick would shatter like a glass, they still experimented, hoping something new would surprise them.

John-John strained to hear the train coming. He set his ear upon the rail closest to him, while looking up at Frank. “It’s about five miles away.”

Frank bent down and caressed the shiny rail. “When you touch this rail, you touch all of America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”

“How so?”

“All these rails interconnect. Some pass over the Rocky Mountains, some kiss the Atlantic Ocean. I don’t know if I will ever see the Rockies or the Atlantic, but when I touch this rail, I touch them both.”

Frank stood up and strained to see the train’s plume. He seemed taller to John-John and more bothered. He absorbed Mama’s grief more than anyone, and he carried a burden John-John did not understand.

The train came in, right on schedule. The two Brinkworths sat on a bench and watched people detrain. They made up wild names and stories for the disembarking people.

“That there’s Freida Hornblower. She has an evil twin that’s locked up in the state mental hospital in Dayton. She likes to fish,” John-John said about a prim and proper lady whose nose stayed in the air while she held spectacles to her face.

Frank took up from there when he spied a ragged looking man jump from a boxcar. “Here comes Forrest Forsythe. He’s a gold magnate from Oregon. He dresses in disguise so no one will make a fuss about his wealth. He is in love with Freida.”

John-John pointed to a Jodhpur-wearing boy. “His name is Alowishes Poin-dexter. He’s a child genius from Philly. He’s come to Centerville to hide from all the University folks who want him to attend their school.”

Being the Fourth, not many people de-trained, so they finished their imaginary person game and walked the long gravel driveway home. The day ended as it had begun, with Mama’s food. Fried chicken, biscuits, rhubarb pie, canned corn, potato salad, baked brown sugar beans, and Grandma Ellsworth’s famous Molasses Cake filled his bursting stomach. When the moon arose dark and slivered

above the quarry lake, the whole family, including Alex and Olya, and of course Welcome who now called Mama “Gusty,” celebrated Independence with explosives. It’s just the way they always did it.

Except this year, Thomas was gone.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Soon enough the strawberry plants surrendered all their berries and picking time was over. Of all the kids To everyone's surprise, Farmer Nutt called up Helen for the Best Picker Award. Helen held her head high, a quiet knowing in her eyes. The gossiping bus drivers thought the award would go to Tiny Lucas. But Helen had out-picked them all by fifteen flats, a true upset victory.

Late that night, in the quiet of her room, Augusta remembered her pen and paper that rested inanimate on her bed-stand. They rested there an eternity. Thomas's death had stilled all written thoughts, except grocery lists and thank you notes, and even those she wrote with certain trepidation. She held the pen as if it were a foreign object. Before it would meet the paper again, she examined its simple engineering.

She remembered the first time Thomas showed her how to write script letters. Her third grade education had stopped at simple manuscript. She'd been a poet ever since she learned those block letters, making silly rhymes for family birthdays, and later writing of love's tight grasp of her heart when she met Thomas, but they were penned in rudimentary manuscript. How she longed to be able to write with a flowing pen.

Thomas noticed how she watched him write. "You want to learn, Augie?" he asked one day. She nodded and he taught her, just like that. Since he fancied himself her teacher, their handwriting scripted identical. She knew she could add her own personality and flourish to her text, but she loved the oneness she felt when she wrote exactly like him.

She placed the nib to a blank page. She used to pen rhymed and cadenced poetry before Thomas danced the streets of gold. Her poetry metered itself, understandable. Her eloquence those days stemmed from his diligence of many yesterdays. So tied were her poems to him that she couldn't bring herself to rhyme anymore; life didn't rhyme anymore.

Maybe that's why she couldn't finish reading her poem at Thomas's funeral. Maybe she knew even then how arbitrary life became with death, how unplanned, how riotous. Somehow she couldn't dignify a chaotic God with her sing-songy words.

But she still had words—words that burst from her heart but had no place to go—longing words, dark words, pleading words. These words had no rhyme. They had no meter. She feared picking up the pen on days when her boiling emotions resided just below her life's surface—even to make a mundane grocery list—in fear that her pen would fly away from her, emancipated, and tell all her deepest confidences. She spent her life in control. No, she could not let her pen reveal the phantasmagoric thoughts that swirled unchecked in her supposed Methodist head.

She knew the pen blazed mightier than the sword. Perhaps true, but when she pressed the pen's nib to the paper, her hand trembled, making an insidious ink spot. She feared the pen would take on a life of its own, turn on her and pierce her Pharaoh-like heart. She didn't know if she could remove it once it was pierced. It would be to her the sword in the stone, un-removable except by a noble Knight. The cold hard steel would wedge itself into a colder still heart of stone. She shuddered and put the pen down. There was no noble Knight to withdraw the sword from her heart so she better not risk it.

Thomas was dead.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Meg noticed that Lily came home every night from corralling the Wheeler twins with deep exasperation. Helen met her each day at the back door with wondering looks, and each day Lily shook her head no. The cosmetics hadn't arrived, and now it was well into the second week of July.

Edward and John-John spent their July days at the Hanson farm helping Frank. They all walked together down the gravel driveway at the sun's first light. Meg would wake up early just to see the sight—Frank walked just like Father, Edward stood erect, and John-John ran ahead and back, keeping up his self-imposed training for the Olympics. Frank and Edward still bickered, and their bickering took a more bitter turn when Frank reminded Edward that he made more money than him. *Why couldn't those two strong-headed boys just get along?*

They arrived at some sort of truce. At least they promised not to argue in front of Mama. Her face looked more worn, more harried. Her worry marks on her forehead deepened, troubling everyone. So, Frank and Edward took to play-acting, pretending conviviality when in reality a storm broiled beneath. Besides, the pay was good, and Mrs. Hanson set a fine table for supper. The Brinkworth men were sated, even when they came home for Mama's supper.

To keep the non-working girls busy, Meg proposed yet another moneymaking scheme.

"The old hog shed!" That's all she said to Helen. She wanted to pique her interest, make her long for the next words, so Meg kept to a cryptic verbal road.

"That place stinks. How could that possibly make us money?" Helen asked, whose bent toward the artistic did not include a hog shed.

"We could make something out of it," Meg continued, still keeping her idea to herself.

"Just get on with it, will you?" Helen had the look of summer, her face tanned, feet bare and dirty. When the sun dominated the summer's days, Helen needed to roam. All that strawberry picking had made her wild, like a caged animal just

longing to spring free and run like a tornado wind. “If you don’t tell me now, I’m going to go exploring.”

“All right. Here’s my idea. We convert the hog shed into a theatre.”

“That’s your idea? We can’t show movies here. We don’t have a projector, and Lord knows Aunt Bertie would have a Bertie-Bee fit if she found out,” Helen said.

“Not a movie theatre, silly, a playhouse theatre. We could clear it out, white-wash it, set up chairs and have us a regular civic center. It would be Centerville’s first—”

“We could put on Amy and Laurie’s wedding,” interrupted Helen.

“Well, we’ll get to production topics later. The question is, can we clean it up in a few days?” Meg knew they could, but she said it to light a fire under the nature-drawn Helen.

Wild rambling roses carpeted the hog shed. It scented the girls as they cleared out debris, tried to rid the inside of hog smell, and swept countless times. Every time Helen swept, a cloud of dust billowed at them all, making them both wheeze and cough. And when she finished, the dust settled right back into place. “Stubborn dust” Helen called it. “Hey, maybe that’s what we should call the theatre. The Stubborn Dust Theatre.”

“No, that sounds too cowboy. We will put on plays that elevate, inspire,” Meg said. “How about The Hallowed Hall of Theatrics?”

“Sounds like a hymn or a prayer,” Helen said. “Well, the hog shed is covered in roses, so let’s just call it The Rosebud Theatre.” The name stuck, much to Meg’s romantic chagrin.

After day one of The Rosebud Theatre revitalization project, the sturdy rectangular building stood free and clear of debris. But one thing still remained—essence of hog. They stood outside the now tidy building, unsure of what to do next.

“It still stinks in there,” Helen said. “No one’s going to want to watch a play if they have to hold their noses.”

“I’ve got a solution.” Meg turned toward the house. “Grandma Ellsworth gave me some old toilet water in an atomizer. We could spray it on the walls and floor.”

“Toilet water? Won’t that make it worse?”

“It’s not water from a toilet. It’s *Eau de toilette*—the French word for perfume.”

“Yeah, but I’ve smelled Grandma Ellsworth. She doesn’t smell like French perfume.” Helen made a face. “More like mothballs.”

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"It smells . . . good. Well, it is a little strong, but we need something strong to overpower that awful pig odor." Meg ran upstairs to her room, leaving Helen behind. She returned with the dusty atomizer and sprayed it in her sisters' direction.

"Strong! Strong? Don't you think that's an understatement, Meg?" Helen coughed and walked away from the misty haze, rubbing her eyes.

Meg unleashed her temper. "Does you have a better idea?"

Helen shook her head no.

"It's settled then. I will spray this inside. By tomorrow, it will smell divine."

Tomorrow came, even though Miss Allen said it never did, and divinity did not rest on the walls of the theatre. "Now it smells like pigs wearing cheap perfume," Helen said.

"Maybe the quarry kids won't notice." Meg tried to smile. "Now, to work."

The wind left Helen's sails, so Meg took to rallying. "I found these burlap sacks in the barn. Let's use them to make the curtains for the stage."

"We don't have a stage—just four walls and a smell."

"I've convinced Edward and Frank to make us one out of the old pallets behind the barn. It won't cost us a dime." Meg laid out the burlap end to end.

"Edward and Frank?" Helen said. "They hate each other. How in tarnation did you get them to agree to that?"

"Technically, I didn't. I asked them both separately. Maybe this theatre will be their salvation. You know how boys get when they work on a project together."

"Yeah, if they hate each other, they end up ripping each other to pieces. Don't you think you're being a little sneaky about it? What's going to happen when they meet up inside? It won't be all roses. You'll see."

"Have you no faith at all?" Meg placed her hands on her hips, then blew a wisp of hair heavenward. "They are flesh and blood. By the time they finish, they'll be regular chums. Now, to the sewing." Meg finished arranging the burlap into two curtain shapes and handed Helen a large needle. "I don't have thread, so we'll have to rip at the burlap to get some."

When they finished the curtains, they took to whitewashing the inside and outside of the theatre. They made quick work of the walls and turned their attention to finding adequate seating.

"What about the benches in the barn?" Helen asked.

"We use them when we're milking. I'm not sure Mama would let us."

"She would if we replaced them with other seating."

"And what do you have in mind, Helen?"

"Buckets. I can milk while sitting on an overturned bucket, can't you?"

“I suppose you’re right. Let’s drag the benches in here then,” Meg said.

They spent the rest of the afternoon dragging benches, painting benches, and putting pieces of wood and rocks under benches so they wouldn’t wobble. “I hate benches,” Helen said. “I don’t ever want to see another one as long as I live. At church on Sunday, I’m going to stand, just to protest anything bench-like.”

When Lily came home that day, she still shook her head no—no cosmetics. The girls smiled at the news, showing relief that they could concentrate on writing and staging plays without distraction.

Everyone waited for Edward at dinnertime that evening. Mama refused to pray or eat without every child there, so there they sat, hands folded on the yellow tablecloth. Edward breezed in, “Hey, where’s the milking bench?”

“I . . . needed it. Didn’t you see the upturned bucket I set there for you?” Meg asked. She tried to convey to Edward that this was not a time to explore the bench’s disappearance, but he didn’t take the hint.

“Yeah, I sat on it all right—for about five seconds. Then I fell off.”

“Don’t worry.” Helen’s voice sounded thin. “We’ll get it back soon.”

“You’d better, or you’ll be milking for me.” Edward sat straight in his chair and swept back his black hair. “This looks good, Mama.” At that, the family bowed and Frank prayed for the meal. With the amens, the table became a chattering marvel, plates clanking, girls giggling, milk pitcher passing back and forth.

“I’ve got a story for you,” Edward teased.

“Tell us!” Meg loved her brother’s stories. He never told a story that wasn’t belly-holding funny.

“It involves one Franklin Brinkworth.” Frank shot a look at Edward, but Edward proceeded, undaunted. “Seems Emma Hanson has been teaching Frank Hungarian.”

John-John started to laugh. “I’ll say!”

Edward took a bite of mashed potatoes. “Seems she’s got her eyes on Frank, or so we thought. You know how Mrs. Hanson is, though—stern as can be, so Emma told him words to say to her to garner her favor. She taught him Hello, *Szia*, Goodbye, *Viszlat*, Thank You, *Koszonom*, and You’re Welcome, *On Szivesen Lat*.”

“That’s pretty good, Edward. Sounds like you were listening too,” Lily said.

“Well, yeah, she taught the rest of us once we saw how soft it made Mrs. Hanson. She made us beg for it. But, eventually, she even wrote the words for us in Hungarian. It looked like hieroglyphics to me, until she wrote them with our normal letters.”

"That's not all she taught," John-John snickered.

"Let me finish," Edward said. "So, we spent the week saying hello Mrs. Hanson, goodbye Mrs. Hanson, thank you Mrs. Hanson, you're welcome, Mrs. Hanson. Every time we used Hungarian, she'd pinch our cheeks, or if we were at dinner, she'd heap on more servings. It worked like a charm."

"I hope you were not taking advantage of that woman," Mama said. "She's our neighbor."

"No harm, Mama. She fed us well before the Hungarian anyway. It's not wrong to be polite, is it?"

"You know what I mean, son."

Edward took in a deep breath and looked around the table.

"C'mon Edward, tell the rest of the story," Helen pleaded. "There's got to be more than just getting more food."

"Well, Emma, she pulls Frank aside yesterday, and whispers some more Hungarian to him. Frank, he looked at us with a smile. You could tell he was happy that he knew something John-John and I didn't know. At dinner he said *szereitek*. Well, Mrs. Hanson, she just threw her arms up in the air and hugged Frank. I swear I could even see tears in her eyes."

"What did it mean?" Helen asked.

"We asked Louise Hanson what it meant later." Edward paused. "He told Mrs. Hanson, I love you."

Mama laughed, violating her own no-laughing-with-food-in-the-mouth rule and her usual somber mood. She had to hold a cloth napkin to her lips to prevent more food from flying out.

"That's not all," John-John added.

"Do we have to continue?" Frank wrung his hands.

"So," Edward continued. "Today, Frank thinks he has a good thing going. Emma refuses to tell him what *szereitek* means and has sworn everyone else to secrecy. She says don't you trust me, Frank? And then uses that pouty face and those big eyes of hers to sway him. She whispers a new phrase in his ear *nagy kover tehen*."

Edward took a bite of fried squash and continued. "Today at the midday meal, Mrs. Hanson goes on and on about how Frank knows what a mama needs to hear, how she wishes her own children would speak to her like that. She tells them what a good boy Frank is to learn Hungarian. Then she asks Frank, 'What do you have to say to me today?' and he blurts out *nagy kover tehen*, all the while with a smug look on his face. Well, Mrs. Hanson, she stood up, threw her napkin

on the floor, and started yelling in Hungarian. The Hanson children exploded in laughter, and of course the rest of us just sat there not knowing what was going on.”

“What did he say, Edward?” asked Meg.

“*Nagy kover tehen*, Jonas told me later, means big fat cow.” The children’s laughter, which had died down after the I love you comment, erupted anew.

Frank stood up, pushed his chair away from the table and left the room.

“Come back. You have to admit it was funny,” Edward jabbed.

Frank looked over his shoulder while he ascended the creaky steps. “Nothing’s funny when you’re the brunt of it.”

Mama rose signaling the others it was time for dishes. “Frank’s got a lot on him right now Edward. Best keep your stories to yourself.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

Summer had a way of getting to Augusta when its air became thick with hot moisture. July had been free from humidity, a rare thing indeed for a Midwest summer, but this week everything changed. The muggy days commenced with a rip roaring thunderstorm, complete with flash lightning that illuminated her bedroom in the dead of night, rumbling thunder that made Inferno hide under John-John's bed with sheets of rain that muddied the garden.

When she awoke the next morning, the humidity announced itself in full, sweaty force. Although dedicated to cleaning the house from the attic to the cellar, the moist hot air made her feel dull, lethargic. Even lifting her hand to her face to mop the drippy sweat took more effort than anticipated. What she wouldn't give for a swim in the quarry lake. Maybe Saturday.

Wearily, she rose from bed and noticed her pen and paper resting in its same place. Why did she think it would move? She convinced herself that the pen had a mind of its own, and she half-expected to be greeted one morning with a perfectly scripted poem or a love note from the other side.

She pulled on her work dress. She noticed Inferno curled again in Thomas's spot on the bed. When the thundering stopped right before dawn, Inferno must've crept back to her bed. "Time to make the bed, fraidy cat." Inferno stood, almost like he understood her and stretched his back into a high arch, his paws extending in front of him. He yawned. The heat got to him too.

She hustled about her routine with a deadness of soul that stymied any positive thoughts of the future. She tried to pray for her family—for Alex, for Olya's starving relatives—but the words didn't seem to form around her teeth. Maybe she should retire her finger and big toe prayers.

Bleak as she felt, she faced each dull day ahead of her, and even that overwhelmed her with a sense of reticence. *How can I hold everything together?* She knew she was the glue that bonded the Brinkworth remnant together, but she felt the bond weaken. All her life she had prided herself on her self-sufficiency—her

ability to face mountains with an invincible fortitude. When her father died of the consumption, she saw her own mother crumble under grief's pallid hand, and she wouldn't do that to her children. She was the parent; she refused to put her own children in that premature role.

The unremitting sun beat down on her while she weeded the garden. There, sitting on a wettened earth surrounded by weeds, she recalled how her mother reacted after her husband's death. Father had died a month prior. A young Augusta slipped out of their home to see Mother. She could still see the sun's rays haloing Mother's head. Mother clawed at her garden then, uprooting everything. Normally a woman prone to uniformity, to straight-lined garden rows and neat geometric flowerbeds, Augusta's eyes instead observed grief unearthed. Turnips lay in scattered heaps. Lettuce ended up beheaded, splayed in various piles around the garden, making Augusta think Mother must've flung them. She cried and pulled and threw. Augusta tiptoed backwards as her body quaked. The memory smelled fresh, still alive.

She would not put her children through her own grief. Better to paste on an all-is-well face than to capitulate to her growing desire to fling rutabagas. She pulled weeds, placed them in neat, symmetric piles, and wiped her wet brow. Her instinct to wipe was more from fear that if moisture entered her eyes, it would prime the pump of raw emotion that steeped below her careful façade.

Olya always sang when she walked. Augusta could hear the minor-keyed melodies before she appeared from over the rise. She looked up to see Olya singing and walking toward her.

"Good day, Olya?"

"Yes, a good day, Missus. Alex stood today, just for a moment, but he stood. And I got this." Olya put a letter in Augusta's hand. "It's from American government. We can bring over my Aunt's family if we can raise the money."

Augusta chided herself for almost abandoning her prayers—prayers that were answered despite her faithlessness. "He stood?"

"Yes, in front of God and Ivan the cat, and me of course. Said he wanted to show me something. I regret that I had little patience for him. I looked at him and said *what*. And he pushed his covers aside and stood up. All I could do was laughter."

"Amazing." It took Augusta a long time to form conversation, so steeped in gratitude. "Have you heard from Zina lately?"

"No, but I wrote her today to tell her the good news—of Alex and America. I told her to pack her family's things and be ready. Even Alex wants to work now. I think that's why he stood. I think he needed to have to work, for something bigger than his own leg problem." Olya joined Augusta in her systematic harvesting and weeding.

Chapter Fifty-Five

“Heaven-Anne! Heaven-Anne! Where’d you go?” Welcome’s voice had a plaintive pleading to it.

“In here, Welcome. In the Rosebud Theatre.” Helen stepped through the doorway and beckoned her friend inside.

“This is pretty in here. What are you going to do here, Heaven-Anne?”

“We’re getting ready for our first play.”

“What is a play? Are you going to play in here? Can I play with you?”

“No, a play is like a picture show, only it’s real. The people are right in front of you saying their lines.”

“Picture shows are real, Heaven-Anne. Joshua, he told me, and I believe him.”

“No, Joshua’s pulling your leg. They are pretend. Do you ever pretend?”

“Oh yes, I do all the time. I pretend squirrels talk to me.”

“Do they?”

“Well, no, not really. But they make noise and I pretend their noise is a special squirrel voice meant just for me.”

“What do the squirrels say to you Welcome—when you’re pretending, that is?”

“They tell me Doc Calverley is their good friend. They say your daddy and my brother Jim are in heaven dancing on goldy streets. They tell me your Mama’s sad. They say lots of things.”

“Those are some pretty smart squirrels.”

“Yeah, they are wise, like owls. Now, what movie are you making in this here building again?”

“Not a movie, a play. We are pretending to have a wedding—between Laurie and Amy.”

Welcome laughed. “That’s silly. How can two gals get married? Is it because all you have is girls? I could be a boy if you want me to.”

“No, I know it sounds silly but *Laurie* is a boy’s name in our play. So, Laurie the man is marrying Amy the woman. Understand?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Can I pretend to be Laurie? Please!” Welcome put his grubby hands together like a beggar and looked up at Helen with pleading eyes.

“I’m sorry Welcome. We have already cast all the parts. But, we do need a curtain puller. How good are your muscles?”

“Better than the squirrels, that’s for sure.”

Helen didn’t want to explore the squirrel/muscle issue and said, “Well, it’s settled then. You will help us draw the curtains between scenes.”

“Heaven-Anne,” Welcome said, “you know I can’t draw. I can’t even draw a line.”

“No, drawing is just a term. It means to pull on the rope to open and close the curtains. Can you do that for us?”

“Sure thing, Heaven-Anne.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

The 1932 Summer Olympics blared from John-John's room for two solid weeks. It had been Helen's turn to have Edward's portable radio, but she capitulated to John-John's blue-eyed glance and let him have it instead. Every night at dinner, while the doors and windows let in hot stagnant air in vain attempts to cool down the house, John-John aped a sport's announcer, catching the family up on what happened that day. His voice squeaked from low to high, ranging from a tone as deep as Frank's to a resonating screech like a protective mother hen. He hated the intrusion of either voice. He missed his monotone boy sound. Like his longings, he was caught in the world of in betweens—of yearning for manhood, yet clinging to childhood. Thankfully, the sheer excitement of the Olympics made him speak and creak, otherwise he would have preferred to keep his changing vocal chords a tidy secret.

In a sense, he had taken over Thomas's role. Like him, John-John was a perfect mimicker, and his screeching enthusiasm bled into everyone, even Mama. The last day of the Olympics just so happened to coincide with John-John's twelfth birthday. As an unspoken gift to him, the family awaited his final report.

"These are hard times," he said with a somber, Frank-like voice. "Only thirty-seven countries out this time in California. That's down from forty-seven in Amsterdam. Athletes dropped to less than half, from 3,014 to 1,408. But, the amazing thing is that there were twenty-two Olympic records set this year."

"Where did they put all those athletes?" Helen asked.

"William May Garland—he's the head of the Los Angeles Olympic committee—he created an Olympic village right by all the events. Just imagine what it will be like when I get to the Olympics. I'll walk the village streets with athletes from Peru or Germany or Mexico." John-John stuffed more greens into his mouth. He read somewhere that greens made a man strong, so he determined to eat more than anyone else in the family. The family supported his strongman quest by donating their limp, slimy greens.

“Tell me about swimming,” Edward said. Edward could out-swim anyone in Centerville. John-John secretly hoped Edward would try for the next Olympic swim team.

“Two words: Helene Madison. She garnered three golds in swimming, and she’s from the good old U S of A. The Japanese scored most of the men’s swimming medals.” John-John shot a glance at Edward. “But we did have one winner—Clarence ‘Buster’ Crabbe. That could be you one day, Edward.”

“Shucks, I just play at it. I couldn’t beat a Japanese man. Those guys swim in an ocean. The quarry lake doesn’t compare. No waves.”

“You have to start somewhere,” Helen said. “Who won the most medals, anyway?”

He stood in front of his plate of shiny greens, a thing unheard of in the manners books, and hummed the national anthem.

“Sit down and stop humming,” Mama said. “You know there is no singing at the table.”

“Aw, Mama. I’m just showing you how they congratulate the winners. The U.S. got forty-one gold medals, and 103 total. The closest country after that was Italy with thirty-six. This Olympics they did something new. They made this platform with a tall step in the center and two lower steps on either side. If you were a gold medal winner like Babe Didrikson, you’d stand on the middle top step. Silver and bronze stand on the steps below. Some committee official would drape the gold around your neck, and an orchestra band would play your national anthem.”

“Who’s Babe Didrikson?” Frank scowled.

“Not Babe, *Babe*. How can you not know that? She’s our very own lady track star. Her front name’s Mildred, but Babe sounds much better, don’t you think?”

Meg swallowed. “I should say so. I would not want to go around life as a Mildred.”

“How about Marjorie?” Edward teased. “That sounds an awful lot like Mildred to me.”

“Enough, children. Can we please just eat supper and be done with it? There are chores to be done afterward, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“But I haven’t told you about Tolan,” John-John’s voice squeaked. He took a breath and then continued before she could shush him. “Eddie Tolan swept both sprint track events. His relay team set a world record of forty-point-zero, a full second off the German record. He ran like the wind.”

Mama angled a look at him that said enough. He cleared his plate from the table and sprinted out the door to further his Olympic training, this time dis-

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guised as feeding the chickens. Someday he would bring Olympic glory to the Brinkworth family. Since Edward didn't take his swimming obligation seriously, John-John would have to run for glory. Thomas would be proud, then. John-John could picture himself running heaven's golden streets with a like-colored medal trailing on a ribbon behind his neck. He'd show it to Thomas and Thomas would say, "Well done, son."

Tonight, his "well done" came in the form of a cackling chicken.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

“Thomas, I don’t know how much longer I can carry on like this.” Augusta noticed more pesky weeds infiltrating Thomas’s graveside. They were a stubborn lot, weeds. When she pulled a well-anchored one, she wished Thomas had been a stubborn weed that willed itself to live no matter what.

When the children left to do chores in the morning, she took a long walk with no intention of ending up in the cemetery. Something drew her there. She had been lost in her thoughts and rather absentmindedly came to herself right in front of Thomas’s gravestone.

“We’re afloat, but we aren’t living. Thanks for sending the loaves and fishes, but now I’m looking for something more elusive—hope. Could you send me some? Our family’s in two parts. I’m sure you see it from your vantage point. It’s me—alone and strong—and them. We don’t seem to be talking. Oh the kids, they have their own society, but I am no longer a part. It used to be the Brinkworths were one—one family. Now we are two—six children and one Mama, subsisting and groveling and surviving.”

She pulled hard at one firmly anchored dandelion weed, pulling off the yellow top and leaving the deep taproot still planted, its root pointing toward Thomas. “It’s like my vegetable soup, Thomas. I remember making it for you that first time. How proud I was when I put the bowl in front of you. How crushed I was that it wasn’t enough for you. I’m living vegetable soup every day. I try my hardest to keep this family together, only to realize it isn’t enough—never will be.”

When she allowed her own guilt to lacerate her soul, Thomas would calm her, say something funny, and help her to see how darkened her eyes had become. She had no one to temper her guilt—her gnawing feeling that all of her efforts amounted to not enough.

She knelt while the hard ground bit into her knees. Now she sat on the weedy earth just like she did in the strawberry fields when her knees buckled beneath her. “May as well get this over with, Thomas. Frank and Edward, they’re feuding

something fierce. Maybe I should get out the boxing gloves you bought them for Christmas, but I am afraid if I did it now, they'd beat each other up till neither stood. Frank blames himself for your death and Edward has taken up the same cause, as if he's a devil on Frank's shoulder. I don't know what to do about it. I'm not kin to the world of young manhood. Welcome's the only man in my life and you know well enough about him. He's more child than man."

She adjusted her position and sat cross-legged. She smoothed her skirt over her hidden legs and continued rooting out dandelions. "Lily's plum worn out, Thomas. She works all day, every day—even Sundays. You need to ask Jesus to send that Hattie woman some sense, some mothering sense. Lily is practically Joshua and Emmy Jo's mama, and it drains the life out of her."

"Our firefly, Meg, is taking to deceiving and conniving. I know I should talk to her about it all, especially the drive with Sammy and bringing Buttercup to school. She doesn't know I know her secrets. Seems kids forget that mamas have eyes in the back of their heads. She's a free spirit. I'm afraid to crush it, but in allowing her liberty, I'm afraid I've been accessory to her rebellion."

She lifted her finger and traced Thomas Elmer Brinkworth's name, birth-date, and death-date. It all seemed so final. It struck her that there was no period on the headstone, just letters. She hoped his life hadn't ended like the period at the end of a carefully constructed sentence, at least not in its significance. She knew he lived on in heaven in some unending eternal line, but his death felt like a giant red period that interrupted her life here on earth. It ended her life, really.

"And then there's John-John. He calls you Thomas, you know. Can't figure that out either. He wants to run like the wind in the Olympics one minute, the next minute he just stares into space and I see a tear roll down his cheek. His voice is changing. He's becoming a man, our youngest son, but I suppose you know that."

She waited for Thomas's answer, just as she waited for her pen to fly by itself to the paper to compose words that she couldn't bring herself to write. As in each case, no words came, only deafening silence—the kind of silence that rumbled through the trees on a windy day, blowing away chaff but never making any noise.

"Helen still cries. I can hear her at night. I don't dare comfort her, for fear I might break down. You understand I need to be strong, right Thomas?" She could almost hear Thomas' reply, *Now don't be so strong, Augie. A good cry didn't hurt anybody*. She countered, "Don't you be interfering with my ways, Thomas. Helen will be all right soon enough. The whimpering is dying down each week."

"Olya's family, they're going to make it. The good Lord stubbed my toe—

blackened it really—and He's seen fit to rescue the whole lot and bring them to America." Augusta looked above her and noticed for the first time the leafy canopy above her. The maple leaves flittered in the light breeze, and for once, she felt as if she were in church—church disguised as a leafy cathedral, but church nonetheless.

A holy hush fell. She whispered, "Alex stood, Thomas. He stood. It's proof that God Almighty hears my finger prayers still, even though my faith is like Saint Peter's. I try to walk on water, but I sink every time. Thankfully, he grabs my hand before the water snags me."

Her voice caught. She feared she said too much out loud, even if a whisper. A threshold of words her puppeteer allowed. With too much yammering, emotions were bound to erupt, and she wasn't about to cry in the maple leaf church. Not now. Not ever.

She stood and wiped the dust and earth from her hands, more an exercise in control than concern for cleanliness. In a sense, the dust symbolized insidious emotions that threatened to rear their unpredictable heads. After the dust fell from her hands, she felt control seep back into her.

"Thanks for inquiring about the loaves and fishes, Thomas. I need some hope now, and so does Olya. Could you petition the Almighty for some?"

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Summer breezes rippled Lake Frank, making its water glisten in the noon-high sun. Meg pulled her hair back in a loose ponytail and looked up the hill, then placed her hand on Helen's head. "Do you see anyone yet?"

"Not yet, but Tommy Norris promised me he'd come. They'll come. Don't worry."

Meg admired her hand-painted sign above the renovated Rosebud Theatre. Her plan to have Edward and Frank build a stage with joy and camaraderie failed. Neither would step foot in the theatre with the other there, so no stage, sufficing instead with a dusty floor.

Meg worried about Welcome's ability to perform his curtain duties so she repeated the instructions.

Helen intercepted. "He's fine. I've already told him how to do it. You worry too much." She looked at Meg, puzzled. "Now why are you wearing a ponytail?"

"Oh, I don't know—just wanted to keep my hair out of my face."

"It suits you, Meg. Sammy would think so too if he saw it."

Meg flushed although she tried feigning nonchalance. "Really?"

"I see the way he looks at you. Looks like L-O-V-E to me."

Meg wanted to explore this further, but billows of dust coming down the driveway interrupted. The dust made noise—the noise of children's animated voices. The wind off the lake met with the herding quarry children to create a whirlwind.

Helen returned from the theatre in full costume and make-up. "They're here! Hurry, come in before they see us."

With cheap entertainment a precious commodity in Centerville, the children ran. For one penny, one blessed copper coin, a quarry kid could see a real live play. Summer usually found the kids swarming the quarry lake for hours of swimming, splashing, and diving, but even the excitement of a luke-warm swimming hole waned when the promise of danger, romance and intrigue invaded quarry housing.

They advertised well, promising the moon. Helen's rose-embellished signs read "Join The Adventure Of Live Theatre! Just One Measly Penny! See Real Live Drama Just Like A Movie House!! Don't Miss Out On This Limited Showing! Two Weeks Only At The Brinkworth Quarry Rosebud Theatre!"

Meg told her to take out some of the exclamation points and de-capitalise her words, but Helen would have none of it. "It makes a bold statement. I'm not changing it," she told Meg.

By the looks of things, the power of Helen's exclamatory advertisement worked swimmingly. Welcome greeted each tousled child with a firm handshake. He took each penny, examined it (Meg had warned him about buttons or tokens slipping through.), and placed it in an old cigar box. He directed each child to a seat—the larger ones in back, standing, the medium sized ones on benches, and the squirmy little ones on the blanket covered earthen floor.

The last time Meg popped her head out of the burlap curtain, the Rosebud theatre stood jam-packed with perspiring, eager faces. Her stomach twisted more out of anticipation than fear. She loved to be up front, loved feeling the voice of a character speak through her. She smiled when the upturned faces of the blanket-sitting crowd seemed to admire her. Fame—a glorious thing, despite what Mama said.

She noticed the mid-sized children crammed onto the milking benches. She pitied the end sitting ones whose precarious perches looked uncomfortable at best. When she saw the standing room only crowd, her heart caught. Sammy Nutt stood in the way back, tall and proud, with his arms crossed across his chest. Though dark, she could see him smirk. She wished she hadn't spoken to him with harsh words in the strawberry fields, and all at once she felt self-conscious.

Her longing to act waned as her face reddened.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The forty five-minute performance had its glitches. Welcome proved his worth as host, but he fell apart as a curtain puller. Twice he had opened the curtain while they were rearranging a scene, and once he closed it in the middle of Laurie and Amy's I do's. At first Meg snarled. This was a serious play, with overtones of love and valor. How dare Welcome ruin it for them. But when she saw the quarry children laugh—and not just token laughter, but deep belly gripping giggles—she forgave Welcome at once.

She decided their next play would be a comedy. Life was too hard to be serious and foreboding. They all needed to laugh, from the smallest quarry kid all the way up to the worry-marked grown ups, her own home evidence of this. Mama set a somber tone—as if it were a capital offence to snicker.

She remembered a quote Miss Allen penned on the chalkboard the first day of school last year: "A good laugh is sunshine in a house—William Makepeace Thackeray." She liked the author's middle name and wondered if she would be one who made peace someday. She also longed for Mama's good laugh—these days a commodity more rare than quarry amber. Even though she fancied herself a grown woman at fifteen, she needed Mama's laugh and craved Mama's touch.

Meg jumped when someone touched her arm. She looked up to see a smiling Sammy. "You half scared me to death."

"Apparently I am good at that, Meg-girl. What do you say we go driving tonight?" His voice emanated peace. Maybe his middle name was Makepeace. She hoped Sammy Makepeace Nut had forgiven her strawberry retorts.

"You know what Mama says, Sammy. She's not keen on boys and cars and goings on. I'll ask her, though. Just a minute." She left Sammy to sit alone in the Rosebud theatre, which still smelled like perfumed hogs, and opened the screen door, letting it slam on itself.

"Mama?"

“What is it, Meg?” Mama came in from the parlor wearing that hideous work dress. She hoped Sammy wouldn’t see her mama that way.

“Sammy’s asked me to go driving with him tonight. May I? I’ll finish my chores. We did bring in nearly fifty cents today.” She hoped money would somehow sway Mama, since Mama preoccupied herself with its acquisition.

Mama sighed, wiped her hands on her apron, and sat heavily in Father’s chair at the head of the dining table. “Meg, you know what I think about cars. They’re dangerous.”

“He’s responsible. You saw him drive the tractors, Mama. It was a tight squeeze down those strawberry rows and he never once smashed a bush. His father’s letting him drive his car. Please Mama.”

Meg didn’t have John-John’s piercing eyes, but today she wished she did. John-John could get Mama to do anything with those eyes. Mama sat there, silent, like she hadn’t heard Meg’s voice, something Meg got used to, but now it bothered her. Part of her wanted to bend down to Mama’s face and scream I exist! Do you hear me? But propriety prevailed. She interpreted the silence as a no and opened the screen door.

As its rusty hinges squeaked, her own Mama squeaked, “You may go, Meg.”

Chapter Sixty

The day, it waits.

Her hand shook when she wrote it last night at her writing desk—a poem fragment, a disembodied line without rhyme, without chiasm. She could almost feel its cadence, its rhythm when she set the pad down next to her bed before turning in. The empty table next to her bed now held life, and that life was inextricably connected to her own. *The day, it waits.*

But what did it wait for? And what did she wait for? The sunlight angled into her empty room pooling around a purring Inferno. He let the day happen to him, and he had a way of reveling in the sunshine that made her envious. Waiting, especially in the form of lounging around, was not her virtue. She plowed. She earned. She scraped. She mothered. She fed. She instructed. She ironed. She slept. She performed on the cruel stage God had given her—a stage without a leading man, but she did not wait. She did not stop.

The day, it waits. This morning, the words almost echoed off the stark white walls of her room. She noticed something new as the day waited. Her bedcovers, even after a night of restless sleep, were perfectly composed, the only wrinkle being her stick straight legs in front of her. As if in tribute to Thomas, she flung the covers heavenward, disrupting Inferno's sun bathing, and let a rush of cool morning air envelope her—the first spontaneous thing she'd dared since he died. Perhaps the day waited just for this one moment.

The day, it waits.

Chapter Sixty-One

Meg awoke slowly, still groggy from her evening with Sammy. She glanced over at her dresser and smiled. The jar preened there, with fifteen fireflies still buzzing in reckless circles. He told her that she lit his life, and handed her the jar when the stars hung in symphony above their heads. They sat on the hood of his car, same place as last time; this time the wheat reached knee high, goldening.

The wheat's in its adolescence, she thought. She almost told Sammy her deep thought when he hopped off the hood and opened the driver's side door, leaving her to admire the adolescent grain and the timeless stars alone. When he switched the headlamps off, he returned to her in the dark with the jar of fireflies.

"Fifteen of them, Meg-girl. One for every year of your life," he said.

The jar-light illuminated his freckled face in hues of green. When he bent closer to her, his face blocked the light, but she didn't care. His kiss was sweet.

She could still taste it this morning.

Chapter Sixty-Two

August first meant the last day for John-John to work with Edward and Frank at the Hanson farm. He smiled when he thought of it. It wasn't that the work had broken him—he couldn't stomach the strained tension between his brothers. Although the two had an unspoken promise not to erupt in front of Mama, they didn't allow John-John the same privilege. He'd spent a month trying to soothe tension, but he found that this sort of tension could not be covered over when neither party acknowledged the importance of making up. Just when he thought he had plugged a hole in Edward, a stream of anger spewed from Frank.

The only time they appeared to get along is when they teased John-John's changing voice. Although their ridicule stung him, he quietly thanked God for it. At least they weren't fighting. His voice was nearly a man's now, but during this month of farm work, he made it squeak at opportune times when the tension mounted.

"Hey mouse," Edward would say.

"Got some oil for that squeak?" Frank added. And all would be well, as long as John-John could feign an undulating voice.

He felt like the little Dutch boy holding an entire river back with just one small thumb. Any minute and his dam would burst. The little Dutch boy might've been a hero in Holland, but his brothers did not afford John-John the same heroic status. To them, he was a bother, a meddler, and this weighed on him.

They made it through most of the day when the dam burst. John-John had to squeak and creak all day, it seemed, until Edward unleashed himself on Frank.

"Frankie boy, can't you hack the work?" Edward sneered when he saw Frank huffing behind the Hanson oxen.

"Of course I can," Frank said.

John-John heard the strain in his brother's voice and wanted to protect him. Frank had worked too hard today. The sun's beating was relentless, and the hu-

midity seemed to drain them all. Weary of this whole battle, he tired of changing his voice for the sake of fragile peace. Better let it just play itself out.

“You know, I think I feel like those oxen, Frankie boy,” Edward said. “I am carrying the load for this entire family. I work like two, since you can’t pull your own weight. I know Farmer Hanson sees it, but he feels too sorry for you to mention it to you. I do your work. Even John-John shoulders more of the load than you do. Admit it.”

Frank looked at Edward, a cold, hard stare. He dropped the reins of the oxen and motioned for John-John to take them up. He threw his hat on the ground and ran at Edward, nearly toppling him. They both rolled on the ground, fists flying, legs kicking, arms wrestling. Dust circled to the heavens as the boys, now men, leveled themselves on the hardscrabble earth. John-John wanted to scream, but nothing came out of his mouth, held hostage like one of his chasing dreams when the bad guys were gaining and he couldn’t speak to rally help.

But this was no dream.

Edward finally stood, triumphant and bleeding from the nose. The sun, directly above him at high noon, shined the top of his head. He looked like Goliath might have, had he beaten King David—haughty, arrogant, sneering. He wiped his mouth with his punching hand and glared down at Frank who was now curled up on the dirt. “Just so you know who’s boss.” He picked up Frank’s hat and set it on his own head.

John-John stood pinned to the earth. He saw Frank, but it took him several minutes to attend to him. He chided himself for not defending, for not forcing back the dam. When he bent near Frank’s swollen face, he nearly cried. The eldest Brinkworth moaned. John-John offered his hand, but he didn’t notice.

“Frank, are you all right?”

Frank’s eyes rolled back. He moaned.

“Frank! Wake up!” This time John-John’s voice pitched high.

John-John looked heavenward toward the unforgiving sun. “Thomas, what should I do? Help me, Thomas!”

No answer.

With John-John self-inaugurated into the fraternity of Brinkworth men, he now stood alone. Thomas was dead with no advice to give. Frank lay unconscious at his feet, and Edward nursed pride and anger for reasons he couldn’t understand. Perhaps he was not ready to be a man, a fact evidenced by the tears that defiantly rolled down his twelve-year-old face.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Helen greeted Lily at the door with the usual questioning eyes. “You’re home early. Did we get the packages?”

Her eldest sister had a vacant, dead look in her eyes. “Packages? Oh, yes. Here’s one from Tangee.”

“Don’t show it to me here. Let’s go to your room. I’ll fetch Meg.” She later regretted not delving into the reasons for Lily’s empty eyes. Lily obeyed her commands like Strawberry the docile horse. She plodded upstairs. Helen heard every heavy step.

When all three cosmetic girls gathered on Lily’s high and squeaky box spring, Meg looked at her. “Lily Pie, what on earth is the matter?”

“Seems I’ve been let go. Hattie ran out of money. I guess she thought her supply was endless. I came today, as usual, and Hattie met me at the door, eyes red like she’d been crying. Told me there was no more money and to go back home. I asked if I could say goodbye to Joshua and Emmy Jo, but she said no, it would only make it harder on them. Then, she shut the door, just like that.”

“Did you knock again?” Meg asked.

“No, I stood there a long time, tarred to that porch.”

“Doesn’t she owe you money?” Helen asked, finally forgetting about the cosmetics packaged on the bed, unopened.

“Yes, but she made no indication that she’d pay me. She owes me for all of July. What am I going to do? We need that money.” Lily, the Genteel One, shattered. Her breaking didn’t take place incrementally, but all at once in a flurry of tears and hand wringing. Neither knew what to do and just looked at each other, stunned more by Lily’s reactions than her dismissal.

Helen settled in next to Lily and put her arm around shaking shoulders. “There, there. Don’t you worry. It’s not up to you to provide. It’s not your burden. You have done your share, and done it without complaining. Maybe we should pray.”

“Pray for what? Nothing will bring Father back, and he’s who we need right now. Mama’s not enough.”

Helen recoiled. “You don’t really mean that. What if Mama heard you say that?” Helen asked.

“What if she does? She’s not alive anyway. She doesn’t hear. She died the moment stone crushed Father. We all see it, but none of us talks about it. Mama’s gone too.”

Lily cried, not as volatile as before, but in soft whimpers. Her serene demeanor cemented the family. And now that the mortar called Lily crumbled and chinked, hope seemed to leave them all. Helen felt punched—no wind to breathe. Air circulated around her, but held no benefit. Death haunted. Its apparition spirited away her father. It threatened to do a pathetic jig on the graves of Olya’s family. It ebbed the life out of her mama, day by day. And it was after her. She knew it.

Meg squeezed Lily’s hunched shoulders, shaking her head.

Helen faced her sobbing sister with ambivalence at first, which quickly morphed to rage—a rage she didn’t know lived beneath the topsoil of her happy-go-lucky life. Helen found her voice—loud. “Straighten up! Mama is alive. And Father is too, in his own way. We’ll all live through this. We will. I will.” Helen left the room and slammed the door for the first time in her life with such force that the transom above it shook. On a mission of rage, she needed the outdoors—even with its stifling humidity—to soothe her. Instead, she slammed right into Mama, who stood outside Lily’s door, arms crossed.

Helen wanted to ask whether Mama was snooping, so corrosive her thoughts, so furious her heart, but a last bit of honor restrained her. Mama was her elder, after all, and deserved controlled conversation. “Hello Mama.”

“Going somewhere?” Mama put an awkward arm around her so that they creaked down the stairs in tandem.

“To the fields—to think.”

“You think that will help?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s a beautiful day. Maybe it will.” Mama motioned to the kitchen window. The trees lilted to the left from a steady, easy wind. The sun mirrored its image in the lake.

“I wish there were no more beautiful days, Mama. I need some rain, some storms. It just doesn’t seem right to have sun when Father’s not here to enjoy it.”

“I think your father wants you to live, little Helen.”

“I’m not little anymore. I’m not a baby.”

The Quarryman's Wife

“You cry at night. I hear you.”

Helen turned away from her, trying to control the twin emotions of shame and fury that boiled inside. She tried to muffle her cries with a feather pillow for the first month of grief, not wanting to bother Mama. But eventually she cried pillow-less. Some part of her still needed a mother's comfort. Each night, the crying ebbed. Each night, she wept in shorter increments. Each night, she looked at her closed door hoping Mama would turn the knob, step to her bedside and hold her. Each night the glass doorknob's immobility maddened her. Once she even left the warmth of her blanketed bed to test the knob. It was cold to the touch, but it turned with ease.

“You hear me crying?”

“Less and less, but I hear you.”

“Why didn't you—”

“It's not my way. We all have to shoulder our grief, in our own way. I figured you just needed to cry it out until you had no more tears.”

“Did you hear us—in Lily's room?”

“Every word.”

“It's true, you know. You died too.”

Helen walked past Mama like she was something inconsequential—like gravel roads near a quarry—and slammed the door for the second time in her life. Behind her, she left her hollow Mama. Before her was a beckoning field whose tendrils and weeds weren't dead, but vibrantly alive—just waiting to hold her, to comfort her, to mother her. At least here, in the open air of the world called outside, she was free from death's specter-like grasp.

At least here, she could cry and yell and run.

Chapter Sixty-Four

The kitchen door's slam at the hand of her baby woke Augusta up. She started the day with poetry, and now she stood alone like a tragic soliloquy. Alone. Her family existed without her, with their secrets and inferences and closed doors. They were like two plays, both tragedies—she, alone, and uttering meaningless monologue about chores and bills and crops, and they, together, scraping their combined wisdom together to face a life of poverty and grayness.

Neither play seemed to be going anywhere—God took their hero on March fourteenth stalling both plots with arbitrary cruelty. They were both hero-less, aimless, caught in a whirling tornado whose fury brought fatigue and hopelessness. Both plays would never end, never come to climax or denouement. Even her internal puppeteer could not make her dance on life's stage while Thomas jiggled on golden streets. No, the two plays would go on, just as the show must go on, but there would be no hero, no aim, no life. They would continue like this for existential eternity, two parallel lines that never intersected, two lines that stretched nowhere. Inferno, more gregarious than aloof, even distanced himself from her.

Just like Helen's slammed door woke her up to her own stone-like heart, its next slam revealed hers wasn't the only hardened heart.

"Mama!" John-John, breathless and red from running, pulled at her apron. "It's Frank. He's hurt. Call Doc Fenn. Hurry."

She didn't have a moment to tell Lily and Meg that she was leaving.

Frank's eyes were closed when John-John led Augusta to his side, prone on the hard earth. "Frank!" She bent close to him and saw his right eye, swollen and purpling.

"What happened? It looked like a bull kicked him."

"Not unless the bull's name is Edward. They took to fighting again—without the boxing gloves."

"Edward? Did this?"

John-John nodded. "Stay here. I'll fetch Mr. Hanson."

She bent closer to Frank and shifted her head to see the horizon. She could feel his gasps of breath on her cheek. Alive.

"Frank!" She held either side of his face in her rough garden-toiling hands and fought to control her tears.

"You wake up son. You hear me?"

Chapter Sixty-Five

Meg squeezed Lily's shoulder until she stopped crying. Helen's verbal tirade surprised Meg, but her door slamming bothered her most. No doors slammed in their home when Father lived. A new paradigm existed now, a paradigm she didn't understand. She wished some wise sage would knock on their door offering free direction—a map of how to live life without a father. So tired of figuring out life, she'd obey any roadmap, no matter where it went or who the map's peddler was.

A rapid knock at the seldom-used front door jolted her from her thoughts. "Maybe it's the cartographer," she said.

"What?"

"You wouldn't understand. I'll get the door." Her action proved to be yet another shift for Meg since Mama instilled a strict hierarchy in the family. The oldest in the house answered the phone and the door—no exceptions. Now Meg became the eldest while her eldest sister mourned immobile.

Banker Pruitt stood in the front door's threshold with his hat in his twitchy left hand and his other hand behind his back like he wanted to deliver flowers to a sweetheart. "Is your mother in, Helen?"

"I am Meg, Banker Pruitt. Mama would've answered if she were here. She might be in the garden. Would you like me to fetch her?"

"No, that's all right. Just give her this." Instead of a bouquet, he handed Meg a roll of papers. "The receivership's done. The house goes back to the quarry in thirty days."

"What? How'd this happen?" She felt the red crawling up her face, warming her cheeks. *Control your temper, Meg.*

The dark-suited banker shifted from foot to foot, his left hand still twitching with some sort of nervous tick. "Two words. Unpaid Taxes."

"What taxes?"

"Surely you don't think the great state of Ohio can get along without property taxes." His voice seethed sarcasm. "Taxes make the roads, roads made from quarry rock. It all circles back around."

“I know about property taxation, sir, but if you would check your slipshod records, you would find that we paid our taxes this year, fair and square.” She let go of her anger restraint and stepped into the threshold nearly onto his feet.

The banker backed up and switched his hat from his left hand to his right. “Now don’t be getting angry Helen.”

“Meg!”

“Don’t get angry. You did pay those taxes—you’re right, but there’s the matter of the unpaid back taxes. Nearly eighty dollars.”

She stepped toward him again and closed the door behind her. No use riling Lily.

The banker backed up. “Your father was a kind man, Meg, but an awful businessman. He paid his workers before anything else—so committed he was to those job-stealing immigrants.”

“Sometimes people having money to feed their families took precedence over other business matters, Banker Pruitt. Don’t tell me my father was a poor businessman. He built this quarry from a minor operation to a thriving one. He introduced electricity and brought in the best electrical engineer in the states—”

“A man black as smoke, you mean. Elijah Frye thinks he’s too smart for us white folks.”

“You are right in that, Mr. Pruitt. He is too smart for any folks. He puts you to shame.”

The banker’s face reddened. “You want to know what happened or not?”

“Yes, I would love to hear how my bumbling father ruined us. Or maybe the ruin came from some crooked individual.”

“Hardly. It’s all quite simple, really. Your kind-hearted father leveraged his company based on a big spring order. When that came in, he’d pay the back taxes, eliminate the lien, and all would be square. Problem is, he died before the order got filled. Once the contractor found out Thomas left this earth prematurely like, he pulled out, thankful he didn’t have to pay what he promised.”

“He didn’t leave. Stones killed him. Before his time.”

“Well, stones were supposed to save him too, at least his business. But it looks like they couldn’t this time. Times are hard, Hel—I mean Meg. Everyone’s looking to cut costs. I wouldn’t blame the contractor.”

“I place the blame on men who don’t tell the truth.”

“Truth is a slippery thing.” He looked her right in the eyes, then averted his gaze.

The Quarryman's Wife

“Indeed. Here’s some truth. We’ll get by. Besides, Mama has a rare amber brooch.” She regretted letting the words “amber brooch” flee her lips, seeing how it made the impertinent man’s eyes narrow.

“Tell me about this brooch. Can you show it to me?”

She stood there, not knowing whether to cry or run. She did neither. “It’s not something sitting around in a jewelry box. Mama wears it.” She twisted her hands. “Come to think of it, I don’t think she’d part with it. Surely there’s a way we can pay the back taxes. Tell me the amount so we can figure this out, business-like.”

“Too late. Foreclosure strikes a lot of folks these days. Best be packing. You have thirty days.” The rotten man turned away from her, put his hat on his greasy head, and looked back. “Unless you’d like to consider giving me the brooch—as collateral, of course.”

Why did I mention that brooch? His covetousness sickened her.

“A slip of the tongue. I shouldn’t have mentioned the brooch. I’m sure you have more folks to needle—perhaps some other widows to rob?” Meg felt no regret for her stinging words. “My father was the kindest man there was, sir. I hope you realize my father can see you. One day, you will regret your deceptions.”

He behaved as if she never spoke, never looking back. He paced toward the front picketed gate, opened it with his twitchy hand, and turned toward town. In her hand, crinkled the papers that would kill her mama.

She didn’t know why she did it, but she ran up the stairs to Lily’s room and shouted, “Where’s the Tangee box?”

Startled, Lily pointed to the box tied with twine on the bed. Meg clawed at the knotted string until she pulled it around the corner of the box. She ripped at the brown paper with a fury that surprised her. When she opened the lid, she expected to find some sort of cosmetic nirvana. Instead she spied orange—everywhere. The four tubes of Tangee apparently melted in the Ohio sun, spilling their contents in greasy mess all over the box.

“Ruined!” The word held too many levels of truth to it that she couldn’t bare to elaborate.

No one would win the noble cosmetic competition.

At least Meg wouldn’t have to tell her secrets.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Helen saw Mama and John-John run out the door in a hurry from her hollowed out weed den near the quarry lake. Curious, she followed them until she reached the edge of the Hanson farm. Mama ran through the bull pasture without caution, but Helen remembered the Hanson bull with flaring nostrils and devil-eyes and stayed put. Mama stopped in the next field and stooped low to the ground. Something about seeing Mama like that triggered something. The teasing began just like it had when Father died.

Someone's dead.

When Doc Fenn pulled up in his shiny Model T, Helen forsook her bull fear and ran helter-skelter through the field. Was it Edward? Frank?

Someone's dead. Someone's dead.

Her feet cadenced to the dark rhyme, and although she wanted to stop the words, she couldn't. They seemed to be a part of her. Halfway through the field, Helen heard the demonic snort of the Hanson bull and looked behind her. In full charge mode, he narrowed in on her.

Someone's dead. Someone's dead. Someone's dead.

Her barefoot feet flew as fast as John-John the aspiring Olympian, but even then she could feel the bull's hooves reverberating under her feet. She beat the bull to the fence.

Someone's dead.

Helen's swift, bare feet had carried her to the fence, but sudden terror disengaged the part of her brain that knew how to climb through its boards. She lumbered slow motion halfway through when she felt the bull's impact. His lowered head sent her flying through the air, landing her several feet on the other side of the fence. When she came to, she saw the menacing bovine, his horns entangled in the fence.

"Helen, are you all right?" John-John and Farmer Hanson had apparently seen the whole thing and both rushed over to her.

“What?” she asked. Her head spun. She lifted a hand to her forehead and then pulled it away. Blood.

“You’re bleeding. Don’t worry, little Helen. The doctor is close by. Settle back down.”

“I am not little! Quit calling me that!” Although incapacitated at the moment, her mouth still functioned and she intended to use it. Defending herself from barrages of “little Helen’s” was a recent crusade of hers, and she was not about to let the bull strip her of that small portion of will. With that, though, she remembered her foe, and felt vulnerable. “The bull, John-John, he’s coming after me.”

“He’s stuck in the fence. Farmer Hanson is untangling him. Said he’s taking him to the barn anyway, so don’t you fret little Helen.”

She meant to repeat, “I am not little,” but everything became so blurry and convoluted that she succumbed to an overwhelming desire to sleep.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Mama flurried and flitted around Helen and Frank so much that Meg decided not to tell her about losing the house. She had enough to worry about with Frank's swollen eye and rheumatic breathing and Helen's delirious concussion, to have to hear more bad news. Although Mama seemed concerned, that concern did not lead to touching Frank or even little Helen, confounding Meg. Instead, Mama worked. She boiled. She disinfected. Inferno touched the unconscious ones, rotating half day on Helen's pillow next to her head, and half day near Frank's chest.

Dorothy, the town's operator, performed her gossip-duty because Olya stood in their kitchen, making *pierogis* and cleaning the already clean house. "Missus Dorothy, she told me of your accidents. I came as soon as I could. When sickness or accident visited our house, my mama made *pierogis*. It seemed to help."

"I am sure Mama will appreciate anything you can do," Meg said. But she who loved words and discourse felt wearied by them.

"We used to make *pierogis* all together, our families did, on good occasions and bad."

When will Olya stop talking?

"We'd have what you call a pecking order. The widows wore black *babushkas*, the married purple, and the young girls such as you wore white—for purity." Meg felt anything but pure. Too many secrets. Olya's fingers flew, making the tiny pies with a Ukrainian vengeance.

"I'll leave you to your pies, Olya. I need to find Edward." Meg didn't wait to hear Olya's goodbye. She exited into the evening hoping Edward hid in the barn.

But, Edward was nowhere, yet another worry to pester Mama. Meg thought her mother's worry lines had etched themselves into her face. Sometimes the lines made their appearance—during lean times when Father brought in less money—but they always seemed to fade away when the first bellow of laughter escaped from her chest. Now they furrowed permanently, hammered into shale. Meg didn't not know how to remove them.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

John-John inaugurated himself the man of the family tonight. With one brother wounded and the other one AWOL, he felt the heaviness of responsibility. He'd always wanted to be a man among men, a co-equal with Thomas, but tonight all he wanted to do was cry and be held by a mama who leaned more toward tenderness than utility. He chided himself for his sissy-ness, then slipped out the back screen door being careful not to let it squeak. He had to find Edward.

He ventured to the quarry around the thicketed side of the quarry lake. The wind picked up, bending the trees forward and back. Even with a riot of leaves, the trees' branches cackled against each other, shuddering him. He remembered Thomas's stories of the Indians who walked this trail before him, and he wondered if their sage eyes stared at him tonight from the shadows. Every whimpering call from a dove stopped him cold. Every scatter by a rodent anchored his feet to the muggy earth. Every speck of nature seemed rascally, menacing.

He could see the lone oak tree silhouetted against the hazy yellow light of the quarry. Thomas had always shut down all the lights at dusk when he manned the operation—to save money and to make sure the Brinkworth family all had a dark house to sleep in. Folks knew Thomas for his gentle system of ethics and thrift, qualities the new owners lacked. They often left all the lights on, and sometimes kept a few, but never extinguished all of them. Tonight the stone workhouse's porch light shone. John-John inched himself down the trail that hugged the cliff and headed toward the light in hopes that by some stroke of luck Edward might be hiding out there. With shadows exaggerating rocks and masking holes, John-John relied on his adroitness to make his way to the workhouse.

Its door was locked. He peered in all lower windows, but spied nothing. He listened for a while, hearing nothing. When he left, he pulled the switch, darkening the quarry.

The night went on like that, with John-John thinking he located Edward only to be disappointed. He tried the train station, the school, Farmer Nutt's fields, the

Hanson farm, Four Corners—everywhere. He sat in front of Decker's store on the dark street. The moon had risen, casting John-John in blue. The buildings loomed larger when the moon shadowed them. He felt small. Too small.

He didn't know what he would say if he found Edward. Sitting there, dusted in moonlight, he realized how rash he had been to venture out without a plan. Even if he found Edward, he couldn't scold him. No amount of words could sway Edward's iron will. No amount of sissy-boy pleading moved his big brother. Any words that hinted at undermining Edward's thirst for control and power met with brooding disdain or a volcano of bitter words.

He walked the road home like a prisoner in a Roman Triumph. The closer he neared home, the more he smelled the stench of death. He didn't think Frank or Helen would die, but he did fear the family's deep ties would sever. In front of the Methodist church, to the moonlit air he said, "Thomas. I wish you could come down and fix this."

"He can't fix it." Edward's disembodied voice.

John-John squinted around him, scanning the horizon. "Where are you?"

"I'm up here. In heaven with Father."

He looked up, seeing only darkness. "Don't be fooling around. Tell me where you are. Mama's mighty worried about you."

"I'm where Farmer Nutt's wagon used to sit." On the stretch of church roof above the front verandah stood Edward, tall and straight.

"It's time to come clean." John-John hoped his words didn't sound desperate or thin.

"I'll come down when I am good and ready," he said.

Every word Edward said of late was tainted with tinges of sullenness. When Thomas died, Edward seemed to keep his anger in checked restraint, but lately he seemed to despise restraint, casting it aside like some unwanted rag. John-John bore the brunt of his explosions. Although he had a healthy fear of Edward—all he needed to do was look at Frank's swollen face—he now was fed up with him. He finally let go of his Mama-infused muzzle.

"You will come down here, Edward. If you fancy yourself the man of this family, you will act like one and take on a man's responsibility. Mama needs you. Forget about everyone else and think of her for a change. Your absence is worrying her to pieces."

"You going to make me?"

"Someday I will be bigger than you, and I'm already faster than you. Not too long from now, I'd make you come down with my fists. Tonight, all I can do is plead."

The Quarryman's Wife

“Pleading’s for sissies.”

John-John fought for control. Violence threatened to overtake his fists, but he pushed down its clawing insistence and instead opted for peace. “Sure enough. But it’s a true sissy who runs away from responsibility. You got what you wanted, Edward. Now you’re the breadwinner. Satisfied?”

Edward stood and paced back and forth on the church’s stoop. John-John found his man voice, deep and resonating, “The doctor bills alone will eat us up. At least go home to tell Mama you’ll work extra hard to pay them. You wanted to be the oldest. Act like it.”

His straight-backed erect brother stooped a bit and then sat on the roof’s edge, his feet dangling free like a fisherman off a pier. “You know I’d rather live in a bottom of a well than go home, little brother.”

“Mind how you’ve been raised, Edward, and do the right thing for once. Lord knows you’ve stirred up enough strife to last us a lifetime.”

“Can’t seem to deny your logic, little man.” Edward, to John-John’s astonishment, alit from the roof and landed square on the ground, like a confident cat. Even though part of him disdained Edward, the other part—a big part really—admired his amazing ability to get out of scrapes and perform man-like feats. Still, Edward had yet the biggest foe of his life yet—an angry Mama.

At least John-John found his voice.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Augusta sat in Thomas's chair when Edward skulked in that night.

"Been worrying about you, son. You all right?" She controlled her voice, kept it even.

"I've been better," he said.

"So has Frank—and Helen for that matter." Her calm demeanor seemed to make Edward squirm.

"What do you want from me?"

"Let's try some honesty and integrity and self-control for starters." Augusta rose to her feet. Her gaze, if leveled, would hit Edward in the collarbone, but she raised it and penetrated her eyes with his. "This family—it needs solidarity, not division. You're causing division. I will not stand for it."

"But, Mama, Frank—"

"Never you mind about Frank. When he is awake, I'll talk with him about his part. Right now, you're the only one standing."

Edward pulled a chair away from the table and slouched down in it, avoiding her eyes. She stood, unmoving.

"I expected more from you. Much more. You are a disappointment to me and to this family." With that, she left him, walking up the creaking stairs, looking back once.

The erect, proud Edward slouched.

Chapter Seventy

That week Frank recovered, more out of revenge, Meg thought, than where-withal. “I’m determined to get back to work. I’ve cost us too much already.” Edward already took over Frank’s post at the Hanson farm.

Even with his abrupt nature, Frank had a soft spot for Helen, who didn’t fare as well. At breakfast, he told Meg, “Maybe she doesn’t have the fight in her.”

“She’s got plenty of fight, it’s just her head’s not there. Seems her brain is asleep. If it were awake, I guarantee you she’d be chasing you around and climbing again on your back, just like old times when you chased us and pretended you were a gorilla.”

“I wouldn’t chase her. I’d carry her if I thought Mama wouldn’t scold me.”

“Helen’s too delicate right now,” Meg said, taking a hesitant sip of too hot tea. “Best just pray for her and hope for the best.”

“Do you think we should call Doc Calverley? He might know something different to do.”

“You know Mama would have none of that. She’s said it more than once that no man-animal doctor is going to treat her children. Doc Fenn’s done all he can do. Helen just needs rest.”

Meg climbed the morning stairs to the sick room. Mama weeded the garden this morning, doing God knows what. Meg stood in the doorway for a long time, watching Helen’s chest rise and fall, rise and fall. She looked like a china doll there in her bed, her brown hair in stark contrast to her pallid face. The covers lay undisturbed, Helen an unmoving rock.

Meg sat in the wooden chair next to Helen’s bed and reached for her cold, limp hand. “I suppose you can’t hear me, little Helen. But if you can, will you please get well? The meadow is beckoning you. I think the birds and butterflies are sad that you aren’t out there chasing them.”

No answer. No movement.

“Can I tell you something? I’m closing down the Rosebud Theatre. Don’t you worry, it’s not because of your absence, it’s because I just don’t have the fight in me

anymore. Banker Pruitt came by. You remember when Lily told us about losing her job? Well, after you stormed out, Banker Pruitt came.” Tears stung her eyes. She wanted to control them, but once they came, they poured.

She took a deep breath and looked out the opened window at Lake Frank. So peaceful. So tranquil. And now it would be stolen from them. Some other child would rename the lake to suit her imagination. Some other children would tunnel the tall grasses. Some other person would skip stones along its dappled waters. Some other.

“Helen, we’ve lost the house. I have to tell Mama, but I’m afraid. She acted like all was well when Lily told her about losing the Wheeler twins job, but I know she playacted. I have to tell her—and soon. We have less than thirty days to vacate, let alone find us a place to live.”

Helen made no move, no twitch. Eyes closed, her mouth perched as if it wanted to say something. Instead, a bubble of saliva gurgled on her lips. Meg took out a hankie and wiped it away. If only Helen’s bubble were a gum bubble and they were running outside wild and free. Meg rose from the wooden chair and put her hand to Helen’s forehead. She lingered there for a while, her hand on her sister’s warm brow. A knock at the door startled her.

Welcome peered around the jamb. “Is Heaven-Anne in here? Gusty, she told me I could visit her quick-like.”

“Be very quiet. She’s sleeping.”

“Will she sleep there like that forever and ever?”

“No, she’ll wake up, don’t you worry. She’s just sick is all. Her head is hurt.”

“Hattie, she says my head is hurt. Damaged she says. But I am not asleep.”

“You’re not damaged, Welcome. Helen hit her head really hard—so hard that it made her go to sleep.”

“If I kiss Heaven-Anne, will she wake up?”

“No, that’s only in fairy tales,” Meg said.

“I brought her some flowers.” He extended his left arm straight out in front of him.

“Thanks, I’ll put them in a vase.” She took the flowers from his inwardly turned hand and arranged them next to Helen’s rising and falling chest.

“Can I touch her, Meg? Gusty said I could as long as I was gentle, like with a butterfly.”

“Softly, Welcome. Touch her softly.”

He shuffled to Helen’s bedside and put a hesitating hand above her. “Will I break her?”

The Quarryman's Wife

“No Welcome, you won’t.”

Welcome, not versed in proper bedside etiquette, kneeled next to the bed so his face was even with Helen’s. He put an awkward hand on Helen’s forehead and then her hair. He petted her this way for a few minutes. “You wake up, Heaven-Anne. You hear me?” Helen made no move, no sound.

“You should go, Welcome. Heaven-Anne needs her rest.”

“But what if she dies?”

“You pray for her, will you?”

“Oh yes. I pray for this whole entire family every day, I do.”

“Thanks. Best be off now,” Meg walked Welcome downstairs.

In the still morning light, she could see Mama tending the garden, bent over and determined. Meg sighed, a deep weary sigh. *No better time than the present to destroy Mama*, she thought. When she opened the screen door, Olya walked down the gravel driveway, no doubt to accompany Mama’s gardening. Another time, then.

Olya’s green thumb saved her.

Chapter Seventy-One

“Hello Missus. I’ve come to help you weed.”

“There are plenty of those, to be sure, Olya.” Augusta took off her work gloves, then handed them to Olya. “What’s the news on your money raising?”

“Oh it is going slowly. I received another letter from Zina.”

“Really, how is she doing?”

“Not so good,” Olya pulled at a stubborn taproot, but it wouldn’t budge. Finally, she stood, put her hands to the base of the weed, and pulled. It relinquished its tenacious hold to the dirt and sent her catapulting onto her backside.

“Are you all right?”

Olya laughed. “Oh yes, I’m fine. At least I won and the weed lost.”

“It’s a constant battle with weeds, you know. My mother had a phrase she used to tell me. ‘Never walk past a weed,’ she’d say. That way, you keep up with them as you go along instead of trying to tackle a jungle in one day.”

“Good advice, your mother’s.”

“She’s pretty wise. You were telling me about Zina’s letter.”

“They are surviving, but they starve. Ivar’s getting weaker, but even though he is, his spirit is still with him. A few letters ago, he helped Zina create a hiding place for food under a loose floorboard. But there is so little food to hide. The government officials come at all times of the day and night doing what they call inspections. It could be three in the morning, and they come to inspect. They even sweep the floors, to make sure there are no crumbs. If they find crumbs, they beat you.”

“Were they beaten?”

“Zina doesn’t say. She is afraid to tell me everything.”

“When can you send for them?”

“A few more days and my sewing money will be enough. I never did tell Alex what I made. I hoped some day to buy him a wedding ring, so I hid a little

extra money every month in my underclothing drawer—a place he'd never look. I pretended the money didn't exist. So, while Zina and Ivar hid food, I hid money. Perhaps all this hiding will end up saving their lives."

"I hope so," Augusta found another rock, but this one wouldn't budge. Thomas used to chide her when she complained of the stones infiltrating her garden. "They're our bread and butter, Augie," he'd say.

"You need some help, Missus?"

Olya didn't wait to hear an answer—her way to pitch in before an "I need you" came. Together, they pulled and pried until the rock broke free, this time sending them both onto their haunches, laughing.

"That reminds me," Olya said breathlessly. "I read the Bible you gave me. Toward the back where the red letters were, like you said. I came across a verse I didn't understand. Jesus talked about a rock that became a cornerstone. Then He says, 'and he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls it will scatter him like dust.' I do not understand this. Do you?"

Augusta sat on the stone they pried from the earth, and looked at the sky. She could see the yard tree's branches tremble under a delicate wind. "I do know Jesus is the foundation of the church. Does that make sense to you?"

"Oh yes, it is called Christianity, isn't it? But what about being broken and being ground into dust? This, I don't understand. It seems God is after us either way, to either break us or eliminate us. He seems to be doing that to Zina. I don't understand."

"Jesus discusses two people here—one who follows Him and one who doesn't. To the one who follows Him, He has to remake. We are so stubborn that in order for Him to remake us, He has to break apart all our stubbornness. Then He rebuilds. It's like the resurrection story. In order to live, you have to die. To live for Jesus, you have to die to yourself, your ways, your stubbornness."

"So, He died, and I have to die, and He breaks me? What kind of God breaks the backs of His children?"

"It must be for their own good."

"How can it be for good that Zina and Ivar starve?"

"I don't know Olya," Augusta took off her gloves and looked at her callused hands.

"You don't know? Listen to this. I've been telling you what's in the letters Zina sends me, instead of reading them. It's hard for me to translate. Perhaps I should read the truth to you, the whole truth." She pulled out a letter, opened it, and read silently. Augusta didn't know what to do. Waiting made her uncomfortable

so she examined her hands, pretending to be interested in picking the dirt from her fingernails.

Finally, Olya read, “Dearest Auntie. We all read your latest letter with great joy. America! Our stomachs are empty, but our minds are full of imaginations. What will America be like? We’ve heard money grows on trees there. Is that true? Does it flow with milk and honey? We hope against hope that you will send for us soon. Ivar just stays in his bed, curled up like our cat, Mitzie. He’s been that way ever since we stewed Mitzie last Tuesday. He used to cry himself to sleep at night, but now he just stares. The officials visit daily now. They seem to gloat when they see Ivar, like they have won a victory. Mama and Papa look hollow. Mama’s clothes hang on her. She seldom walks now. I am the strongest, so I take to hauling water every day from the village well. There, I meet other hollow people. I tell them of America, and I smile. Soon, I tell them, soon I will be in America and my family will eat again.”

Olya cleared her throat. Augusta thought Olya wore grief like a mourning cloak—a grief taking on two forms, one profound sadness, the other unrequited rage.

Olya seemed to locate her rage. “You didn’t say what God does to the other person—to the one who doesn’t believe in Him.”

“Dust, Olya.”

“Is Thomas dust?”

“No, he believed. He’s in heaven.”

“And those who don’t believe in this God?”

“The preacher says they go to a place of torment forever,” Augusta felt trapped. She had wavered in her own beliefs since Thomas died, and she felt hypocritical spouting them off to Olya who asked sincere, albeit angry, questions.

“So, no matter where I turn, I am ruined? If I turn to God He breaks me. If I turn away from Him, He makes me dust. I thought you told me you serve a loving God! My family turns to dust before His eyes. How can this be?”

Olya stood above Augusta, flung her gloves in the Ohio dust and walked away. The gravel beneath her determined and angry steps crackled. Augusta heard her friend walk up the entire driveway while she sat reposed on a stubborn rock.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Meg watched Olya storm off. Her stomach knotted. Something in her said, no better time like the present. Mama had always said that, and now Mama's own words spurred Meg on to crush her. She left the comfort of the house that would soon be sold to strangers to join Mama in the garden. Mama sat on a rock, staring after the path Olya walked. A dove cooed from the barn.

"Mama?"

"What is it?"

"I need to talk with you."

"This is not a particularly good time."

"For this, there is no good time." Meg saw a raw patch of earth, uninhabited by vegetables, and sat down, sighing. "I've been keeping secrets, Mama. Almost too many to count." If she only knew.

"I know."

"I'm not sure you do."

"Sammy Nutt."

Mama caught her eyes. An odd mixture of pain and teasing in Mama's glance made Meg hold her stomach. "Yes, Sammy Nutt is one."

"I was there that night when you snuck in."

"You were?"

"Sitting in your father's chair, still as stone."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I waited for you to."

Meg looked at the earth. She hoped in vain to find weeds to occupy her, but found none. Instead, she caught Mama's leveled gaze. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and let the guilty words fly from her lips. "Well, Sammy, he really wanted me to go, and to tell you the truth, I didn't see any harm in it."

"I may be getting old, but I do recall forbidding you to go driving." Mama folded her arms across her chest, and looked directly at Meg, unwavering and steady.

“You did, Mama. And I disobeyed you. Many times. Sammy Nutt was one—but I did it just that one time.”

“You would have done it again if I had forbidden it the second time.” Mama’s voice sounded dry.

Meg located a smooth rock and caressed it with her hand. “Yes, you’re right, once again. I would have, but only because you don’t let me live.” There, she said it.

“Live! Live? Survival is what we are about now. It’s not time for trivialities, for flirtations and secret rendezvous. It is time for work, for toil.”

“Yes, Mama, and you have done that quite well. The house is very clean. We are very clean. But none of us lives.”

“Survives. Living is not an option for us right now. We hang by a thread. I don’t know about you, but I aim to survive.”

“I mean to live, Mama. Really live.” She tossed the rock in the air and caught it before it hit her knee. “We can disagree on our philosophy of life, to be sure. I am here today to come clean.”

“Then come clean. With all of it.” Mama’s eyes held Meg’s steady, and her arms stayed crossed.

“I wrote my quarry story willy-nilly, never checking my facts. Miss Allen was disappointed in me, and to tell you the truth, so was I. I didn’t hold my nose when I walked past Frank’s room. I bathed near-naked in the quarry lake and Welcome Wheeler saw me.” Mama nearly interjected, but Meg held up her hand, determined to spit out everything. “Mrs. Hornby’s horse, Buttercup—I brought him into the classroom—”

“I knew that.”

“How?”

“You’re the only one I know who’d have the spunk to do that.” Mama’s arms unfolded. “Can I ask you why you did that?”

“Helen needed help. Mrs. Hornby accused her of cheating.”
“Cheating?”

“Of course she didn’t cheat, but it hurt her that Hornby—uh Mrs. Hornby—didn’t believe her.”

“Why didn’t she come to me with this?”

“Because, Mama, you were cleaning. You had your own grief. We all knew we weren’t to disturb you—our unspoken pact.” Meg shifted her rock from hand to hand. “There’s more. And I don’t think you know this secret.”

“Edward and Frank are irreconcilable.”

“No, although it does appear that way. On that day, Banker Pruitt came to the house. He gave me this.” She pulled the document from her apron pocket and handed it to Mama. Her hand trembled, even though the other held tight to the rock.

“What’s this?”

“Foreclosed.” The word hung in the damp air with a sickly pall. “And I almost sold your amber brooch to that man—I was so afraid this news would kill you.”

“My brooch? Whatever possessed you?”

“Desperation. The moment I mentioned it, I felt like I had sold my soul.”

Mama smoothed the paper before her and scanned the damning document. She looked up.

“How long till we have to leave?” Mama’s voice quavered, slightly.

“Twenty-seven days. It took me three days to tell you. I’m sorry Mama—sorry for so many things.”

Meg stood. Her body blocked the sun between her and Mama, darkening Mama’s worried face. “I’m so sorry.” Tears streaked her face and she bent to touch her shadowed mama, only to be rebuffed.

Mama folded her arms. “Leave me be. You’ve said enough.”

Meg ventured back to the house, the house that held too many memories of Father, and sat resolutely in his chair. She knew it was Mama’s place, but she didn’t care. She put her head in her hands and wept, loud and unstopping. She meant to chide herself for sounding like Lily, but she had no more will for that. She cried until her head hurt and her eyes swelled. Time to tell the rest of the family the news.

The pit in her settled like a rock.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Augusta worried in the garden. She found herself in a peculiar space, transported back to Mother's time, only now she played Mother's role. What if her children saw her crumble here in the garden? What if she took to flinging rutabagas in grief and anger? Truth be told, she wanted to fling something, anything, but somehow she mustered enough restraint not to. The rock she sat on was hard, unforgiving. The world she lived in was hostile, arbitrary. The tear on her cheek was insistent, disobedient.

She bent forward, putting her elbows on her knees and her hands to her chin. The defecting tear slipped off her cheek and dimpled the earth. Another tear escaped and watered the garden. Another. And another.

All turncoats.

She slipped her hands from her chin and held her face, wetting the earth beneath her with virgin tears.

Augusta cried.

Chapter Seventy-Four

By the next day, the whole town knew the news. Dorothy, the trusty town operator, put her spin on the tragedy. Apparently she had called everyone in town, just plugging phone lines one by one down the switchboard. The phone in the Brinkworth house rang.

Augusta, who kept a silent vigil by Helen's bed that day, jumped when he heard the ring. "Hello."

Dorothy didn't bother to ask the obvious—like who she called—nor did she think to breathe between sentences.

"Have you heard about those poor Brinkworth folks? Foreclosed. A real tragedy. I'm thinking about starting a collection for the family. They're going to have to find a place to live—probably a small one, if you ask me. Let's hope the kids know how to share beds—and clothes for that matter. Such a pity they can't keep the house. Probably going to have to sell all their animals too."

"Dorothy—"

"Would you like to donate to the cause? Helen is still comatose. Probably needs medical care."

"Dorothy!"

"Well, what?"

"You've dialed the Brinkworth home."

For once Dorothy forgot her words. A dial tone answered back instead. Augusta hung up, half amused, half beaten. She should've seen the tax problem coming. And now the whole town pitied the family. She could bear many things, but she could not bear pity.

A knock at the kitchen door startled her. She saw Olya through the window in the door and opened it.

"Crazy," Olya's said from a red, swollen face.

"What is it? Can I help you?"

"Alex made me bring him here. Says he wants to sit with Helen."

“But what’s wrong?”

“Alex wants to sit when my relatives die.” Before Augusta could say anything, Olya turned and ran uncharacteristically out of the house toward the hen house.

Augusta followed outside, squinting in the summer sun. Alex sat facing backwards in their old oxcart. “What can I do for you, Alex?”

“Please, can you find someone to carry me to Helen’s room? I want to sit with her.”

“She hasn’t spoken yet. She just sleeps.”

“That’s all right. I understand her. I know what it’s like to be bed-ridden. Please, it’s the only thing I can do—only thing I can do to help.”

Augusta nodded. She found Frank in the living room and shared Alex’s request. Augusta watched as her son cradled the man whose pride had been crushed and carried him upstairs.

When Frank set him beside Helen, Alex said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Frank, breathless, left the room.

Augusta stood between two worlds—her broken son’s and her sleeping daughter, Alex the crippled bridge between them.

“Mrs. Brinkworth,” Alex whispered.

“Yes?”

“I am regretful about you losing your house. Very regretful.”

She said nothing and left the room.

She looked for Olya in the hen house, but couldn’t find her. The chickens cackled and screeched as Augusta upset them and purloined their brown eggs. Usually, she loved upsetting the skittish hens, only to soothe them once the eggs were basketed. Today, she didn’t even bother to talk to them by name. Today, they were just a sea of nameless chickens, another chore she had to endure. In the sun that filtered in through the doorway, she could see dust particles and floating feathers suspended in the air in some sort of poetic dance. Olya disrupted it. She wept.

“What’s wrong?” Augusta wiped her hands on her cherry apron and set her egg basket down.

“They are dead, Missus. Every one of them.”

“What?”

“My family. Zina and Ivar. My letter telling them they could come to America never reached them. Today, I got this.” She shoved a wadded piece of paper at Augusta.

“I can’t understand it. What does it say?”

The Quarryman's Wife

"It's the letter I sent them. On the bottom it reads, 'Dear Olya, your letter reached here too late. Your family died, first the children, then the parents. Losing their children killed them, I think. I am sorry. But there are others here who need America. Can you send for us?' It is signed by the town's magistrate."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say? What is there to say, Missus, except that God does not listen to your toe prayers? He sees the poor but does not act. He let Alex's birdies die. He watched while Zina and Ivar breathed their last breaths. I wonder if He laughed. I wonder if He sent those stones from the heavens to crush our husbands. I wonder—" With that, she sat on a hay bale, put her head in her hands and wept uncontrolled.

Augusta stood above her. She told her internal puppeteer to touch Olya, to place a reassuring hand on her weeping friend, but the damned thing would not respond. She looked at her callused hands and remembered the poem fragment that somehow escaped from them: *The day, it waits*. Perhaps the day waited for her—for her to live the day, inhabit the day. And maybe living meant touching, engaging. Since Thomas's heart-wrenching death, she lived her life aloof, consecrated in a sense, from the world of people. Shaking, she lifted her right hand, the hand whose finger reminded her to pray for Alex, and set it woodenly on Olya's shoulder. Although a lover of words, Augusta had none. All she possessed was a shaky right hand on the buckling shoulder of a grieving friend.

The day, it waits.

When she finally stood up and left crying Olya in the barn, she stubbed her toe on its threshold. Perhaps the Communists were right. Perhaps God was a fictitious opiate.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Grandpa Brinkworth arrived unannounced on a rainy day in mid-August, bringing much-needed sunshine to the quarry house. Augusta relaxed the moment he alit. His presence lent a grandfather-like calm to the mounting chaos both within and without her. They had yet to locate a small home in Centerville. Edward toiled at the Hanson farm from dawn to dusk. He said he did his penance, but Augusta knew he simply avoided her. Frank failed to find a good paying job and kept to chores and watching Helen who remained reposed and silent.

Helen looked more fragile each day. Alex, who held silent vigil by Helen's bed, told Augusta she looked paler. The livestock and her prized laying hens were slated for auction. Even Strawberry the horse seemed listless and unhappy, like she knew something ominous loomed. Olya helped Augusta harvest as much of the garden as possible. Neither of them spoke when they pulled produce from the earth. Even canning, usually a lighthearted social event in the Brinkworth home, took on a silent, somber air.

But, Grandpa Brinkworth had been sent by God to change all the gloom; at least that's what he told her. Upon entering the front door, he took off his hat, rolled up his sleeves, and got to work packing boxes and cleaning empty cupboards. He rallied Frank, Lily, Meg and John-John by organizing them into competitive squads. Frank and Meg were put in charge of the attic and the upstairs bedrooms while Lily and John-John's domain was the downstairs, including the kitchen. Each evening, he'd tally up the winners, making for a lively dinner.

"Well Lily and John-John, you're lagging behind the Frank-Meg team. They've packed up the entire attic today, and you're still stuck in the kitchen." He always spoke as if he had a smile on face, even when he didn't.

"But the kitchen's hard. Everything is breakable," complained John-John.

"Stop your bellyaching." Grandpa Brinkworth tousled his hair. "The rest of you—make yourselves useful. See if you can't each pack five boxes in the next hour. Hut two three four." Only John-John marched. The rest scattered. They

knew Grandpa Brinkworth meant business. Five packed boxes could mean a sweet treat.

Although staunchly Methodist, right down to his symmetrically tied shoes, Grandpa Brinkworth was a closet suffragist, through and through. He rose from the table and dug into the pile of clanking dishes like a woman, Augusta thought. Even so, she did not cross him, and she felt a cool sense of relief when he dried the last plate and actually put it in its rightful place in the cupboard. She needed him in a way that made her insides squirm. She hated to need the man who fathered Thomas, but something in her finally snapped, or perhaps resigned, when she saw him serve her family.

She wanted to say something poetic, to thank him in eloquence—something noble that matched her deep gratitude, but all she could do was sputter, “Thanks Grandpa Brinkworth. You have no idea how—”

“You can use my front name, Augusta. Call me Jasper. I’m so used to titles that I’ve almost forgotten my name. When Eliza died, it seemed my name died with her. It’s been ‘Here you are, Mr. Brinkworth,’ or ‘The butcher saved the cow’s tongue just for you, Mr. Brinkworth,’ or ‘Grandpa Brinkworth, can you help me with my buttons?’ You get the idea. Eliza’s the only one who said my name, and I miss it. I miss her.” He took a cloth and wiped the kitchen table methodically—just as she would in widening concentric circles.

Augusta could not speak, so captured by his words. She had nearly forgotten her own name. She was Mrs. Brinkworth and Mama, but no longer Augusta. And even when folks called her Augusta, no tenderness punctuated the syllables. Why was it that when Thomas died, he took her heart, her life, and even her name with him?

“Jasper, do you ever get over the grief?”

Jasper placed the towel precisely back on its nail and sat down in Thomas’s chair. “No,” was all he said.

“Why does God kill innocent people?” She knew the question was of the highest sacrilege, but in the company of another who suffered as she, she felt an open kinship—an ability to lay things bare.

“Remember whose job it is to steal, kill and destroy. Don’t be putting Satan’s modus operandi on God. Death’s because of him, because of his pride, because of his hatred of mankind.”

“I know all that. I do. But isn’t God big? What’s the word? Omni—”

“Omnipotent. Yes, He is all-powerful. He can do anything He pleases.”

“Doesn’t that make Him capricious? Aren’t we pawns in His game?”

“You can choose to believe that. But I think you look at the wrong world, Augusta.” He said her name tenderly, with an almost Thomas-like lilt.

“Well, you can’t blame me for thinking on this earth. We do live here for the time being.”

“Fair enough. We exist in this upside down world where evil men get rich and innocents bend under tyranny. The Great War taught us that. It’s because of the world’s collective selfishness that there’s injustice.”

“I don’t think I follow your logic,” she bent closer to him. Whenever Jasper had an important thing to say, he lowered his voice—a trait that used to rile his parishioners.

“This is not all there is, Augusta.” Again, her name—said in a way that gave her longings. “There’s heaven to remember.”

“Seems cruel to me to have to trudge through a meaningless life here just to look forward to some ethereal place with angels playing harps. I’m not so sure it even exists. The Communists don’t think so.” There, she said it—out loud and for everyone to hear.

“The Communists don’t like God or the individual, let alone the sweet hereafter. They veil their collectivism with patriotic slogans, but underneath, people live under tyranny. And all they have is the here and now—the here and now made miserable by power-hungry wolves dressed in lamb’s clothing.”

Augusta had no response, so entwined with Olya’s grief to see any other side to oppression. She assumed it had been God’s hand that destroyed Olya’s tender family, and forgotten the government’s motivations.

Jasper cleared his throat and interrupted her silence. “Seems even more cruel that you think life is something to trudge through. Life, don’t forget, is a gift—a divine gift. Don’t spend the rest of it straight-jacketed with bitterness. Part of your eternity is your legacy, your children. They, most likely, will populate heaven after you. They are the gift you will give this trudging world.”

“They don’t need me. They’ve gotten along fine without me.” Her words sounded sullen, which surprised her since she made an effort to sound nonchalant.

Jasper shook his head and leaned back in Thomas’s chair, tilting so far that she thought he’d fall.

Doesn’t he know he’s not supposed to do that? Sometimes he was just like her children—a pesky nuisance.

He caught her reprimanding look and settled the chair back down, cleared his throat, and said, “They’re only children.”

“Seems to me Thomas’s passing made them have to grow up, made them have to take responsibility.”

“True. But you add to their grief by letting them grow up prematurely. What happens when a plant shoots up too fast in the Ohio sun without first establishing roots?”

“It gets leggy. The heat withers it.”

“Exactly. You’re the gardener. Your plants are starting to bolt. They need tender care and even some pruning if they will survive the withering heat of this world. A garden left to itself is just a weed plot. Don’t let your children go to seed.” He angled a look Augusta’s way. Sincerity, grit, and intermingled pain lived behind those eyes—those eyes that bored into her very soul.

“They need you,” he said. “All of you.”

Chapter Seventy-Six

Grandpa Brinkworth gave Meg the job of packing the outside, a difficult task since she didn't know what to keep or what to sell, not knowing where they were going to live. He seemed to know her dilemma instinctively, helping her weed through their outside possessions.

As the moving date loomed nearer and they still had no money to pay Banker Pruitt and no place to move, Meg said, "Grandpa, what's to become of us?"

"That's up to you. What do you want to become?"

"Famous!" She laughed when she said it, a far cry from her doctor bent of a few months ago.

"Seems to me, you'll be infamous before you're famous—all that sneaky business you've been up to."

"Grandpa!"

"You know it's true. Maybe you should put all that to good use—hang a shingle at Four Corners that reads *Meg Brinkworth's Detective Agency. We sneak for you.*"

"I hear you. No more sneaking."

"Have you thought about becoming a reporter?" He dragged out a rusty plow from the barn.

"Quit kidding me. I won't sneak anymore."

"I'm serious. You've got an inquisitive bent. You watch things, like you're writing them in your head. You see the details of life. You should consider it."

"Miss Allen said I disappointed her. I did a story about the quarry, but I did a lousy job of it. I even made up quotes."

"This story you mean?" He pulled out several sheets of paper, folded neatly into eighths.

She unfolded them, revealing her slipshod quarry story.

"How did you—"

"I ran into Miss Allen in town. Genteel as all get out. When I told her who I was, she asked if I'd come to her home for tea. Tea—mind you. I sat, a bit

uncomfortable in her small house with a smaller teacup. But we had ourselves a real nice talk. She felt like she did you disservice by not handing this story back. Had regrets. Asked me if I'd please give it back to Miss Meg."

"She did? Why?"

"Wants to give you another chance, and I agree. You can do better than this, Meg."

"Do you really think so? Mama's the one with the poetic gift. I write straight, not flowery like her."

"No need for flowery words when the nation's crippled by a depression. You tell it straight, but with real quotes,"

He hauled an unidentifiable farming implement out of the barn. He put a rusty hand on her shoulder while she re-folded the story.

"First things first, though. Before you go gallivanting around the world covering stories, best be to the business of reconciling first." His gaze settled on Augusta, now alone in the barren garden. "She needs you."

"No she doesn't. She's told me in a hundred different ways. I am to stay away from her. Keep my distance."

"She's a tough nut, to be sure. She birthed six children for one. You done that lately?"

"No, but if I did, I'd at least touch them."

"Today you would. But answer me this, do you understand the love between a man and a woman?"

Meg blushed at Grandpa's paradox, jovial and tender one minute, prying and unnerving on another. "Yes, in some ways I do. There's this boy."

"Sammy?"

"How did you know?" Did all adults know everything? Maybe they did have eyes and ears in back of their heads.

"That's why they pay me." He sat on the farming implement's oxidizing seat and sighed. "Until you're married, you won't ever understand what it's like to love someone with your whole being. I know your mama loved your father. He made her laugh."

"She doesn't laugh anymore. Least not if she can help it."

"It's just her way. Try to remember how your mama was before your father died."

Meg thought a long while. It seemed another era—some far away time she could barely recall. She looked at him. "She used to play kick the can with us at night. She giggled like a schoolgirl when Father read funny stories. She helped us

with our homework, puzzling over what she called 'algebraic nonsense.' Sometimes, she'd slip funny poems she wrote about us in our lunch pails, usually under an apple. I loved those poems."

"That mama still lives—she's just buried in grief. Give her time, Meg. She'll return when the grieving's done."

"I want the old mama back, the laughing mama, the mama who freely forgives."

"Can't hurry grief, Magpie."

"You seemed to pull through all right. You rebounded."

She watched as Grandpa Brinkworth picked up a long stick and wrote in the dust. "When your grandmother died, I felt like a chunk of my heart died," he said. "It's like God Almighty took one of those harvesters over there and cut away a good portion of my beating heart. It still beat, but not very well. I may have appeared normal, but inside I ached something fierce. It takes time. Your mama, she's had that same heart surgery. Her heart is there. It's injured, smaller. To heal, she needs time. Not to mention constant tenderness and big helpings of grace."

"What exactly is grace?"

"Grace is forgiving and loving anyway. Grace is letting God do the healing of your heart so you can love the person who has broken it."

"That's beautiful."

"I see your eyes, Meg. You want to write that down, don't you?"

"Sure enough," she laughed. "The thing is, I can't forgive. I think deep down I want to, but I can't. I'm too angry."

"Anger's a deadly thing when bitterness takes hold. Look at Edward and Frank. They're at the bitterness stage. It takes a lot of love to get past that. Sometimes folks just live bitter lives, never learning grace. They die cursing God."

"I don't want to live that way. We've enough worries right now." She tried to sound convincing, hoping her own words would change her stubborn heart. She always reasoned Mama as the stubborn one, but now she couldn't be so sure. Perhaps it was time to point the finger back at her own stubborn self. She sat down on the grass next to Grandpa and watched her mother garden. Grief had shrunk her. Mama seemed smaller now, more vulnerable.

"All it takes is willingness."

Meg wasn't so sure she could welcome the willingness. Wouldn't that let Mama off the hook? "How did you move on—after Grandma died?"

"Sheer will. I had to make myself live. Everywhere I went, I saw her. I smelled her on my clothes. You know I didn't wash my nightclothes for a year because I could still smell her on them? Yeah, love does crazy things to a fellow."

“Do you still miss her?”

“Terribly. Awfully. Deeply. But, I do know I’ll see her again, waltzing on the streets of gold, and that brings me hope.” His voiced trailed off. He looked at Meg. “Sometimes it doesn’t help when I lay cold in a half-occupied bed.” Grandpa Brinkworth stood up, wiped the sweat off his forehead with a bandana, and beckoned her to follow him to the barn. “Enough about that, now, you’re making me weepy. The question is, are you brave enough to forgive your mama?”

He left it like that, a question dangling wildly in the air. They worked side by side the rest of the afternoon in silence. Meg didn’t know whether she was brave, or stubborn, or both.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

The world in Helen's head spun on a wild axis, keeping her thoughts unsteady. She longed to talk to her family but her mouth disobeyed her commands. Her dreams and reality mixed together like Aunt Bertie's infamous hot oatmeal mush. She felt stirred, shaken, and frightfully alone.

She knew Alex sat beside her, which on one hand made her uncomfortable. What if she soiled her bed sheets? Yet knowing he sat there, unable to move comforted her, gave her peace. She used her living-between-worlds time to pray for the immobile Alex and Olya's starving family, for her own disintegrating family, for miraculous money to come in.

Mostly, she prayed Mama would touch her—not just the medically necessary touch she'd grown accustomed to, but a soft, tender brush of the fingers. Even Frank touched her that way, but when Mama's voice entered the room, she expected nothing and was well rewarded for her pessimistic expectations.

Lily brought Alex and Helen lunch every day. While Alex ate in silence, Lily rambled about the going's on in the quarry house. Helen knew Lily stalled the inevitable—hard work for their congenial grandfather. Lily normally welcomed hard work, but Helen thought the fight left her since news of the foreclosure shrouded them all. Helen worried Lily wouldn't pack the attic museum correctly. She longed to grab her sister and tell her to be careful to wrap the seashells independently, and to be cautious with the bird skull, for heaven's sake, but she couldn't talk.

With Lily's attempts at feeding Helen, her stomach ceased growling, but its emptiness still screamed at her for food. The weak tea and soup broth Lily spooned in her mouth when Alex ate chicken and dumplings did not satisfy. Often the liquid would spill out. It irritated Helen that tiny rivulets of soup water careened down her face, untouched. It angered her more when Lily wiped her mouth as if she were a messy baby. But none of that compared to her frustration when Lily mopped her face incompletely, half clean, and half soupy. She felt the

broth dry then cake on the creases of her neck. She smelled broth day and night, wishing someone would give her a decent bath. But no one bothered.

Every day after lunch she smelled more like old broth. Worse than that, Alex had a post-lunch snore, holding Helen captive, unable to push or rile him. She hoped she wouldn't marry a snoring man.

Mama came in. She could tell by her quiet, measured steps. Time for medicine and temperature taking again. Awaiting Mama's antiseptic touch was almost worse than awaiting the bull's charging. She wished she could cringe, or at least groan her disapproval, but she only breathed.

"How's my little Helen today?" Mama asked.

Not great, Mama. I've got soup dried on my neck. It itches. It smells. And this Ukrainian snores. Can't you hear it? Can't you make him stop?

"Let's take your temperature. There." She jammed the thermometer under her tongue. Every time Mama did that, she was sure she punctured a small blood vessel.

Mama, go gently.

For a long time, Mama sat silent. Probably looking out the window, Helen thought. She remembered the moments before the bull connected with her body—a ravaging touch that changed her life. But now another touch surprised her. Someone pet her and tucked her hair—the hair that kept tickling her face—behind her ears. A soothing, soft touch. Was Lily back in the room shirking her packing duties? Did Alex wake up? Was it Grandpa Brinkworth?

“Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
O'er the world's tempestuous sea;
Guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
For we have no help but Thee;
Yet possessing every blessing,
If our God our Father be.”

The melody of Mama's voice sang the bittersweet hymn from Father's funeral, tender and free. As Mama voiced the hymn and stroked Helen's forehead, a tear stole down Helen's cheek. Mama wiped it, not with a sterile cloth, but with her rough hand.

“Do you hear me, little Helen? Mama's right here. I am right here.”

Helen, by sheer force of will, opened her teary eyes and gazed into Mama's. The bull's violent touch may have rendered her unconscious, but the tender touch of Mama's hand brought her back to life.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

“I can dance,” Alex told Helen, teasing in his voice.

Helen never knew when the Ukrainian man told the truth or joked. Doc Fenn confined her to bed one more day—torture in Helen’s book. So she listened to Alex’s stories, spoken in a mix of his native tongue and English. He’d begin a story in halted English, only to carry himself away into the story. When he came out of the story on the other end, she couldn’t understand him. Yet, his gestures animated most of the stories.

“Sure Alex. I see it now. You dance with your arms, like a chicken.” After she said it, she worried she offended him.

He waved his arms erratically and cackled. “Like this? No, that is not how I dance, little Helen.”

“Don’t call me little, or I’ll call you Chicken Man.”

“All right then, big Helen. You want to see me dance?”

She sighed. Why wouldn’t he just do it, instead of drawing things out so? “Yes, please do.”

“You must look at my eyes—right into them.”

She puzzled over this, then obliged.

“Now, watch.” Alex hummed a Russian tune, with dark threads of minor notes stringing through it. His eyes danced—really danced! He could make them oppose each other, like fighting lovers, only to have his irises turn toward the center, reunited and cross-eyed. He commanded each eye independently. On cue, each eye would dance to the rhythm of the mournful song. A sheer surprise—the dancing eyes of a crippled man humming a dirge.

“I’ve never seen an eye dance before.”

“I’ve never performed one. I will surprise Olya with it next, but I wanted to see if you liked it first.” He sat forward in his chair. “I spent the first two months at home angry. I wanted to dance like the wind, but my stubborn legs would not obey. Finally, I decided I would never dance.”

“What gave you the idea to dance with your eyes?”

“The birds—the baby cardinals. Before they died, I could soothe them with my eyes. When I’d dart them back and forth, I’d hold their attention long enough to give them some food. I can’t help but think that if I danced my eyes earlier that they’d be flying around today.”

“I’ve never been able to save a baby bird. Without their mamas they just die. You did what you could—more than any of us would do. Fixing’s hard, Alex. And sometimes there’s just things you can’t fix.”

“I know. I still miss those birds, though.” He looked out the window. “For them, I began dancing with my eyes.”

“I’m sure they’d be proud. You’ve become quite a dancer.”

“Back home I danced for my village. After harvesting, we’d all gather together in the harvest barn. The air smelled of wheat, I can still smell it—smells like . . . What is it you call bread under the oven fire?”

“Toast?”

“Yes, toast. We harvested the grain in the heat, so the air smelled like many toasts. Music found its way to the barn too, and although tired, we knew we had to dance. My Olya is a fine dancer. Her *babushka* whirled higher than the others.”

Helen sat herself up a little higher, leaning toward Alex’s chair. “What’s a *bab—*”

“*Babushka* is like a large scarf. It livens up a woman’s work clothes.”

“I’m not sure I’d like to wear one of those. Might get in the way when I hunted worms.”

“Yes, you are right. It might just get in the way, but it didn’t get in the way of our barn dances.”

“How long did you dance?” Helen asked. She wondered if Zina and Ivar danced, too.

“We danced well into the night. Danced so hard we dropped into bed at night and in one moment fell asleep. The sun rose too early for us on harvest days. Work was hard in the Ukraine, but we always had dancing. Dancing saved us.”

“Will it save Zina?”

Alex turned his gaze away from Helen, interesting himself in the wall at the opposite end of the room. For a long time he sat that way, and for a long time Helen knew she should not interrupt his silence.

“Zina—her family—all of them, are dead.”

“Dead?”

The Quarryman's Wife

Alex nodded. The eyes that once danced welled with tears and doused his cheeks. He resigned himself to tears, Helen thought, since he did not wipe them away. As if in unison, they both looked out the window with wet cheeks while the warm Ohio wind bent the trees in a mournful dance.

Alex broke through the silence. "I have other secrets too."

The tears choked Helen's curiosity. She stared out the window and let his sentence hang in the summer air.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

“I found us a home,” Frank said as he burst through the back kitchen door, just one week before homelessness. His voice sounded so much like Thomas’s that for one rushing second, Augusta thought that perhaps the crushing stone was all a cruel dream and she finally had awakened. When she turned, she saw Frank, and frowned.

“What is it? Why are you mad?”

“Nothing. What was it you were saying?”

“I found us a home—a good home.”

Grandpa Brinkworth came downstairs right when Frank said “good home.” “What’s this?” he asked.

“I found us a home—in town.”

Augusta’s heart sank. Her dream of living in the country, of harvesting her own food, of nurturing prize laying hens died with Frank’s declaration. She was glad she never quite gave her heart over to the hope of country living. Although Thomas chided her often for her pessimism—a thing she called realism—today she thanked God for the pessimism, always better to think the worst. At least that way, if things turn upside down a person would expect it. Expecting good was for fairy tale living. And now her fairy tale morphed into a nightmare. She knew she should be grateful, so she rallied herself and tried not to sound uninterested. “Where’s this home?”

“It’s Doc Calverley’s house in town. Seems he finished building that house outside of town. You know, the one out of quarry rock?”

“The veterinarian doctor?” She looked at Frank.

“Now don’t be getting ruffled. I know you don’t like his methods—”

“I don’t like his pet mole. Doesn’t seem right, having a garden hazard as a pet, if you ask me.”

Grandpa Brinkworth walked over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Now don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Let Frank explain.” He nodded to Frank to continue.

“It’s a real nice house, Mama, with four bedrooms and a fine parlor. And for us, he lowered the rent.”

“I don’t want charity, or pity for that manner,” Augusta said.

“Mama, just listen. He’ll charge us twenty-five dollars a month. That’s fifteen less than we pay now. And, it has a big garden out back.”

“A garden?”

“Yes. Seems Doc Calverley doesn’t just love animals. He’s a plant lover too. He’s got a huge vegetable patch in the back and twenty varieties of roses up front.” Frank sat, facing Mama. “And there’s a porch swing, just like ours.”

“A porch swing?”

“Mama, I think it’s our best bet. What do you say?”

Grandpa Brinkworth’s reassuring hands on her shoulders helped her make the decision.

“I suppose it’s better than no home at all.”

Chapter Eighty

“Let me tell you about the world.” Edward spat the words John-John’s way—words of disdain, not brotherly instruction. They had been forced upon each other that evening by Grandpa Brinkworth of course, who delighted in putting warring factions together. Their job? To ready Strawberry for auction tomorrow. It would’ve been an easy task if all they had to do was to brush her dust-covered red coat to shining. No, Grandpa Brinkworth wanted all her things—her harness, her saddle, her tack, and even her hooves—“to shine like the lake at dawn.”

“I can’t wait to hear,” John-John said without enthusiasm.

“You break your back for people, and what do you get? Nothing! Not even a thank you.”

“You’re not expecting us to bow down before you, King Edward, are you?”

Edward angled a gaze at John-John—a gaze that would normally make him stare at his shoes and kick the dust. John-John held Edward’s ire-injected eyes.

It was Edward who looked down this time. John-John’s erect brother, his proper, angular brother, Edward—bent in a gentle curve toward the ground, messing with Strawberry’s saddle. “Not a thank you, exactly, just the respect I deserve.”

“Thomas once said to me, ‘Son, respect is not a deserving thing, it’s an earning thing.’ It’s true, you know. And lately, you’ve done little to earn respect. This family doesn’t need a breadwinner; it needs a big brother. You haven’t been that.”

“Get the saddle soap. This is filthy.”

And that was it for Edward’s words—the brothers worked side by side without conversation late into the evening cleaning tack amid the barn’s manure and hay-scented walls. John-John spent most of his time on Strawberry’s harness. He fretted that he said too much, that he further distanced his already alienated brother.

In the past, he’d be tongue-tied by Edward’s verbal lashings. It used to be that Edward would say some unkind word and it would so shock John-John that he’d

be rendered mute. Only later, in the quiet of his bedroom under the warmth of woven afghans, would he think of catchy retorts and clever comebacks, but the comebacks always came an hour or two late. So, while Edward slept the sleep of the just, smug in his bed, John-John busied himself with comebacks that never came.

John-John finally had the retort he had longed for, and yet he did not feel victorious—just empty and petty. Strawberry’s flimsy harness almost fell apart in his hands. Who would buy this thing? Who would purchase sway-backed Strawberry who had very little work left in her? Since he self-christened himself into the world of Brinkworth men, a world he thought would be replete with man-secrets, he had been sorely disappointed. He had been relegated to think as most men did—to worry incessantly about providing.

Chapter Eighty-One

While Edward and John-John toiled with tack, Meg cleaned silver in the parlor. She would've rather been out in the barn. At least then she could speak soft words to Strawberry and say a proper goodbye. She even envied an unsteady Helen, whose job it was to mend two blankets.

Lily and Frank had it worse, though, appointed to Mama and Grandpa Brinkworth's auction brigade. The two would tear through a room, looking for auction wares. Meg could see it wore on Mama, but she kept at it. Grandpa Brinkworth would point to a basin or a vase and Mama would shake her head yes or no.

Mama's voice was leaving her; it had ebbed and waned throughout the day. Sometimes she squeaked like John-John, at others she sounded like Father's baritone, so now she took to the nodding and shaking of her tired head. If she nodded yes, it was a resigned and sad yes. Each slated auction item had some deep tie to the past, so much so that as the parlor filled up, Mama's eyes grew sadder. Meg worried that by the time the auction came, Mama's life would flow clear out of her.

Frank and Lily tagged and priced the nodded item, then hauled it downstairs to the parlor, which was how Meg got stuck with the silver. "Mama said to polish this," Lily said.

"A box?" Meg studied the plain wooden box.

"Look inside" was all Lily said.

"Grandma Brinkworth's silver? Why?"

"Seems Grandpa got the best of Mama on this one. He insisted we sell it tomorrow, and Mama squeaked that she would not. Grandpa said it was time to throw some sentiment to the wind and think pragmatically. Grandpa won, and the silver goes. Mama said to polish it. At least it will look lovely for someone else, she said."

So, Meg readied the silver for auction, in a dirgeful sort of way. She said goodbye to each spoon by polishing it, staring at her upside-down distorted face,

and placing it neatly back in the plain wooden box. Funny how such treasure lay buried in such a nondescript box. She hoped a man would see her as a treasure someday, that the plain box called Meg's appearance would be opened, and the silver within would be lovingly polished, cherished and caressed.

She looked up when a loud, insistent knock rattled the front door. She set the last spoon down and opened it, only to find a disheveled Aunt Bertie.

"Why Aunt Bertie. How very unexpected."

"Weren't going to invite me to the auction? I wouldn't miss it for all the gold in California, and I'm not one who's prone to exaggeration. Help me with my parcels, Meg girl."

Meg loved it when Sammy called her Meg girl, but when Aunt Bertie sneered it, she recoiled. "Here, come on in. I'll help you with your things."

"You most certainly will. I've got a trunk too."

When Aunt Bertie entered a room, any room, she came with a catty flourish—a commotion that sounded like livestock fighting on wooden floors. When Grandpa Brinkworth and Mama came down to investigate the stampede, Aunt Bertie took off her floppy hat and threw it in the air.

"Weren't going to invite me to the auction? Well, here I am—ready to help. Put me to work, Augusta." When Aunt Bertie talked this time, she heightened her pitch. Seems her hearing was worse.

"The auction's tomorrow," Grandpa said, teasing. "So glad you could come."

She cocked her head Mama's direction. "What's wrong with you? Cat got your tongue?" Aunt Bertie yelled.

Indeed, it had. The moment Aunt Bertie raised her voice yet again, Inferno ran upstairs, and with him, apparently, went Mama's voice. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out, not even a John-John squeak.

"Oh, my, it's worse than I thought. Your Mama's taken sick. I knew she'd need me. That's why I came. Don't you worry. I'll do your talking for you."

At least in this point, Aunt Bertie told the God-spoken truth. She had enough words for six people, and now, much to Meg's horror, she was going to unleash every word on the Brinkworth family for their own good, of course. Every time Aunt Bertie visited, she'd tell them how she was sent to put the fear of God in this family if it killed her.

Meg feared God plenty. It was Aunt Bertie she was worried about.

Chapter Eighty-Two

The porch swing beckoned Augusta away from Aunt Bertie's verbal torrents. Its chains rankled under her weight. She watched the night with its pale, shadowy moon. Its pallid light ghosted her flowers. Why was it that she was always saying goodbye to her flowers? She lamented their loss when she left Columbus, when she left Centerville the first time, when she left New York to marry Thomas. Now, she had to say goodbye again, a bittersweet prospect. *Porches are for anguish.*

Her eyes rested on the heart-shaped leaves of the lilac bush—a bush Thomas planted for her. It was a third generation lilac, as he had said. He knew how much she loved her mother's lilac in New York, so for their wedding, he presented her with a stick with roots.

"It's your mother's lilac," was all he had to say, smiling.

Every time they moved, he took a portion of that bush with them, and he planted it by their new home's front porch—a perennial wedding gift. This time, the lilac would stay. She couldn't bring herself to do something he did for her; it would be like saying he wasn't necessary. She'd miss that bush, though. She had no voice, but her mind sparked alive with moonlit sadness. In that mind, she recited the three familiar stanzas of Whitman.

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,
And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,
I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.
O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night -O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappeared -O the black murk that hides the star!

Mary E. DeMuth

O cruel hands that hold me powerless -O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-
washed palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of
rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume
strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle -and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-coloured blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich
green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

Her heart broke, silently, yet with a force she could not resist. She was leaving home. She was leaving Thomas, cleverly shaped like a looming lilac bush.

Chapter Eighty-Three

“Hurry down, now. Hurry down.” Aunt Bertie coupled her brassy voice with a swift, rhythmic beating of one of Augusta’s old tin pots, set out to auction. Her infamous oatmeal—if you could call it that—simmered on the stove. When Augusta tried to stir it, Aunt Bertie hit her hand with her drumstick (disguised as a wooden spoon).

“Stop meddling with my cooking. Now sit down and rest. You didn’t let me help you when I offered to take Helen and Meg. Now I am helping, and you need to let me. It’s the least you can do after offending me so.” Aunt Bertie let the glop bubble untouched in its Dutch oven, letting wafts of burnt oatmeal encircle the cooking stove. She took to banging the pot again.

“For heaven’s sake, it’s six in the morning,” Meg said, wiping the sleep from her red eyes. “Mama, make her stop!”

All Augusta could do was shrug and try to look as convincingly exasperated as she could, hoping that Aunt Bertie would for once recognize subtleties and take a hint. She took no hint, a fact punctuated by staccato beats of the poor tin pot.

“Mama, it’s early,” came John-John’s plea. Augusta pointed at Aunt Bertie—behind her stout back of course—and gave a look of empathy to those tired blue eyes. She nodded as if to say, *I know John-John, just bear with it.*

The savior entered. Quietly, Grandpa Brinkworth took the beaten pot and the equally beaten spoon from Aunt Bertie’s insistent hands and set them down. “Thanks for rousing us. Now, wouldn’t you agree it’s time to ready ourselves for the day? I think you’re manning the attic, am I right?”

“Shoving me in the attic? I might catch consumption up there with all that dust and must. Very clever. But don’t you know I am a smart one? I’ll be in charge of the kitchen and that’s it. No attics for me. The way I see it is this—you need me here in the kitchen with all those immigrant ladies trying to drive a hard bargain. I will garner the best prices here. I know my kitchens, you see.”

“Just like you know how to make oatmeal?” John-John hushed it, but even though Aunt Bertie was going deaf, she had what Doc Fenn once called “selective hearing.”

“I heard that. Should make you eat ten bowls just for your ungratefulness.”

“I think it’s burned,” John-John said, his eyes teasing.

Although her hearing was selectively intermittent, Aunt Bertie’s sense of smell had abandoned her at old age. “Smells lovely to me, isn’t that right, Augusta?”

Augusta thanked the Almighty for no voice, although it would’ve come in handy for what she needed from Aunt Bertie. She unclasped her amber brooch, and handed it to her. Augusta motioned to the pots and pans for sale and then to the brooch, indicating she wanted to sell it.

“No, Mama! You can’t!” Meg said.

“Downright sensible, your mother is,” Aunt Bertie quipped. “Finally has gotten some smarts. That brooch will fetch your family a pretty penny. It’ll help you live for several months. I’ll make it my personal mission to sell it at top price, Augusta. Don’t you worry.”

Thankfully, the auctioneer arrived—her cue to excuse herself from the kitchen full of saddened eyes and busy herself with a thousand little details. One thing for sure, she would steer clear of Aunt Bertie’s domain.

Grandpa Brinkworth pulled the auctioneer aside in the parlor and shooed Augusta away. “I’ve got to talk business, Augusta. No need for both of us to settle things. You attend to the hogs—maybe they want some oatmeal.” He laughed when he said it, and Augusta thought he said it unusually loud for his soft manner.

“I heard that!” came Aunt Bertie’s ringing voice from the kitchen.

Chapter Eighty-Four

The day turned out to be a beautiful one—sunny and bright, with clear, crisp air that hinted of autumn to come. Even so, Meg smarted that Mama abandoned Father’s brooch. Mama’s pragmatism had won over her heart.

The whole town turned out for the auction, even Sammy Nutt, to Meg’s delight. When she saw him, she flitted about trying to appear busy. Seeing him there, tall and angular, made her stomach hurt—almost as much as it hurt when she ate Aunt Bertie’s morning concoction. She darted this way and that, like a nectar-searching hummingbird, until Sammy caught her arm.

“Why so busy, Meg girl?”

“There’s so much to do.”

“Like what?”

“Like—” She couldn’t think of a thing at that moment. The sun, at high noon, warmed the top of her head, melting her logic. “Well—”

“You avoiding me?”

“No, not at all. Mama has us all doing a hundred little things. It’s hard to keep account.”

“Come with me for a second, will you?”

He started walking away behind the Rosebud Theatre. She looked around to make sure Mama wasn’t nearby. No—just Farmer Hanson and Edward discussing livestock prices. Sammy disappeared around the theatre’s back corner. When she turned that same corner, he caught her up in a swift embrace.

“I’ve missed you, Meg.”

At first she couldn’t speak, unprepared for a daring Sammy. “You’re mighty forward for a shy person.”

“Can’t help it.” He brushed the hair from her face, one errant strand at a time, penetrating her with his blue-eyed gaze. She closed her eyes and let him kiss her, right then and there behind the Rosebud Theatre—the most drama it had ever seen. Mama said Father was happy in heaven. How could he be when heaven

came to her in the form of a gentle, yet pleading, kiss? She opened her eyes, slowly, as if to savor the sacred moment. Fully open, they gazed beyond Sammy.

Mama stood but ten feet away. Meg pushed Sammy away and started toward Mama, but she turned and walked away, disappearing into the house. Another thing for Mama not to forgive.

That afternoon, Meg could feel Mama's silence. Her eyes were silent. Her hands were silent. Every action screamed to Meg, How could you be thinking of love when the family is losing the house? Even though Mama could not speak, her silent actions ate away at Meg.

Mama let Grandpa Brinkworth attend to dinner. She had relegated many inane duties to him since he came, a thing that angered Meg a little. An old man, he shouldn't have to work so much. When she entered the kitchen to help him, he said, "Meg, get to getting, OK? I have a surprise for dinner. Keep everyone out of the kitchen. Just this once?"

"Sure, but where's Aunt Bertie? Isn't this her sacred domain?"

"I sent her to Decker's store without a car. It'll take her a good long time. Decker's sells licorice now, you know."

"That should keep her occupied. I hear it takes a long time to pick licorice from one's teeth." They both laughed. Meg set out to gather the children for a brief meeting by Lake Frank.

The maple tree's shadow snaked across the long end of the lake. She sent John-John to do her bidding. In a few Olympic minutes he rounded them all up, even Edward and Frank. "What's this all about, *Marjorie*," Edward teased.

"It's about Mama," Meg said.

"What about her?" Lily had come to terms with Mama being distant, at least that's what she told Meg, but her question was still laced with sarcasm.

"Anyone hear if the brooch sold today?" Meg asked.

"No one's heard a thing about it. My guess is that Banker Pruitt bought it—probably for a steal, too," John-John said. "I saw him heading to the kitchen—an odd thing for him to do, wouldn't you think?"

"I wouldn't put it past that stingy man," Meg said.

"Let's not be unladylike," Lily said. "Why did you call this meeting again?"

"For Mama. We all know how much she loved the country," Meg said.

"You make it sound like she's dead, or past tense. She still loves the country, Meg," Frank said.

"You're hardly the one to correct my syntax, Frank. The point is—Mama is upset."

“Hard to tell when she can’t talk at all. You’re just sore because she caught you pressing lips with Sammy Nutt today,” Edward sneered.

Lily hugged herself. “I believe the topic of discussion centered around Mama being sad about leaving our home.”

The children didn’t intend it, but they sat in the same order around their dining table, in their exact order of birth. Mama arranged them that way, something Father thought silly, but he obliged her rigid ways anyway. A certain knowing passed between them, seated on the Ohio earth around an imaginary dining table—a knowing of loss.

No one spoke for quite some time, each seeming to be lost in his own personal loss of home. Lake Frank added to the quiet mourning, dappled with the brightest sunlight in a mocking dance. The trees, tall and canopied, stretched greener that evening—the sky bluer. And Meg nursed a deep sadness, the most melancholy she’d known in her fifteen-year existence. Moving meant more than leaving this patch of earth. It meant leaving Father behind. Her memories of him rooted in this soil, beneath this tree, in that lake, on that porch, in that chair. Leaving here meant leaving him, and everyone knew it.

Edward stood erect and cleared his throat. “Yeah, I guess Mama *is* going to miss this place.” He turned away from them and looked over the sunlit lake, the lake he sliced through with poetic ease. Its shore answered back with steady laps.

“I’m sure the new occupants will let us swim here.” Helen didn’t sound convincing.

“I suppose,” was all Edward said.

Helen stretched, reaching for the blue sky and said, “Mrs. Hornby bought Strawberry. She told me we could visit the old mare whenever we wanted to. Doc Calverley’s house is just a few doors down.”

“Farmer Hanson bought most of the livestock, but he left the chickens,” said Lily. “I hear there’s a coop at Doc Calverley’s place.”

An understanding passed between Lily and Meg. Meg decided to let the others in on their sisterly knowing. “That’s what we can do,” Meg said. “Let’s sneak the chickens over there and get them settled. That way, when we move tomorrow, Mama will have one piece of the country to welcome her.” This type of secret society Mama wouldn’t mind—a surprise society to conspire kindness.

Frank stood next to Edward, which worried Meg. John-John fidgeted and picked his bottom teeth with a piece of straw. Frank coughed, and then spoke. “Mama loves lilacs just like you do, Meg. Father brought a shoot from our Columbus house and planted it right in the front by the door so Mama could smell

them when they rocked together on the porch. The way I see it, that lilac is hers.” Frank took a deep breath, something Meg thanked God for. It had taken him a long time to be able to breathe that way.

“I can’t pull it out by myself, Edward. I need someone stronger than me.”

Both men faced the lake as the sun dipped below the horizon. An awkward quietness settled in. Even the birds, usually chatty at this dusky hour, kept silent. They waited with the children to hear if one brother could halt a feud.

“Let’s do it.” Edward put a lanky arm around Frank.

Over a lilac bush, they made their peace.

And the birds sang again.

Chapter Eighty-Five

Dinner came late that evening, blessedly late. Grandpa Brinkworth told John-John to go away for at least an hour, so he could finish his surprise dinner. While the sisters spirited away the laying hens, John-John helped Edward and Frank pull the lilac from its tenacious roots. They spirited away a few of Mama's other favorites too—hollyhocks, yellow roses, lavender, phlox, and Jacob's ladder. Mama scrubbed the attic for the next tenants while they worked. They loaded the shrubbery in the back of Father's truck along with the protesting chickens. The bed was crowded, even more so when all four sisters insisted on sitting with the chickens "to calm them" as Lily had said.

The last time the children dangled from the truck's bed was the day the slab of rock crushed Father. Although none of them dared to mention it, they all knew it.

Frank let John-John drive, which proved to be tricky when they passed a black-toothed Aunt Bertie.

"John-John, what on earth?"

"We're just letting him get his feet wet, Aunt Bertie. A man has to grow up sometime," Frank said. The fact that he said *we* gave John-John hope. Maybe Frank and Edward were actually finished feuding.

"Let him get his feet wet without gals bouncing in the back. It's not proper."

"Ah, they aren't worse for wear," John-John said.

"Well, I don't like it. I don't. Right near creamed me, on my way home. And to think your poor family would have no cabbage had it happened."

"Cabbage?"

"Yes, cabbage. Your crazy grandfather asked me to get some at Decker's. Seems you're plum out."

John-John looked over at Edward and Frank who were trying not to laugh. The root cellar was well populated with many a cabbage head, and everyone, except apparently Aunt Bertie, knew it.

“Well, you best be getting home. I hear Grandpa’s making dinner, and he’s almost done.”

“I swear this family just can’t live without me. You’re all an accident waiting to happen, and that’s the honest truth.”

“You have something in your teeth,” John-John said, trying to look serious.

“I do?” She looked worried.

“The licorice got the best of you?” John-John pressed the accelerator, leaving Aunt Bertie in a cloud of dust. In the rearview mirror, he could see her picking her teeth. The children’s raucous laughter punctuated the potholed road. Every time the truck flew in the air, or dipped suddenly, more laughter leaked out. In some ways it felt good to have Aunt Bertie there, if not just for comic relief.

Once at Doc Calverley’s, Edward and Frank didn’t say much to each other, but they worked side by side without spewing hateful words—a victory in John-John’s eyes. They dug deep holes, planted the plants, and watered them in.

Before the sisters could put the harried hens in “Calverley’s Coop” as they called it, they had to clean it out, which didn’t take long seeing as how the fine Doctor kept anything pertaining to animals in tip-top shape. They spread straw from the old henhouse, so the hens would be less reticent to lay, and perhaps be confused in thinking this had always been their home.

“How’d it go, Meg?” Frank asked as they started back to the truck.

“Not bad. They tried to fly, of course. But Lily settled them—sang ‘Amazing Grace.’ You’d think those hens got religion, the way they settled down. They were quieter than John-John in church.”

“Hey, I’m quiet. It’s just hard to sit that long, that’s all,” John-John said.

“How about letting Meg drive, Church-Talker?” Frank teased.

“Aw, I only got to drive here. It’s not fair.”

“Meg needs to learn,” Frank said.

She had a few stalls, a few laughs, and a few worried looks, but all in all they made it home in one piece, much to John-John’s surprise. Home. It was a word that would last for one more fading day. They’d be in someone else’s home tomorrow, the tongue-depressor flinging doctor’s home.

When they returned, they heard the familiar clanging tin pot. “Looks like Aunt Bertie’s back. Must’ve finished picking out the licorice,” Edward said.

To their surprise, and delight, a smiling Grandpa Brinkworth greeted them at the kitchen door, spoon and pot in hand. “Wash up. Supper’s ready.” Under his breath, he added, “Dirt’s under your fingernails and the gals smell like chickens. Use soap!”

The Quarryman's Wife

The table looked lovely, with a freshly pressed floral table cloth, their nicest plates, tall glasses full of iced tea with lemon, and Grandma's silver.

"Grandpa!" John-John said. "Didn't the silver sell?"

He shushed him. "Sure did—to a right nice fellow, too." He winked. "Don't be telling your mama. You know how she hates charity. To your knowledge, the silver didn't sell. It's our little secret." He caught the gaze of each Brinkworth child, cementing his pact.

Before John-John could ask about the brooch, Aunt Bertie and Mama entered the kitchen one right after the other.

"Well, I'll be," said Aunt Bertie. "Seems we've entered a New York restaurant and all its finery."

Mama picked up a polished silver teaspoon and looked at Grandpa Brinkworth.

Watching a grandfather lie would be just too much for John-John, so he blurted, "The silver didn't sell, Mama. Isn't that just too bad?"

Mama smiled, a pale unregistered smile.

Aunt Bertie called the dinner The Last Supper. Grandpa Brinkworth made sure it was the finest last supper in Centerville, complete with grandma's silver, a real ham, perfectly mashed potatoes, lump-less gravy, homemade rolls, corn on the cob, cherry pie, and iced tea. What was missing was cabbage, and of course, Thomas. John-John wondered how Thomas would feel if he had to leave this house, if it was his last supper here. He wondered if Thomas missed them.

Grandpa Brinkworth read funny stories to cap the evening Thomas fashion. Seeing him sit there in Thomas's Morris chair stirred John-John. Although twelve, he fought an insatiable urge to jump up in his grandpa's lap and soak him up.

"What are you waiting for, son? Climb up!" Grandpa Brinkworth beckoned.

John-John looked this way and that and climbed on the ample chair next to him. He smelled like Thomas.

Preacher Bourland stopped by, as all good preachers should do when a family faces a move like this.

"Mrs. Brinkworth, I want you to have this—for your new home." He handed her a neatly wrapped package.

She looked at him puzzled and began carefully tearing its corners.

"My Millie, she gave me a verbal licking when I told her about our conversation about God helping those who helped themselves. After that, she took to cross stitching this with a vengeance. I hope you like it."

Mama held it up for the family to see. The simple phrase “God helps” was surrounded by lilacs. Mama put her hand on the preacher’s arm and tried to whisper “Thank you,” but couldn’t.

“That’s all right, Mrs. Brinkworth. I’ll tell Millie you liked it.”

As the preacher opened the door, Olya stood in its threshold, *babushka* in hand, looking flushed.

“Missus, I have to talk to you now—right now.” The preacher tipped his hat and waved goodbye as Olya pulled Mama outside. John-John surmised that they settled on the porch swing; he could hear the chains creak, as he stayed settled under the crook of his grandfather’s arm.

Chapter Eighty-Six

“**M**issus, I know you can’t talk, but I must talk to you. I have found God. This very night, I have found Him.”

All Augusta could do was nod. How she longed for a piece of paper, any scrap would do, where she could ask her every question that came to mind. In a way, her malfunctioning vocal chords held her captive, and she sat at the mercy of Olya’s verbal meanderings. She nodded, hoping she would share the miracle.

“I didn’t want to believe in such a God who lets children starve and good people die from heavy labor and evil men. When Zina and her family died, I could finally believe there was no God. For a time I was happy. I had answers. No God. No heaven. Just life, and what you make of it.”

They swung on the swing, watching the pocked sky for a long time, neither speaking—one of holy reverence and one of sheer disability. The fireflies danced on the front lawn in pale green circles. Augusta felt a lump creep to her throat. How she was going to miss this house, this vista, this place that emitted Thomas. For a while, she didn’t think she could do it. Maybe Banker Pruitt would let her pitch their old army tent here.

Something other than Thomas was missing, and it took her listening to far off crickets to realize it—her lilac was gone. Gone! Aunt Bertie had mentioned some folks wanted to cart off shrubbery. Yet Augusta sternly wrote her instructions not to allow such a thing. If only she had her voice, she could’ve saved the lilac. Now a deep, inky hole stood in its place. No more Thomas. No more lilac. Wasn’t that the way of things?

Olya, oblivious to Augusta’s discovery, continued. “Then, after I was happy, I was sad. I knew deep inside, that what happened to poor Zina was wrong. And I knew that there was inside me a knowing—a knowing of what should be. Why did I have such strong leanings toward right and wrong unless they were put there?” She stopped the swing’s momentum and looked at Augusta, square on. The moon shone in Olya’s eyes, but its light was not the only light there.

Augusta nodded again.

“You were right. There is a heaven and a hell, Missus. The world doesn’t make sense if neither exists. Evil people made me hope for a just God who set things right. When you told me about the stone crushing some to dust, I didn’t want to believe it, but now it makes sense. Because I longed for a perfect world, I saw there must be another world somewhere. Surely my longings were put there for a reason—to long for a perfect and just world. I was just looking for it here. I was looking for heaven on earth.”

Olya started swinging again. “It’s that song, ‘Amazing Grace,’ Missus. I was blind to God. My country, it blinded me. My stubbornness, it blinded me. My fear, it blinded me. When everyone I loved died or lay crippled, grief blinded me. But now I see. God is real. He is just. Someday, my husband will walk. Perhaps not here, but in heaven, he will walk.”

All Augusta could do was reach for Olya’s slender hand and hold it in her calloused one. Olya, who questioned the Almighty with out-loud brashness, made her peace with Him. The words that Augusta dared not speak were Olya’s words, and in them, she found a tender solace. Just as Jasper had said, she looked to the wrong world for justice. Swinging on the porch, where she and Thomas planned their lives together, she realized where home really was. Home could not be contained in four walls, or crammed between garden gates, or quantified by lilac bushes, or meted out in acres. Home was where Jesus lived, in heaven, where all wrongs were righted—all tears wiped away.

She would shed a few tonight and tomorrow. Just saying goodbye to her remaining plants would sting. Clanking the Willowware plates in the deep limestone sink would sear. Remembering Thomas in each room of the house would tear open wounds she had not allowed to see the light of day. Watching her children leave memories behind cut through her, she knew. And somehow, for the first time since the stones crushed Thomas’s life out of him, she felt prepared to grieve, ready for her children to mourn. And she was ready to live again.

Olya stood. “I wanted you to be the first to know. You have loved me well, Missus. I will see you tomorrow, early.” She jumped to the walkway in a fairy-like glide. The burden of a homeland far away seemed to have lifted while the lightning bugs encircled her, in nature’s simple rendition of the Hallelujah chorus.

The house was dark when she entered, and the stairs creaked, for perhaps the last time. Inferno curled on Thomas’s side of the bed. He looked up as if to say,

The Quarryman's Wife

“Hurry up and come to bed.” She pulled on Thomas’s pajamas, flung the covers heavenward to let in crisper air, and glanced at her nightstand. Set on top of her writing pad was her amber brooch, and below it, a note.

“I couldn’t bring myself to sell it, Augusta. Some things are meant to be kept. Bertie-Bee.”

She cradled the delicate amber brooch in her trembling, rough hands, noting the contrast. She unclasped it and secured it to Thomas’s pajamas. She sunk to the floor and smiled.

She sat cross-legged like a child and wept. Although her voice had been stilled, her heart released. She reached for her pen and paper, stayed on the floor, and finished the poem she’d begun before her heart’s emancipation.

*The day, it waits
For midnight’s tears
To resurrect
A life once lived.*

*The day, it waits
Arousing sun
To warm a heart
Once seared, now cold.*

*The day, it waits
Midmorning’s light
That salves the grief
Of crushing stone.*

*The day, it waits
Hot afternoons
Of skinned knee tears
Not wiped away.*

*The day, it waits
Lightning bugs dance
On graves of men
Too young to die.*

*The day, it waits
A star-pocked night
Sky's light and dark
Mingling joy to loss.*

*The day, it waits
Blue moonlight's hope
The day has ebbed
Yet, life has dawned.*

The cathartic words wept easily from her pen. She sat for a long time, looking at the cadenced, unrhymed poem. She folded it neatly, and placed it in her cherry apron pocket. She had one more thing to write tonight—something far more important than a poem.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Meg rolled over while the sun spilled its light onto her bed. She wanted to cherish her last morning in the quarry house. Welcome's voice, loud and insistent, awakened her. She heard a clumsy knock on the front door at seven o'clock, which was followed by "Gusty, Gusty, I've come to help you move."

She heard Mama's steps creak the stairs. She would miss the creaks. She sat up and stretched a long, satisfied stretch, and set to put on her work clothes. Everything else had been packed away, according to Grandpa Brinkworth's standards, so she folded her nightclothes and bedding.

Once dressed, she crossed the floor to her vanity. On it sat a piece of paper, and on that, Mama's amber brooch. She sat down, picked up the marquis pin, and examined it, incredulous. Tears stung her morning eyes, so much so that she had trouble reading the beautifully penned note.

"Dearest Meg. I woke up Lily last night and asked her, through a note, what she thought of me giving this to you. We both agreed it should be yours. I was not angry yesterday when I saw you embracing Sammy Nutt. I felt like I relived my life, the life I began with your father. It hurt too much to observe Sammy's tender affection toward you. I know you have always admired this brooch. Your father gave it to me with every ounce of love he had. With all of my love, I now pass it on to you.

"We've had our differences, you and I. I see myself when I look at you—proud, intelligent, winsome, full of life. Perhaps it is because we are so alike that we squabble. Like your father used to say, 'Two alike flints, when pressed together, make sparks.' I've let the sparks create a fire between us. I am sorry. I was wrong. Can you forgive me?"

With love, as always, Mama."

Meg put the letter down and looked up. Mama stood in the doorway, wearing her Saturday work dress and cherry apron—her work uniform. Meg never thought she looked more beautiful. She stood, walked over to Mama, and flung her arms around her.

“Of course I forgive you. Will you forgive me?”

Mama nodded. Her tears communicated more to Meg than the neatly penned letter. Arm in arm, they creaked down the morning stairs for the last time.

Welcome welcomed them in the kitchen. He'd miraculously convinced Aunt Bertie that he was a good mush-stirrer. He smiled and stirred oatmeal in the bustling kitchen, while Aunt Bertie packed the remaining dishes and Mama sat silent.

“Anyone want jam on their toast?” Lily asked.

“Jam? We packed all the jam,” John-John said, sleepy-eyed and hungry.

“Mrs. Hornby dropped it off yesterday when she bought Strawberry. Called it poisonberry jam. Turns out her berries weren't poisonous after all. The white stuff she sprayed on the berries was some sort of fertilizer that made them grow bigger. She made several batches and wanted us to have some,” Lily said. “Seems our notions about her were wrong, wouldn't you say?”

“I'm going to need more evidence than jam, I'm afraid,” John-John said.

“Suit yourself.” Lily spread jam to the far corners of the bread, to Meg's delight. Lily did unto other's bread as she would have them do unto hers—no blank spots, no exposed toast, just a full, thick blanket of poisonberry jam.

“Delicious,” Meg said. “Strawberry sure picked a good owner.”

Chapter Eighty-Eight

John-John hated to say goodbye to the quarry. Although intrigued by Mrs. Hornby's reformation in the form of jam offerings, he resisted the temptation. He ran his own 100-yard dash to the edge of the quarry precipice and stopped. He stood beneath his own victory platform, disguised as the lone oak, and watched the quarry operation below. The Dinky engines huffed and tugged rocks to new destinations. New men scurried and filled orders. The world of men was a complicated machine—when one man fell to injury or death, another filled his place as if the person before was just a hazy memory. His own brothers feuded and made up, as if the feuding never occurred.

He made the most adult decision of his life under the lone oak. He decided he was too young to be saddled with the responsibility of adulthood, too young to understand its grown-up machinations. He didn't want the medal of manhood just yet. He sat down and cried, not like a man, but like a boy who missed his father.

“I miss you, Father.”

Chapter Eighty-Nine

Augusta sat at the table a long time, watching her children flit about. She pulled Helen to her lap and hugged her, a tender embrace that Helen returned. When Frank walked by, she grabbed his hand, squeezed it, and let it go. Though preoccupied with the business of moving, they all mourned in their own way. Augusta, for the first time in months, understood this.

The front door opened. Meg came into the kitchen and announced, "Someone's here to see you, Mama. You need to come in the parlor." She motioned for everyone to follow.

There, in the center of the parlor, stood Olya, and behind her, Alex, supported by a strong cane.

"I wanted to help you move, Mrs. Brinkworth." Alex leaned heavily on the cane, shifted his weight, and pushed the cane forward. His feet, one by one, shuffled to catch up to the cane's new position. He jutted the cane and shuffled until he made it across the room, facing her.

She smiled, a broad open smile, so open that her tears could have a home there. She coughed, then found her voice. "Well, if it isn't Alex—caned and able."

The room, filled with the entire family erupted in laughter. Augusta's first new words were a joke—a clever one at that. She held Alex's shoulders and looked into his dancing eyes. "Aren't you a site for sore eyes!"

When Sammy Nutt came to their door that morning to help with the move, Augusta thanked him politely, and even rode with him in his father's truck, the children hanging off its bed. They were a motley bunch, she knew. Several quarry trucks, some horse-drawn wagons, and even Aunt Bertie driving their truck, made for a rousing caravan.

"I will drive, and that's all there is to it," Aunt Bertie said when Grandpa Brinkworth settled in behind the steering wheel.

"Whatever you say. This clutch is tough. You sure you can handle it, Bertie-Bee?"

“Oh, I can handle it. The last thing I’m going to do is let my fate rest in the hands of a patronizing old man.”

She shoved him out the door and turned the ignition. Grandpa Brinkworth barely had a chance to shut his door before she jerked the poor truck forward, stalling it. Sammy and Augusta saw the whole scenario and laughed.

Driving down Four Corners, she saw a lone Banker Pruitt silhouetted in the empty bank window. Poor man, she thought, it must be miserable to live a lonely life like that. She looked behind and watched her children dangle from the truck’s bed while she held the seven-stanza poem in her apron pocket. She pulled it out, unfolded it, and read its rhythmic words afresh. Again, she looked behind her.

Seven stanzas. Seven Brinkworths left. She held the poem out the window in uncharacteristic abandon and let it drop from her hands to the limestone curb. This family was her legacy, her poetry.

Awaiting her was home—not her permanent home, where Thomas danced hay-foot and straw-foot to “April in Paris,” but home nonetheless.

Welcome stood on the porch, waving wildly. “Hi Gusty! Hi Gusty!” He said it with such rapid succession it made her smile.

Her entire lilac bush, a little droopy, but intact, greeted her, as did her dear laying hens disheveled but happy to see her. Surrounded by the cadence of her children’s banter and laughter, she sat on Doc Calverley’s porch swing and rocked. And she said her finger prayers.

“Porches are for miracles,” her mother said.

And she was right.