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YESTERYEAR

CARO CLAIRE BURKE

A NOVEL



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A Novel

Caro Claire Burke



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PART ONE

THE PAST

THIS IS THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself.

I woke up two minutes before my alarm went off, like usual. Five fifty-eight and *bing:* eyes wide open, ready to greet the day. I've never had a hard time waking up in the morning. Never used the snooze button, either, not once in my life. Sobriety helps. I don't drink. Discipline helps, too. I was born with spades of discipline, I'm practically overflowing with it—which is why, I think, I've never had that much trouble with anything in my life. Not motherhood, nor marriage, nor building a business, nor serving Him. All of it appeared to me as a series of tasks to be accomplished each day, at the right time, in the correct chronological order. I know it's not that easy for other people, but it really is for me.

That's why all those strangers liked me so much.

That, and the money. The money definitely helped too.

It was wintertime. January. A cold front had just blown through the pass. By my bedroom window, the radiator was puffing hot air. The sky outside was deep-as-death black, and would be for another few hours. Our farm was nestled in the rolling divots between two mountain ranges in Idaho, which meant we didn't see the sun until nine or so in the winter months. We were located five miles down a long, winding gravel country road. Not even airplanes flew overhead.

In the darkness, I listened to the distant mooing of Sassafras, our beloved dairy cow. I could tell by the pitch and register of her moans that my husband, Caleb, was milking her. Right on time. The man was good.

My husband was not disciplined before he met me. He was the youngest of five boys, the runt of the litter in an American dynasty. His father was the latest senator in a long line of U.S. senators, currently barreling through a presidential bid (third time's the charm!); his mother was a homemaker who had spent most of her life drowning in Chardonnay. Together, through a near-fatal combination of paternal neglect and maternal sympathy, they had raised Caleb to be soft and spoiled and sweet. But the only thing more

valuable than a person with God-given traits is a person who's willing to learn, and my husband, *that man*, had been willing to learn.

And who was I?

A flawless Christian woman. The manic pixie American dream girl of this nation's deepest, darkest fantasies. The mother every woman wanted to be, and the wife every man wanted to come home to. Like a nun in a porno, it didn't make sense, but also, by God: it worked.

My name is Natalie Heller Mills, and I was perfect at being alive.

In the silences between Sassafras's near-human groans of pleasure (sometimes I joked online that my husband had a bovine mistress, *ha ha!*), I could just hear the distant chicken coop chatter, that meditative *bockbockbockbockbock* that served as the white noise machine of our farm. I loved our chickens. They were as domesticated as dogs, as harmless as toddlers. Sometimes I went out to the coop just to sit with them. I liked to stroke their silky necks, let them peck softly at the feed in my cupped palms.

We'd be killing them soon. In the darkness, my mouth watered. I'd been yearning, lately, for fresh bone broth. Once you've made it from scratch, the store-bought kind tastes rancid.

Through the open crack of my bedroom door, there was a spilling of little-boy laughter. The children were down the hall, having breakfast. I closed my eyes, felt the rhythms of my house like a heartbeat. Nanny Louise—*a godsend for our family*—was at the stove, making pancakes. Producer Shannon—*my right arm*—was by the kitchen sink, getting the video equipment prepared for a long day of work. Stetson and Samuel—*my darling young men*—were sitting at the table, shoving and pulling one another in equally groggy measure. Clementine—*my eldest, the girl who made me a mother*—was at the head of the table, ignoring her brothers, reading a book. Nanny Aimee—*our second in command*—was moving through the far corners of the house, waking up each of the littles, kissing sleepy eyelids, tugging my two toddlers gently forward into the day. She would bring one to the kitchen, hand her over to Nanny Louise, and go back to get the other.

I closed my eyes and whispered my daily thanks to the Lord for everything he had provided me.

Thank you, Father, for Caleb. Thank you for the Inheritance. Thank you for Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa, Junebug, and the little angel we haven't named yet.

My hand moved instinctively to my stomach, resting at the height of the curve. I was thirty-two years old. Six months pregnant with our sixth child. It had been the easiest pregnancy to date—though all my pregnancies, relatively speaking, had been smooth. I was born to be a mother. I never felt more connected with Him than when I was tasked with carrying one of His creations.

(Do you see what I'm saying? Perfect.)

Beneath my palm, my baby girl rolled slowly to her side. My little sea creature. I loved her so much.

Thank you for watching over the farm animals, Lord, and thank you for helping us pass five million on Instagram this week. We're only a few souls away from one million on YouTube, Lord. It's through Your will, and Your will alone, that I have reached so many hearts and minds. It's in Your name that I work to spread Your truth.

A wave of nausea passed over me, and I suffered beneath the shadow. Sometimes it actually made me sick, how perfect my life was, and how good I was at living it.

On the bedside table, my phone sputtered awake. I reached over and silenced it, then threw off the sheets and got up.

—

We hadn't always had this much help. For the first few years, it had been us and the kids and the farm. When I became pregnant with my fourth, we hired Nanny Louise. When I was pregnant with my fifth, I hired Nanny Aimee, and shortly after that, we hired Producer Shannon. What we had now, in terms of help, was more than enough for the time being. It allowed me to be present with both my children and my followers in all the ways I

wanted to be at all the different points throughout the day. That's the thing about being a mother and a wife and an influencer, all at the same time: it's basically like breastfeeding three babies simultaneously. Like seducing three lovers at once.

—

Why don't you ever show all the help you have behind the scenes?

"We love our employees like they're family, so we go to great means to protect their privacy as they've requested. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if my social media account ended up compromising them in any way."

—

When I stepped into the kitchen, Producer Shannon was in the corner, fiddling with a tripod, and my four oldest children were eating breakfast at the table, each wearing a thick wool sweater. Nanny Louise was helping Jessa, our three-and-a-half-year-old, as she poured orange juice into her glass.

"I can *do it myself*," Jessa whined.

Nanny Louise, who also served as our homeschooling teacher, nodded and said, "Of course you can. Look. You're doing it right now. All by yourself. Big girl."

Jessa grinned, the verbal pronouncement of her autonomy enough to make her forget how Nanny Louise's hands never left the cup. "Big girl," she echoed. Nanny Louise tipped the glass, and my little girl drank greedily. I watched with approval as the pulp dripped down her chin. The orange juice was homemade. The tutorial would go online later this week.

"Good morning!" I said to the room. Five heads swiveled toward me. A chirpy chorus of *Morning, Mama* came in reply.

I made my way around the table, kissing each perfect cheek, ruffling each perfect head. All my children, even the boys, wore their hair long. The girls looked just like me: freckled, narrow faces, soil-dark hair, expressions

prone to penetrating seriousness. Catch one of us in a pouting moment, and you'd be forgiven for summoning images of some sixteenth-century martyr on a hunger strike. As for the boys, they looked like Caleb: ruddy cheeks, big toothy smiles. When they were all walking in a group (and they often were; the boys worshiped Caleb) they made me think of a trio of politicians in lockstep, scouring the land in search of babies to kiss.

I rarely paid attention to the differences in the children. Both the girls and the boys spoke similarly, laughed similarly. Their clothing was a rainbow of neutrals. The same pile of olive and tan and ocher had been tumbling down our growing family tree for over a decade.

It's amazing how long good cotton can last.

I walked over to my two boys, Stetson and Samuel. Stetson was eight years old, a full year younger than Samuel, but as of last summer the boys were the same height, same weight. With their shoulder-length hair and the way they seemed to do everything—run, play, do chores, shovel food into their mouths—in jerky, awkward-limbed unison, they reminded me of a pair of dressage ponies.

I rested a hand on either head as they ate their cereal with little-boy gusto, felt their skulls move around beneath my palms like possessed bulldozer levers. "What's on the docket for today, boys?"

"Needa builda new enclosure for Sassafras," Stetson said, mouth full.

"Mmm," I said. "Very important. Papa will love the help."

"Papa said I could use the nail gun."

Samuel shoved Stetson, knocking the spoonful of cereal out of Stetson's hand and sending it clattering to the floor. "It's *my* turn to use the nail gun."

"You'll *both* use the nail gun," I said. "Nanny Louise…?"

She nodded, wiped the pulpy juice from Jessa's cheeks and chin, then got up to clean up the mess.

People refused to believe my babies were as amenable as they appeared online. There's no way this is their actual life!!!!, the Angry Women would write. (That's what Caleb and I called them. The Angry Women.) To which I would reply: absolutely nothing, of course. A mother's main task is to protect her children from the world. There was no need for some hateful

witch in Manhattan to see how physical Samuel got with his brother (and even his sisters, sometimes), no need for them to witness Stetson's daily tantrum over arithmetic (I loved that boy, but he had not been gifted with a standard helping of brains). If the Angry Women found out about any of my children's failings, they'd go crazy with bloodthirst. They'd also be devastated. None of them realized it, of course, but they needed me as much as I needed them. It was a symbiotic relationship. I was a shark, and they were five million tiny fish, nipping at the nutrients along my belly.

Little idiots. They were desperate to eat me. They had no idea I was the one who was keeping them alive.

—

How does it feel to know that millions of people around the world know intimate details about your children?

"I show only very selective moments of my children's lives. And besides, none of them have *any* access to screens—have you seen the studies, by the way? Of what screen time does to children's brains? If you ask me, my children are much better off in this household, where they occasionally show up in videos for my account, than in some other household where they'd be staring at an iPad all night. I mean, really." Sympathetic cluck. "It's an epidemic. So sad. You should look into *that*."

—

"You're up early," I remarked to Producer Shannon as I poured my coffee.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. She was frowning at one of the knobs on the camera, twisting it one way, then the other, a grumpy expression on her face. When Shannon first showed up at the ranch, she was nineteen years old, a Barnard dropout with pink hair and a nose ring who was willing to do professional work at a student rate. Now she was twenty-one. The nose ring remained; the pink hair had been abandoned in the name of her natural brown. I wasn't sure if that was an indication of any personal identity shift so much as a practical acceptance of the realities of living an hour away

from the closest city. Not exactly many options when it came to qualified hair colorists near a five-hundred-acre farm.

I paused, then said delicately, “Are you having those dreams again?”

She looked at me. “Who told you about that?”

—

In the dreams, Shannon stood on the nearby hillside, watching the farm burn to the ground. The house, the chicken coop, the gardens: all aflame. Car-size balls of fire raining down from the violet heavens. As the fire spread across the fields, she would run—or try to run—while the barn collapsed, the animals screaming in the rubble. Sometimes she could see us in the distance, waving to her. Saying something. And sometimes—when the dream lasted this long—she could see beams of light shooting down from the heavens, shining grace onto my children and Caleb and me. Saving everyone but her.

—

“Nanny Louise is worried about you,” I said—which was more diplomatic, I thought, than *Nanny Louise is sick of being startled awake in the middle of the night by screaming.* All our farm employees lived in a set of rooms above the stables, next to the homeschooling classroom.

“I’m fine,” Shannon said. “It’s no big deal.” She leaned past me to plug in a battery charger. For a moment, we were silent, standing side by side in the small corner of the house where we spent nearly all our waking hours together.

—

You might just have the most beloved kitchen in America, these days. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

“Oh, gosh—where do I even start?”

Through the camera's discerning eye, the cooking space was perfectly cluttered: a half-filled mason jar of water here, a flour spill there, a few forgotten flower stems strewn across a worn-looking cutting board. It looked like a space where a mother worked; like a kitchen in the real world, only obviously better than anything the real world had to offer. People think they want minimalism, they think they want a house absent of stuff, when in fact a perfectly uncluttered home makes them want to kill themselves. A space must always look lived-in for someone to want to live in it. This is a completely obvious notion, when you take a moment to really think about it, but most people don't take a moment to really think about anything. Most people are morons.

Another bonus of this area of the kitchen was that it was right next to a long row of windows, so the light, once the sun rose, was a perfect soft-bright at any hour of the day. Just standing near that kitchen corner made me look and feel a good six years younger. God-given plastic surgery, I called it privately, though I wouldn't dream of saying something like that online. The Angry Women would eat me alive.

—

Have you ever had any work done?

Laugh, laugh, laugh.

"*God,* no. I'm sorry, no offense to others who *have,* but me? Personally? I would never."

—

Shannon was looking blankly at the windows now, which seemed on these early winter mornings to offer a portal into a world shrouded in black. I knew she was thinking about the dreams. It was clear she didn't even have an inkling of an idea of what they meant. How could she be so dense? God was clearly trying to reach her, in about as direct a way as He could, He was sending smoke signals and carrier pigeons and writing messages to her in the sky, and she was ignoring all of it. She'd probably schedule a call with

some scam-artist dream interpreter before she even considered that her brain might be offering her a nonmetaphorical insight. It was a shame to watch her totally bypass revelation, but not exactly surprising. Shannon's partially Barnard-educated brain was a blunt instrument, secular and smooth; it was about as suited a tool for speaking directly with God as a pair of rubber spatulas were for open-heart surgery.

And why might the Lord want to reach Shannon so badly?

Well. Shannon had misbehaved.

—

Shannon looked up at me, and our eyes locked. My cheeks flushed for having been caught staring at her with such an openly judgmental look on my face. "By the way," she said, "my new phone arrived today. Thanks, again, for letting me do the rush shipping option."

"Of course." One of the children had dropped Shannon's phone into a puddle, apparently, a week earlier. And because I was such a good boss, I'd remedied it immediately, handing her the company card to order a new one along with a little lighthearted joke: *Wouldn't want you to be stuck out here without access to the real world!*

"Weren't you going to wear the purple apron today?"

"Ah!" I said, and laughed. "Whoops! Pregnancy brain." I hated that phrase, *pregnancy brain,* but it was an excellent way to sound relatable. The apron I was wearing was a dark navy. We were using these videos to announce a new shade option for the aprons on our online store ($35.99, 100 percent cotton, buttons made of recycled plastic, made in Spain). "I'll go get it now."

As I left the kitchen, Nanny Aimee walked in with my toddler, Junebug. Jessa got up from the table, her glass empty now, and trailed whimsically after me like a dandelion puff. She grabbed Junebug's hand as she passed, and soon both nannies were calling plaintively after the little girls as they followed me up the stairs.

"It's fine," I called over my shoulder. "They can come with me."

It was a particularly special gift from our Creator that we had been blessed with three girls in a row. All children were gifts from God, of course, but *groups of girls,* little jewelry sets of two and three? That was something else altogether. A girl was lovely, a boy was nice, but *girls, plural,* were rainbows and fluff, personified. Radiant balls of delight. Such community-oriented creatures; with the addition of each new little lady to their little-lady tribe, they all seemed to grow a little taller, glow a little brighter. They carried each other like dolls. They braided each other's hair. They picked and preened and poked at one another with motherly obsession.

The boys would keep us fed when we were old and feeble, I liked to say, but the girls? They would dance around our wheelchairs, toss rose petals over our graves. Plus, I'll admit it: they were easier to train. The boys occasionally resisted or got frustrated or bored, but not the girls. They could perform on film for hours without complaint, just like their mama.

"Mom."

I winced instinctually, then rearranged my expression into softness. "Yes, honey?" I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, fixing the new apron, and my eldest daughter, Clementine, was standing in the doorway. She had turned twelve over the summer and promptly stopped calling me *Mama* a few days after. It made my eye twitch each time I heard her say *Mom;* I hated the word. It was such an ugly sound, so short and masculine, far much less musical than my preferred alternative. I didn't fight it, though. Clementine was a preteen, which meant she was testing me. The worst thing I could do would be to push back.

I watched through the mirror as Clementine crossed the room and sat next to the girls on my bed. "What does tradwife mean?"

Record scratch. "Who said that word to you?"

"What? Is it bad?"

"Tradwife," Jessa said, and giggled. She threw her head back and said it again. "*Traaaaadwife!*"

It almost seemed possible Clementine might hear the mechanical clicks of my brain as it whirred into warp speed, sorting through five hundred

possible answers to that question. My eldest daughter was like me, not just in likeness but in disposition, too: she held her intelligence like a knife behind her back. Now that she was creeping toward womanhood, I found our similarities a bit unnerving. Like watching a clone of myself walk slowly toward me from a faraway point in the distance: What would happen when she arrived?

I'm aware this isn't the kind of thing you're meant to feel about your own daughter. But motherhood is its own kind of curation. Which is to say: every woman I know lied to me about what it would be like, before I became one myself.

—

If your children became influencers someday, would you be proud of them?

"I just want my kids to be happy."

Big gummy smile.

—

I opted for casual ambivalence. The worst thing you can ever do is let a child know you care. "I know that *trad* is short for traditional. Some people call women like me a traditional wife. For obvious reasons."

By some people, I meant the Angry Women. The Angry Women were the ones who called me a tradwife, who said *trad* like it was short for something evil, like *traditional* wasn't a fine word in any sane person's universe. But these women were not sane, nor were they happy, nor were they big believers in personal accountability. Instead of asking themselves why they spent so much of their precious time on Earth scrolling through other people's lives when they could be making their own home-cooked meals, or even offering eye contact to their own children—instead of asking themselves why they spent so much time bathing in their own rancid jealousy when they could be building their own lives into something they were proud of—they were apparently far more interested in drinking a bottle of wine each night and typing their little hearts out in online chat

rooms about me. I suppose I'm assuming that these women were winos, but judging by the number of typos riddled throughout each of their messages, I'd call it an evidence-based assumption. Tradwives were *ruuning* the country by staying married *2there* husbands, apparently. Tradwives were *destoryin* America because they actually liked spending time with their *cildrn.*

To which I would comment, in one of the six rotating anonymous burner accounts I used online: Oh my goodness, heaven forbid!

Before these women called me a tradwife, they had called me a religious zealot, a cult leader, a breeder. Compared to those names, tradwife seemed mild.

"I don't personally think celebrating traditions is bad," I said. "Do you?"

The two littles shook their heads. *No, Mama. We love you, Mama.* But Clementine just stared at me. "So you're saying you are one?"

I felt, suddenly, like I was being deposed for a lawsuit. "Clementine, why don't you just tell me who told you I was a tradwife?"

"No one," Clementine said. In a flash, she was bored. "I was just asking a question. Jeez."

As she stood up, I faced my reflection again, busying myself with the apron bow. I wasn't smiling anymore. "Tell Nanny Louise to look at the weather forecast," I said to Clementine. "It might rain today. The children should wear boots."

Clementine didn't respond, and by the time I turned back around, she was gone.

Nannies. It had to be the nannies. They were constantly leaving their phones on countertops and couch cushions, no matter how many times I told them not to. It was an overwhelming task, protecting your child from the world. Jessa and Junebug were still so young, so impressionable—but Clementine? Practically a woman now. She couldn't be trusted.

—

Do your children enjoy being filmed?

"Oh! They love it."

—

The plan for this Content Day was to make a boule with my famous sourdough starter and to depict a Nativity scene on the dough with herbs I'd personally picked from our garden. This was, excuse the pun, my literal bread and butter. Plus, the holiday season always led to a major boom for our online store (Yesteryear Ranch Cherry Cutting Board, $120, made in Brazil; Yesteryear Ranch French Salt Blend, $45, made in France; Yesteryear Ranch patented indoor paint gallons in shades of Homestead, Pioneer, and Cowgirl, $80 per gallon, all made in America). The boule wasn't the main attraction so much as the gateway drug: Baby Lavender Jesus in a Rosemary manger, three wise Thyme sprig men, fa la la and the followers would click, click, click, until their hearts—and their online shopping carts—were full. They would beg—*they were always begging*—for more.

The herb boule took four hours. A standard amount of time, which would be clipped and snipped by Shannon into a thirty-second time lapse, my fingers spinning dizzily around the screen, packing and kneading and caressing a lump of pale dough. The second half of the day was Natural Dinner. I was going to make a traditional Sunday roast (*or should I say a trad Sunday roast?* I planned to write in the caption, with a winky face; that would really drive the Angry Women up a wall). All the ingredients would be sourced from our very own farm, except for the beef itself, which technically came from the supermarket on the other side of the mountain pass.

At some point in the early afternoon, we realized we were out of fresh eggs, so we decided to make a trip to the chicken coop. The sky and the mountains performed beautifully for us. I walked blissfully over to the coop, Jessa and Junebug clinging to my skirt as we mucked along in the

mud and said hello to our ladies, which is what I called the chickens whenever I was being filmed. *The ladies.*

"Hello, ladies," I sang out. "How are y'all doing today?"

Behind me, Shannon tripped on her video cord and swore loudly. "Sorry," she said, "can you do that part again?"

Of course I could. I could do any of it on command, a million times over, in a million variations of singsong. "Hello, ladies! How are y'all doing today?"

"Perfect. Let's move on to a shot of the egg pickup."

"I say," someone said from behind. "Is that Marilyn Monroe by the chicken coop?"

It might as well have been! I rolled my eyes and laughed, had a single moment to smooth my skirt and pray that Shannon was still filming before Caleb strode into the coop, grabbed me by the waist, and dipped me low. He kissed me while our daughters cheered. Then he lifted me back up, grinning as I slapped him playfully on the shoulder. "You got my boots all dirty!"

"Little dirt never killed anybody." He tipped his cowboy hat to me and winked.

I laughed and rolled my eyes again. "We're *filming,* Caleb."

As if he didn't know.

"Actually," Shannon said, "we're not. I paused right before Caleb spoke. So you guys are good. If you want to take a quick break, I can go have some coffee."

"Oh," I said, crestfallen. "Okay. Well, we don't actually have to—"

But Shannon was already trudging away with the camera, walking quickly toward the house.

Caleb patted my behind twice, gently. As we watched Shannon throw open the front door with an unnecessary amount of force, he said, "She still upset?"

A surge of emotion rolled through me.

"Yes, Caleb. She's still upset."

"Well. She'll feel better soon. When we—"

I looked at him, and he fell silent. "You don't understand women at all."

He was about to reply, and I was about to cut him off with an even sharper statement, and then both of us seemed to realize at the exact same time that we were being watched.

Jessa, Junebug. Little girls, sweet things, peering up at us. Watching, always. Where the hell was Nanny Aimee?

No matter. It was good practice, anyway. That was what I told myself when I found myself under surveillance by a child who should've been under surveillance by someone else: *It's good practice!* A flawless performance, after all, does not arrive overnight. It takes years—and years, and years—of practice.

I leaned forward on tiptoes and kissed Caleb twice in quick succession. "Get back to work, cowboy." The girls laughed and clapped, and I flushed from the reward. Caleb tipped his hat to the three of us and strode back toward the barn, where he would probably spend an hour or two messing around with the organization of some hay bales. Caleb was very good at keeping himself busy. He was also very good at only ever doing the farm chores that he actually enjoyed: milking Sassafras, driving the big John Deere tractor around in tight donuts in the pastures, staying up all night with a laboring sow. As for the chores he didn't enjoy—cleaning, planting, picking, mucking out the stalls—he left all that to the ranch hands.

—

Hold on. You have ranch hands, too?

Pause.

"Did I not mention those before?"

Shit. Consider mentioning pregnancy brain.

"We have two or three, usually. Just seasonal work. Depending on what's going on at the farm. We need as much help as we can get!"

But why didn't you—

"Pregnancy brain!"

—

The filming for Natural Dinner ran late. All throughout the house, moods went sour. Shannon and I started bickering over how to do the overhead filming, and then our bickering wasted ten precious minutes of afternoon light, causing us to rush, which then led to further bickering, then the older kids' homeschooling lesson ended fifteen minutes earlier than usual because Nanny Louise apparently didn't feel like providing a comprehensive education for the day, and all of a sudden the kitchen was filled with incessant whining, the boys arguing with Clementine about what to play before dinner, and the nannies—who were, the agency had assured us, the absolute cream of the crop, but sometimes made me feel like I was paying full-time prices for part-time work—were just sitting there on the couch scrolling on their phones while a world war was waged over the tiny Scottie dog game piece in the Monopoly set. (The only board game allowed in our house, by explicit demand of my father-in-law. It was important, Doug said, for children to learn the value of a free market as soon as possible.)

The nannies. Oh, the nannies! They tended to veer toward uselessness during this time of the day. From Nanny Aimee, I expected as much. She was a dumb girl from Los Angeles with a perfectly symmetrical face, capable of keeping the kids alive, and not much else. But from Nanny Louise, who was five years older than Nanny Aimee and had a master's degree in education, I expected more. She was like family to us.

—

Did you just say your nannies are like family?

Silence.

I'm sure you can understand that there's a long and controversial history of white women calling the people who worked for them "family."

Longer pause. Soft, knowing smile.

No. That's not right.

Soft, *unknowing* smile.

Better.

“Next question, please!”

—

“Ladies, can I speak with you for a moment?”

The nannies looked up from their phones.

“Clementine has been using someone’s phone unsupervised,” I said. “She asked me what a tradwife is today.”

“Well,” Nanny Aimee said, then paused.

I trained my smile on her. “What?”

“I mean.”

Another pause. She looked like a Muppet with a gummed-up jaw. I resisted the urge to step forward and work her mouth open myself.

“We’ll be more careful moving forward,” Nanny Louise said. She gave Nanny Aimee a sharp look, the visual equivalent of a kick beneath the table, and Nanny Aimee nodded. “Yep,” she said. “Won’t happen again.”

I took a deep breath, sighed my anger out. “Can you both handle dinner prep tonight? I was thinking about making a little trip to Target.”

In my periphery, Clementine perked up.

Right on cue.

—

It was a rare gift of decadence, when I took the girls with me to the Super Target thirty minutes away. At the Starbucks inside the store, Clementine ordered a Frappuccino with extra whipped cream, and I bit my lip about having so much caffeine and sugar this late in the day. I got Jessa and Junebug each a cake pop and an apple juice, and then a nonfat decaf cappuccino with oat milk for myself. I tried to limit these trips to once a month; usually Nanny Aimee went out to pick up our groceries for us. But it was nice, even for me, to come here occasionally and float along beneath the mind-numbing fluorescence—though I will say it amazed me that so many people came here on a weekly basis. Spending more than thirty minutes at Target made me feel like I was nursing a cavity.

As I pushed the cart slowly down the main aisle, the girls trotted forward and behind me in haphazard loops, hopping from distraction to delightful distraction. The jewelry stands. The clothing racks. The shelves of body lotion in colorful packaging, tangerine and persimmon and bubblegum pink. *See how good the little things can feel, girls? See how thrilling a sugar high can be if you choose it consciously, after so many days of careful—*

"Natalie?"

I paused, looked around. Pretended to be confused, when really I was thinking, *Oh, Jesus Christ. Not you.*

Vanessa and I had gone to high school together. She'd been on the track team too but had made varsity only her senior year, so we hadn't spent much time together. She was in nursing scrubs now, standing by two overflowing shopping carts, her preteen daughter glowering behind her with the same expression of profound disappointment that Vanessa had worn at every track meet. I glanced at the cart closest to me. Disposable razors, disposable tissue boxes, a half dozen slices of chemical-bloated ham wrapped in three layers of plastic. I could practically smell the stink of the landfill where all this stuff, all these products designed to be trash, would end up a month from now. Then I looked back at Vanessa, who was now frowning at me with the same sour expression as her daughter, and my heart softened with nostalgia. *Poor thing.* She'd never won a race in her life.

"It's so good to see you!" I said. "It's been, what—a decade?"

She sniffed, looked at my empty cart. "I didn't know you came to Target."

"Of course I do. I'm human, aren't I?" I turned my grin to her daughter. "And who is this?"

Vanessa looked at her own daughter with a strange expression, like she was trying to see what she looked like through my eyes. "This is Zoe."

Zoe looked to be a few years younger than Clementine. If she recognized her own name, she didn't show it. She just stared at me, her expression a springboard of tight misery.

"And those ones, I'm guessing, are yours?"

I followed Vanessa's gaze to see Clementine crouched in the aisle ahead, flipping through a picture book while the little girls peered eagerly over her shoulder. A flush of pleasure ran through me, stronger than any artificial sugar high. "Yes. Those are my girls. The oldest is Clementine, and the younger ones are Jessa and Junebug."

When I turned back to Vanessa, she was smirking. When was the last time I'd seen a grown woman smirk? "You know, I really admire your commitment to the olden days with those names."

My smile shrank by an inch. *Here we go.*

Vanessa had grown up in a strict, devout family, much stricter and more devout than my own, but she'd since emancipated herself from her parents, and now liked to write long-winded diatribes about her *terrible upbringing* via Facebook statuses that garnered, on average, three to five likes a pop. Vanessa wanted the world to know she was modern, now. She'd changed. She ate organic! (*Except when she got her groceries at Target, apparently!*) Self-proclaimed progressive women like Vanessa were chemically addicted to hating women like me. I knew that. I knew this woman got embarrassingly drunk at family parties and pulled up my Instagram page, showing anyone stupid enough to walk past that *she knew this woman personally, she knew her in high school,* before launching into some recycled slur of a speech about how all traditional people are idiots, all religious people are idiots, all people who choose to live a different lifestyle than hers are idiots, idiots, idiots, when what she really wanted to say was *I am so nauseatingly jealous of this woman I used to know that I think it might actually kill me.*

Women like Vanessa, with their expensive latex foreheads and their *I'm with her* bumper stickers? They didn't know what they wanted. They couldn't possess a truly principled stance even if someone injected it straight into their faces. Lord knows they couldn't take responsibility for their own lives, so they blamed their unhappiness on me. The dumb, ignorant, backward-thinking tradwife. Never mind the fact that I graduated in the top three of my high school. Never mind that I got straight A's at Harvard, studying global religious history while Vanessa ping-ponged her

way through the rooms of the club rugby house at Michigan. (Yes, I'll admit: I checked in on her Instagram from time to time, too.) Never mind the fact that I lived my life *actually adhering* to all the principles they loved to virtue blast on Instagram. *Eat local! Support small businesses! Reduce waste!*

The Angry Women could say what they wanted, but facts were facts. I was a woman of principles. A woman *defined* by principles. No amount of money in the world could've gotten me to take a nibble of the cancerous ham in that Tetris-packed cart. No amount of smooth-brained social acceptance could've gotten me to name my daughter something so toothlessly trendy—something that so desperately shouted *pick me*—as Zoe.

Cunt.

Sorry, Lord. My anger was getting the best of me, these days. It was a problem that needed to be fixed, and I planned—I really did!—to fix it. If I'd had a little more time, I swear I would've fixed it.

"It's wonderful to see you," I said smoothly. "You should bring the kids over to the farm sometime!" I peered down at Vanessa's sullen ogre of a daughter. "I bet you'd love to see where ham comes from, wouldn't you?"

Vanessa let out a tiny moan. As intimate and shameful as an accidental fart in mixed company. Her face turned a bright shade of pink. I knew it was the kind of threaded offer that would catch in her molars. She would know the offer was half-hearted but still consider the possibility anyways, because Vanessa probably wanted to see my picturesque little farm in person more than she wanted anything else in her life. The chickens, *my ladies.* The big red barn, which photographed so beautifully in any kind of light. The gardens, oh, the gardens! The pseudo-erotic fantasy of us baking my signature lemon zest cake together, the two of us laughing at some stupid thing, our children playing peaceably together in the background. None of it would ever happen, and yet: the idea of that impossible day would sit there, growing bacteria in the back of her throat, for the next week or month or year. A profoundly humiliating desire, as strong and confusing and animal as the ones that inspired her to watch lesbian porn on low

volume while her husband was sleeping next to her. (She was definitely the kind of woman who watched lesbian porn on low volume while her husband was sleeping next to her.)

Grind away, Vanessa, I thought, smiling beatifically. *Go ahead. Give yourself a migraine thinking about me.* A notion so pleasurable it was worth the guilt that came wrapped up inside it, like a penny candy. She would think about my famous little farm for a year, and then she would bite the bullet and order one of my branded Dutch oven sets ($250, made in Taiwan), and she would mail it to a friend's house, one whose name I didn't recognize, so that I never found out that she personally gave me money. That's how much this woman hated me. That's how much she hated herself.

"Say you'll come sometime," I said one last time, smiling wide. "Please, just say it."

"Thanks," Vanessa said shortly. "I will." She looked like she'd swallowed a bottle of Advil. I beamed in reply.

We said a few more pointless things, long enough for Vanessa to take a few more obvious glances at my body (noticing, no doubt, that the skirt hanging loose around my hips was the very same one I'd worn in school a decade earlier) and long enough for me to pointedly ignore her body altogether (do I even have to say it?). We said goodbye. As I turned the corner with my girls, Vanessa threw a middle finger at my back. I didn't *see* her do it, but I felt her do it. I swear I did. And who could blame her? I had the life she always wanted, the life she *still* wanted but could no longer admit. Vanessa was liberated, sure—but I was happy. And it was such a shame, wasn't it? The way some women so willingly compromised every ounce of themselves in the name of building a life for themselves that they didn't enjoy.

I passed Vanessa once more at the checkout line and gave a cheerful wave, but she didn't see me. She was bickering with her daughter over something in the cart. By this point, I'd regained my composure and felt nothing but pity for her again.

—

What do your friends think of your success online?

"They're happy for me. Why wouldn't they be?"

—

Pity. I pitied her.

But also: *fuck her.*

Sorry, Lord, but really, fuck her—

—

By the time we reached the car, it was dark out and I was practically spitting with fury. Vanessa, that *bitch,* was undoubtedly going to run home to post about me in one of those stupid snarky online forums—bet you didn't think someone like Natalie would shop at Target!!!—and then I would have to suffer a whole week of *online commentary,* and Shannon! The nerve! The absolute unbelievable nerve of that spoiled uneducated morally bankrupt little son of a—

Breathe, Natalie. Just breathe.

Clementine was in the back, buckling the girls into their car seats. I sat in the driver's seat, staring straight ahead, my hands flexed tightly on the steering wheel. I glanced down at my phone on the console. My temper settled.

Yes. That would be nice. I could share the moment myself and take the wind right out of Vanessa's stupid little sails.

I picked up the phone and pressed record, right as Clementine was getting into the passenger seat. "Girls," I said, smiling into the lit-up screen, "what did you get at our *very special* trip to Target today?"

Jessa and Junebug squealed in response:

"A stuffie!"

"Sparkly lotion!"

"What about you, Clementine?"

I angled the camera so it featured me, grinning, and Clementine's form in the passenger seat. Clementine had gotten a new shade of nail polish. But

she didn’t reply. She was facing away from me. “*Clementine*, what did you get at—”

“Stop filming me.”

I froze. My face flooded with heat.

She’d never done that before. Not once.

I glanced quickly in the rearview mirror: Jessa was playing with a bracelet on Junebug’s wrist, Junebug babbling quietly about the new stuffed animal. I pressed the button to stop recording and set the phone face down in my lap. My hands were shaking. I threw the car into drive and we rolled toward the parking lot exit.

“I didn’t know you were unhappy being filmed, Clementine,” I said as we rolled onto the quiet mountain highway toward home. “I’ve always told you to tell me if you felt that way. Haven’t I?”

I hadn’t.

Clementine rested her forehead against the window. “I’m telling you now.”

“Fair enough,” I said. None of the girls were looking at me anymore, and yet for some reason I was smiling. *Stop it*, I told myself sharply. *Stop smiling like that.* But I couldn’t. I didn’t.

—

When it comes to consent, do you think children are capable of—

“Oh, please.”

Pause.

Can I finish my question?

Longer pause.

“Yes. Of course.”

When it comes to consent and the use of children’s likenesses on public social media accounts—

“Actually, I need to take a quick break to use the restroom. Would that be all right?”

—

Later that night, Caleb walked into our bedroom and said, “I spoke to my dad again today.”

“Oh?” I was reading my emails, mass-deleting spam messages, while the nannies got the children ready for bed. At that moment, a new email pinged my inbox. It was from Shannon. The subject line read: formal resignation

I paused. Stared at the subject line for a few moments. Then I clicked on it.

> Natalie,
>
> I’m writing to let you know that I won’t be working for you any longer. Between what happened over the summer and all the nightmares, it’s clear that this job isn’t good for my mental health any longer. I’ve got a bus ticket for later tonight. I don’t need a ride; Nanny Aimee is going to drive me to the station.
>
> For what it’s worth: I don’t think you’re a bad person. I think you’re just confused.
>
> Please tell the kids I love them.
> Shannon
>
> P.S. I’m sorry for screwing up your content calendar.

“Natalie? *Helloooo*, anyone there?”

“Sorry,” I said, “I just—I need to look at something quickly. Give me one sec.”

I read the email a second time, then a third. Then I looked at Caleb. “What were you saying?”

“Is everything okay?”

I laughed a bit too brightly. “Just silly publicity emails. Now, *please*, I’m all ears: tell me about your father.”

“Well,” he said. He paused dramatically. *Drumroll, please.* “He thinks that now’s the time.”

I nodded impatiently—I already knew what he was going to say—before remembering this was meant to be the grand reveal. *Play along*,

Natalie. Say your lines. “Now’s the time for what, darling?”

I knew exactly what was coming. In fact I had seen *all* this coming—my father-in-law’s political push for Caleb, Shannon’s letter of resignation—had arguably orchestrated it myself, but still, I found myself unaccountably shocked that it was finally happening. *Here we go. The dominoes are starting to fall.* And yet: how dare she! I suppose it was the tone of the email that got under my skin, more than the email itself. Such faux maturity. Dripping with unearned condescension. Exactly the kind of letter you would expect from a twenty-one-year-old. Exactly the kind of letter I would’ve expected from Shannon in particular, that lost little lamb, that stupid little bitch.

Sorry, Lord. Sorry, sorry, sorry.

“Now’s the time to run,” Caleb said. “For office.”

“Oh my gosh. Wow.”

Caleb’s father wasn’t just a senator. He was a bona fide political icon. He’d been in office for four decades, running uncontested every six years. He was a war veteran, a family values traditionalist, the kind of guy people described with abject sincerity as a *real-life John Wayne.* They weren’t wrong. Doug Mills was broad-shouldered and confident. The ultimate patriarch. Nearly every comment he made to another man was accompanied by a hearty clap on the shoulder. He was, if the polling was even remotely accurate, about to become the next president of the United States. He was also my closest ally. What my father-in-law and I both knew: there was no *otherwise.* There was only this plan, a very delicate one, in which two variables—my producer, my husband—were taken care of in one fell swoop.

—

Final question, Mrs. Heller Mills: Would you like to comment on these horrific allegations of assault at Yesteryear Ranch?

“Unfortunately, I can’t comment on an ongoing legal investigation.”

—

I would just like to pause here and say: another woman would have cracked years ago.

—

I don't think you're a bad person.

A bold thing to say to the wife of the man you've been fucking. That was the word I was looking for: *bold*. The whole email was so hair-raisingly bold that it might have caused another, lesser woman to have a complete nervous breakdown, to throw her phone across the room, to hiss at her stupid, useless, can't-keep-his-dick-in-his-pants husband, *Look what you've done.* Not me. As I stared at my philandering moron of a husband, I gave myself a mental pat on the back for all the work I'd done over the years to harden myself against the world. We were facing down the barrel of our first PR disaster. I could already see the headlines: *Allegations Roil Insta-Famous Family.* Even worse: *Is Natalie Heller Mills a Cult Leader? Former Producer Speaks Out.*

Would a headline like that ruin a nascent political career? Assuredly not. America didn't care one iota about morality when it came to politicians. If anything, we expected them to be a little sleazy. It might improve the odds for my coddled husband in the heartland. Might even give me a boost in followers, too. *That poor pregnant woman, doing her best to keep her family together.* Really, if you think about it: this whole situation would make for a hell of an Instagram post.

But I was getting ahead of myself. There was no need to think about that now. No need, even, to tell Caleb about the email just yet. This was not the kind of thing my husband was capable of dealing with. Not the kind of thing he—who, despite his best efforts, still wore his masculinity so roughly and unnaturally, as if it were an ill-fitting sweater I'd forced over his head—would be able to fix. If he knew, he'd only make it worse. He'd do

something completely idiotic like drive to the bus stop and beg for forgiveness from Shannon in front of a crowd of strangers.

“I think it’s a great idea,” I said, exactly like I’d practiced. “I bet you’ll be president one day. Just like your dad.”

Caleb’s face lit up in relief. He would never admit it, he’d spent half his life running away from it, but this was the only thing he’d ever truly wanted: to be just like dear old Dad.

“Now,” I said, “let’s pray on it.”

We kneeled together at the foot of the couch. I pressed my forehead into my clasped hands and tried to breathe the anger out of me, but I couldn’t. It was like a germ. It just kept replicating in my stomach. Usually my husband’s failures were easy to forgive, but tonight I wanted to kill him. I could practically see his insipid prayers float past me, in little Comic Sans thought bubbles. *Please keep my kids safe, Lord, along with the chickens. Help my wife continue to love me. A blow job would be nice, Lord, and if it’s not too much, I’d like the strength to become something memorable. I’d like to become a legend.*

All men wanted to become legends. It was so embarrassing.

And what did I want? An easy answer. I wanted more of what I already had. I wanted the whole entire world to see itself through my eyes. A new level of influence. That’s not the kind of thing you ask for directly, though, so I settled for something simpler.

Please let this plan work, Lord. Please don’t let her win. And please give my husband a spine. I’m tired of him needing to borrow mine.

Amen.

PART TWO

THE PRESENT

1

WAS IT A DAY, a week, a month?

What I know is this: I wake one morning and think, *Jesus fucking Christ, it's cold.*

Then: *Sorry, Lord.*

Cussing like some scummy teenager is not the ideal way to start a day. Still: it *is* cold. Colder than usual.

And darker than usual?

Calm yourself, Natalie. A little cold never hurt anybody.

When my sister and I were little, it was a Christmas Eve tradition for my mother to tell us stories about our ancestors, how they came to America through Ellis Island, then crossed the West on horse and buggy, laying stake to the most fertile land they could find. "The days of yesteryear were not for the faint of heart," my mother would drone on, a distant, romantic look in her eye. "Think how *brave* your great-great-great-grandparents had to be. Imagine facing down Indians with arrows. Defending your cattle from wolves. Catching fish straight from the stream. Drinking milk straight from the udder. Imagine, girls, trying to stay alive through the coldest, longest, darkest winters you can imagine, without even the dream of electricity to keep you warm."

I'd started doing that with my own children, too. Talking about the olden days as if they were something I could speak to, when the truth was I'd never been truly cold a day in my life.

Until now.

The power is definitely out. Why isn't the generator kicking on?

Relax.

But I can't. My thoughts are flowing quickly. I'm wide awake from the cold, making a quick mental list of the handymen we could call to fix the power, of whom I could possibly blame for this mishap—*I should investigate the warranty on the generator, it's only five years old*—and then finally I remind myself again to *stop, Natalie, breathe.* This is not the right time in the day to be thinking about chores. It's the time of day to ground my thoughts in spiritual gratitude; to center myself before the blessed chaos of another day.

I give a little shiver-shake of my head, try to start again.

Thank you, Father, for Caleb. Thank you for the Inheritance. Thank you for Clementine, Samuel, Stetson—

I reach for our comforter to pull it tighter around me. Then I freeze.

This is not my comforter. My fingers are not clutching the flannel-linen hybrid duvet I bought the previous summer. Instead, I'm shivering beneath a stiff, thin quilt. Cautiously, I pull a hand out from under the covers and run my fingers across the surface, feeling what appear to be the thick tracings of hand-knitted designs. The first snake of fear slithers through me. "Caleb," I whisper.

No response.

If my body's clock is correct—and it always has been, every single day of my life—then it's near-exactly six in the morning. Surely Caleb is already up and out at the barn, performing the daily milking. Surely this unrecognizable quilt is just some rag from the linen closet that the cleaner chose to use until our normal duvet was clean.

So why hasn't my alarm gone off yet?

Panic seizes me. I lurch for the bedside table, where I leave my phone to charge each night. My hands slap air instead of smooth walnut. I fall out of the bed and onto the floor, knees cracking painfully against the hardwood. I cry out in the darkness, then clap a hand over my mouth, suddenly terrified of making a noise.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

This time, I don’t pause to apologize to the Lord. There’s no time to apologize. Slick-knived thoughts are running through my brain, each one making me gasp a little in the refrigerated quiet.

I’ve been abducted.

Kidnapped.

Someone must be here with me.

Someone is going to kill me.

I’m too young to die.

Too beautiful to die.

It’s always the young, beautiful ones who die.

Right as I’m about to pass out from fright, I hear something familiar: a ripple of children’s laughter.

I pause. Cock my head at the sound.

More laughter. Multiple children. Little girls, it sounds like. *My girls?* Then there’s another whisper, an older voice, shushing them sternly.

Clementine? Is that you?

Then: another bright peal of laughter. A decade’s worth of motherhood places that voice at four years old, maybe five.

Jessa? Junebug?

I move into a sitting position on the floor, stare in the direction of the sound. Slowly my eyes adjust to the darkness. Soon I can see the faint outline of a door.

Speak, I tell myself. *Say something.* “Hello? Is anyone there?”

There’s an immediate reply from the other room. “Mama, we’re having breakfast!”

A current of queasy relief flows through me. I stand up, ignoring all the sensory information my feet are screaming upward to my brain—*this frigid, knotted, lumpy floor is not your Brazilian-imported hardwood*—and walk toward the sound, trailing my fingers along the wall until I reach the door and find the doorknob, *my doorknob,* in the black.

I open the door, exposing the dark hallway.

This is my doorknob and that was my quilt and this is my house. It’s cold because there was a storm and the power went out. Things feel different

because it's dark and you're afraid, and everything feels different in the dark when you're afraid.

I march forward through the hallway, which is dark but not as dark as the bedroom. I move quickly, trusting my instinctual knowledge of this house. I've spent so many evenings awake in the middle of the night in this home, so brain-dead and exhausted from round-the-clock breastfeeding that I might as well have been the actual walking dead. I know this house like I know myself. And with each correctly placed step, I become more relieved, and I walk a little faster. *What a strange way to wake up,* I think with a rising happiness. *What a terrible dream.* As I make the final steps before the turn into the kitchen, I think about how this would make for a good video later on in the day. *Afternoon, y'all. Had the weirdest experience this morning, I'm sure all you hardworking mamas will understand…*

I turn the corner and step into the warm light of the kitchen and stop short.

This is my home.

This is not my home.

I'm looking at my kitchen, which is also somehow not my kitchen. The size and layout and decorations are near-exactly the same—the same dining table, the same chairs, the same wooden countertops—but the floorboards are wider and uneven, and there are no overhead lights. No light whatsoever, I realize slowly, except for the fireplace. In my house, the kitchen fireplace is nonfunctional. In this house, the flames pop and crackle in the cold, providing the only light in the room. Illuminating the others.

Sitting by the fire are my children, who are also not my children.

Four of them. Two girls, two boys, all wearing raggedy-looking clothes that remind me of a pioneer reenactment. The oldest, a dark-eyed girl, who looks to be a teenager. Hair pinned and plaited. She's like Clementine, but not Clementine. She's also the only one who isn't looking directly at me. She's braiding the little girl's head with perfect, unyielding focus.

All these children look like they could be my children. None of them are my actual children.

I take one step back, then another. A floorboard creaks beneath my feet.

The older girl’s eyes snap up and meet mine.

—

I know fear. I have, on more than one occasion in my life, felt it so powerfully as to be crippled by it.

A week before I was set to leave home for the first time to go to college, I was born again in my church. Right before the pastor dunked my head into the warm pool water, my knees buckled in fright. There it was, flooding through my body as the priest held me limply up by the armpits: a drowning sense of human inadequacy. A blank terror at what this world would become, if not for the saving grace He offered us. For those three seconds before I went underwater, I felt a complete and total clarity of how broken everything was. My life, my family, my country, my planet. We, all of humanity, were alone, weren’t we? Was He even coming to save us? Or were we abandoned, stuck on this forsaken rock, spinning dizzily through the black toward nothing?

Then I dropped beneath the water, and the fear fell away, and the warmth—the love—came tunneling through.

I felt fear again when I was giving birth for the first time. I was twenty years old, in the hospital, and the nurses were offering banal little platitudes I could just barely hear over the sound of my own panicked gasps: *You’re so strong, just a few more pushes now, you can do this, Mama—*

In the instant before my daughter came screaming into the world, I felt, for the second time in my life, a debilitating certainty of the wrongness of the situation. *Mama,* I thought, *who is Mama? I’m Natalie. My name is Natalie.* I was not ready to be a mother. I felt this certainty in the deepest parts of my body, and so it seemed inevitable that He would intervene before this mistake of parenthood developed further. *She’s going to come out blue.* Or maybe He was going to punish me in some other way: Caleb was going to slip and fall and hit his head on the corner of the bed, my mother was going to suffer a fatal car accident on the way to the hospital. *A trade must take place for this life to enter the world.* As my body slowly

halved open like a peach, I realized it was me who was losing my life; me who would vanish from the world to make room for this new child.

I will never be Natalie again. I will only ever be Mama.

For one single moment, I wished the child gone. Not just out of me, but out of this world. Erased. Then the room was filled with her bellowing, and the fear fell away, and the love—or something like it—came tunneling back through.

—

I thought I knew true fear. But this, what I'm feeling now, is not a fear I've ever known. The feeling inside me is big and black and bottomless. It feels like plummeting into Hell.

"Mama," the younger girl says. She's small and freckle-cheeked, one half of her head braided neatly, the other half long and bed-headed, swinging by her waist. I've never seen her before in my life, and yet she says it again, that sacred call. "Mama?"

She's the one who laughed, and then who called for me. I stare at her, nausea roiling my insides. She is of me, and not of me. So close, so similar, *and yet.* The dissonance sends my mind skittering out of control. I think of plastic dolls. I think of aliens, and skin suits. I think—*oh, God*—of my own children, taking off their own faces and handing them to strangers to wear like rubber masks. I let out a noise. It sounds like a moan, it feels like a gasp, and I finally think to say: "Who are you?"

The children look at one another.

"Mama," the young one says again.

My voice rises in pitch. "*Where am I?*"

"Uh-oh," a little boy says. Eight years old, maybe nine. He looks like my Samuel, my Stetson, but he's neither.

"It's us, of course," the older boy says. He looks to be about thirteen.

"Barn," the oldest girl says. She's looking at me, but her hands are working of their own volition, braiding the younger girl's head with a force

that makes my own scalp hurt. The little girl says nothing, just looks at me with big baby eyes while her head is yanked left, then right.

"*Go to the barn,*" the oldest girl says impatiently.

I stumble across the room to the front door. My hand is wrapped around the doorknob when I see something and freeze.

There, carved into the threshold of the front door, are notches and scribbles. Dozens of them. Names and numbers, positioned in a vertical line. A list. No—a record.

At the doorknob's height, a series of particularly clear markings: *MAEVE,* 1852; *MAEVE* 1853; *MAEVE,* 1854. Height measurements. Which means—which *can't possibly mean*—

I follow the line of measurements, gaze traveling uneasily upward. By the first pane of window: *NOAH, 1853*, then by the second pane: *ABEL, 1854.* And then, at exactly the level of my eyesight: a freshly notched entry.

MAMA, the carving reads. *1855.*

No. No no no no no no—

I rip open the door and step out onto the porch, stumbling down the stairs and taking a few steps into the darkness before I stop short. There it is again: a scene I recognize intimately, which slowly disintegrates into the uncanny. Like an evil sister of nostalgia. There's the big red barn, and the chicken coop, and the sloping road that disappears over the backside of a hill. There's the world I built for myself—poring over every blueprint, taking years to get it totally right—except, except, *except:* there are no driveway lights here. No lights above the entrance of the barn, either. Everything is bathed in shadows beneath the still-black sky. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I see how the barn looks old and worn and unloved. The roof has a deep bow. The chicken coop is not the thirty-thousand-dollar technological marvel we bought years earlier, with an automatic door that opens and closes at sunrise and sunset to protect the chickens from foxes and mountain lions and bears. Instead, it's a small shed with a thatched overhang. Even the chickens look different in the dim moonlight. Thinner. Less friendly.

Hello, ladies.

My body is so flooded with cortisol, I feel paralyzed.

Oh, God. Help me.

“Natalie.”

I spin around. A figure is standing by the barn, the barn that is both mine and not mine. He begins to walk toward me, and suddenly the moonlight illuminates his face.

It’s Caleb. Unlike the children, who look like waxy versions of my own, *this* is my husband, with the soft face and the plaid shirt and the puppy dog —

Eyes.

I step back. He stops walking. The two of us stand there, silent, about ten feet between us.

This man’s eyes are not my husband’s eyes. This man’s eyes are black and cold and dead. The more I look at him, the more unfamiliar he becomes. He’s Caleb, and then he’s a distant relative of Caleb’s, and then he’s a stranger, an older man, staring at me in the dead of night. Distantly, I register how cold I am. I look down at myself, take in the strange nightgown I’m wearing. A floral, cotton thing I’ve never seen before in my life.

“Natalie,” he says again.

I think about running. My legs don’t move.

Wake up, Natalie. It’s time to wake up.

“What’s happening?” I say. “Where am I?”

“Christ,” the man mutters. He rolls his eyes, then throws his hat to the ground, making me jump and sending a small puff of dust into the cold air. “You’re home, Natalie,” he says. “Now, for the love of God: get inside before you catch a chill.”

“Wh-who are you?”

“I’m your goddamn husband,” he snaps. “I’m Caleb.”

Maybe this is a dream. It’s illogical like a dream, it’s terrifying like a nightmare—but then if it’s happening in my head, why are my knees aching so horribly from the fall out of bed? Why can I feel my lungs heaving in my

chest, my terror vibrating through my body like something trapped and desperate to escape?

"Take me home. Whatever you want, I'll give it to you. I have money. Lots of it. You probably know that, don't you? Is that why you took me here? Do you want money?"

"Natalie—"

Something snaps in me. "Stop saying my name!"

He lets out an aggravated noise and begins to walk toward me again. "If you're going to start shouting like that—"

Finally, my nervous system shifts into drive. I break into a run.

As I fly down the road, I feel the whining strain of muscles gone soft, but I don't care. Now is not the time to worry about pulled muscles. Now is not the time to think about anything but flight. I sprint through the darkness, very distantly registering the pain in the soles of my feet as my skin is ripped apart by the gravel. Right as I begin to think ahead—whether the closest neighboring house is five miles away or eight, whether it would be smarter to run along the road, looking for a passing car, or to disappear into the woods—I trip and pitch forward and *oof*—

My body skids and rolls.

Just scrapes. Get up, Natalie. You can do this. Get up and run.

On the other side of my fear: shoes on gravel, coming closer.

I'm gasping and rolling on the ground, trying to find my center of gravity, trying to place my palms flat on the earth so I can push myself back up and keep running, but the night sky is so black it looks like dirt, and the dirt is so black it looks like outer space, and I keep grabbing at air, and the air is filled with dust, and my vision is rolling, and I think to myself, *Get up*, and I'm trying—*Lord*, *I am trying*—but I can't, I can't, I can't.

The footsteps disappear.

Silence.

I roll over onto my side, gasping, grabbing. Then I see the man standing a few feet away, watching me with a passive, unimpressed expression. Arms folded. "Get up," he says, echoing my thoughts.

Run, Natalie. Fight.

I turn onto my side and scream. I tell myself to say *help*, but I'm not sure if I do. The noise of my own voice is too loud in my ears to discern any words.

I see in my periphery the man drop to one knee. A fresh current of panic surges through me. He tries to gather me into his arms. I thrash my arms and legs. He leans forward and easily pins my arms down, then maneuvers my wrists so he's holding both in one grip, his other hand free. In an instant, without any conscious thought, I spit into his face. This shocks him. He stares at me, cheek glistening in the moonlight as I wriggle desperately beneath him.

"*Fuck you*," I snarl. The first time I've ever said that phrase aloud in my life.

The man wipes his face with the back of his sleeve. Then he says, "A good wife doesn't speak to her husband that way."

He rears back and slaps me so hard the whole world turns black.

2

I WAS SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD when I left my family for the first time. I was going to college in Boston. Harvard University. Remember what I said about being disciplined? Yeah. By the time I was twelve, I was practically running my weekly Sunday school lessons while the actual teacher—some neighborhood dad who reeked of booze and liked to hit on the girls in the confirmation class above us—slept off his hangover in the back. *Sharp as a tack,* my father used to say about me. *Be careful, or you might get pricked.* And then he would laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

That's all I remember about my father. He died when I was ten. At least that's what my mother told my sister and me to say when we moved to our new town in the southwestern corner of Idaho, four hours away from where we'd grown up. *Tell the teachers your father is no longer with us.* You had to give it to her with that rhetorical sleight of hand: she wasn't lying, she hadn't committed a sin, he was—technically!—no longer with us. With that phrase, my teachers would come to their own conclusions, and the conclusion would not be that Eliza Heller's husband had fled the state with a woman from his local bowling league.

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality…

Even at a young age, my mother's logic checked out to me. *Daddy's dead.* So sad! May he rest in peace, amen. My father was the kind of man who called a woman smart only when it worked as a beer-soaked punch line for his friends at a party. I'd be lying if I said I missed him, but I did what my mother said, because this was the world I was born into: a world where

good Christian women moonlighted as crisis managers for their good Christian men. The rules were laid out at Church service and Sunday school and over the dinner table each night: the job of a woman was threefold. Be a mother, be a wife, and keep the household clean. Oh—and don't forget to *smile*!

And so I came of age in a small mountain town, no grandparents or cousins to speak of, with a single mother who steadfastly refused the best efforts of other women in church to set her up on dates, since she was technically already married. By day, she was a secretary at a local law firm. By night, she crocheted baby sweaters, socks, and hats for the women in our neighborhood. Since the families in our church popped out five to nine children on average, business was always booming. The bills were always paid on time. My mother's carpal tunnel syndrome flared up monthly, but the pain, she said, was worth it for such a good American childhood. Even so, we were not the kind of household that could afford worldly luxuries like *tuition*—which is why, when the full-ride offer came in the mail, there was nothing my mother could say except, "Oh my."

It was surprising to my mother that I wouldn't want to go to the honors program at our state university. Surprising, more generally speaking, that I would want to venture outward into the world, when the world so clearly had lost its way. Out in the coastal cities, nuclear families were an endangered species. Children ran barefoot in the streets while their fathers philandered in third-floor walk-ups and their mothers smoked crack on the stoops. Some women didn't know they were women anymore. Some men didn't know they were men. The birth rate was plummeting. Humanity was self-immolating. The white race was going extinct.

These were the prayers my mother sent to the Lord each night while I packed for school down the hall: *Keep her safe, Lord. Lead her from temptation. Deliver her from evil. In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit—*

—

At the airport, my mother and sister hugged me goodbye.

"Don't do cocaine," my sister, Abigail, said fearfully. She was two years older than me, with a heart-shaped face, wide Bambi eyes, and a crumb of a diamond ring on her finger. She was engaged to her high school sweetheart, a pimple-faced corn dog of a young man with a bad temper. Bryce. Together they were enrolled at the local community college. Abigail had no intentions of ever leaving our hometown, or of reading a book that was written by someone whose name was not Paul or David or John.

"Remember, Nattie," my mother said, "just *remember* to be kind." Her expression was bright with piousness, almost oily with it. She kept glancing around at the other Idaho families in the ticketing area, nearly all of whom were dressed like us, in long prairie dresses with hair braided down their backs, and nearly all of whom were larger than us by a factor of two or three. Nearby, a woman led a line of eight children to the baggage drop, a fat stack of passports in her hands, an expression of beatific exhaustion on her face. My mother watched them pass, her face almost naked with regret. In our community, a family with only two children was suspiciously small. The opposite of blessed. Well, what could you do? *Her husband was no longer with us.*

"Everyone believes in something," she said, still watching the family. "You can reach anyone if you show them kindness."

"I know, Mother."

Her attention snapped back to me. "I'm serious, Nattie. *Be nice.*"

I swallowed a hiss. I didn't want to fight, but it was a low blow for her to end the goodbye on *this*, the greatest shame of both of our lives: I was not, and had never been, a very social girl. I was polite and well-mannered, I was reliable and hardworking and clever—*concerningly so*, my mother would say to women at church, when she thought I couldn't hear—but extroverted? Not so much. Friends? Technically none to speak of.

"It's not going to be a problem," I said. I meant it, though not in the way I knew she would take it. This was, secretly, why I was going to Boston: I was going to a school and a city where intellect would matter much more than being *likable.* Bostonians, as far as I could tell from what I'd read at

our desktop computer back home, were famously smart and famously uninterested in pleasantries. That kind of world was undoubtedly the one where I belonged.

I hugged my sister and mother one more time, then I gathered my bags and marched forward to the security line. As I inched along, I felt an urge to turn around and wave to my family one more time. But then I thought of Gomorrah, of what happens to women who look over their shoulders at the world they leave behind.

…the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah…Thus He overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

Don't look back, don't look back.

What happened to the women in the Bible who looked forward, though? What about them?

I couldn't remember, but there was something about the notion that felt instinctively wrong to me. It sniffed of greed and felt worryingly close to witchcraft.

Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them.…

Best not to take the risk. And so I found a seat at my departure gate and stared pointedly at the carpet, determined not to look forward or backward until the flight attendants called for my group number and the rest of my life began.

3

AFTER CALEB AND I bought the farm, we met with several architects and contractors to discuss a renovation. Most of them scratched their heads at our demands. The house on the property was from the late 1800s but had been fully renovated just a few years ago. The windows were new, the appliances were new, the roof and the light fixtures and the floors were new. And now we wanted to renovate it…again?

"You do realize this will cost half a million," the first architect said.

"You do realize the resale value will be cut in half," the first contractor said.

"Are you both completely insane?" the second, third, and fourth architects said.

"I want it to feel like stepping into a time machine," I kept repeating in every meeting. "I want it to feel *authentic*." ("Authentic to *what*?" one of the architects asked.) Then I would add the five most important words in any business meeting: "Money is not a concern."

The sixth man we spoke with was the one we decided to work with. He didn't try to talk us out of any of our plans, nor did he raise his eyebrows when I listed my requests: I wanted the dishwasher and microwave and all modern kitchen appliances to be hidden from view; I wanted a claw-foot tub absolutely dripping in natural light; I wanted wide-plank floors that felt like they'd been ripped straight out of the *Mayflower* herself. I wanted all the aesthetics of the olden times and all the amenities of modernity, and I wanted this seemingly irreconcilable set of desires to be somehow reconciled via a series of impeccable design decisions. As I spoke, this

contractor, an older man who'd worked for decades in the area, took notes prodigiously. At each of my requests, he would nod and say in a quiet monotone, "We can certainly do that, ma'am."

Right before the meeting ended, the contractor looked at me with a totally straight face and said, "Will you be wanting indoor toilets, ma'am, or would you prefer an outhouse?"

I laughed stiffly. "Indoor toilets are fine."

"Great." He shut his notebook and looked at us. "Let's build you two a time machine."

—

Welcome to the time machine.

I'm lying beneath the covers of that god-awful quilt, curled in the fetal position. I have no idea what time it is. I've woken from what felt less like a nap and more like anesthetized surgery. My left eye socket is pulsing in a steady throb. The skin on my palms, forearms, and legs stings horribly. My feet don't hurt so much as they feel unnervingly warm, swollen with blood. My brain, too, is ringing and spinning in a way that makes me wonder if I have a concussion.

Wake up, Natalie.

Mama, we're having breakfast.

Go to the barn.

A good wife doesn't speak to her husband that way.

Uh-oh.

It's us, of course.

I'm your goddamn husband.

MAMA, 1855.

It's hard to think right now. Literally. I can feel, actually *feel*, the muscular effort of conjuring thoughts, as if every word is a rock I must find and then pull from the mud.

It must have been that man who carried me back to bed after he knocked me unconscious. *Caleb,* allegedly. An older version of my Caleb.

Old Caleb. As I lie there on my side, I imagine him carrying me: touching my skin, tucking me into bed, doing God knows whatever else while I was passed out. It makes me want to vomit. Except it's unlikely that I'll *actually* vomit; my stomach is growling and whining.

I roll onto my side, wincing as my body lights up in ten different locations. It's not just the injuries. My body generally feels old and worn-out.

I pause. Blink slowly. Consider the parts of my body I can see readily. The backs of my hands, my forearms. It's hard to consider the state of my skin when my body is streaked with grime and dirt.

There are no mirrors in this room, no way to see my own reflection. No way to reassure myself that I am, in fact, my actual self. Amazing, the things a person can take for granted. I've never once paused to think about the sheer miracle that is a mirror. I've never once considered there might be a day when I would be desperate to see myself, only to realize I was lacking the necessary tools to do so.

I close my eyes, try to cool down my overheating brain.

Calm yourself, Natalie. Regroup. Think. Think!

My brain weakly oozes little darts of panic in response.

"Mama?"

I twitch at the sound. Lift my head off the pillow. *Ouch;* a headache pierces the back of my skull like a surgical needle.

There's that little girl, standing by the doorway. The same one who called for me earlier. She's wearing one of those strange pilgrim outfits, hair fully braided. My heart squeezes in a sort of heartsick revulsion, the kind I felt in the early days of postpartum with Clementine. That innate instinct to love a child, especially one who looks like you, coupled with the overwhelming desire to kill the needful thing, to bash its head in and run.

The girl moves inside the room, her little hand trailing the wall. "It's Maeve, Mama," she says shyly. "It's me."

"Maeve," I echo groggily, like some demented cavewoman. I love that name. It's always been on our list, ever since the very first child. With each of our girls, we considered Maeve but never found a soul who seemed to

fully fit the bill. This little girl, though, is a perfect Maeve. Soft and watchful and sweet.

I close my eyes. Paw roughly through my thoughts. Mumble, “Where am I, again?”

“Home,” she says immediately. She’s staring at the floor now. She looks upset, or maybe disappointed. Like she’s playing a game she doesn’t want to play.

A prickle of dread runs through me. A new thought rises to the surface, spiked with paranoia: *She was trained to answer these questions.*

“What day is it?”

She’s been slowly creeping along the wall toward me as we talk, in an incremental shuffle that feels less intentional than instinctual, like she’s magnetized by me. Like she loves me. Like I’m—my heart stutters a little bit—like I’m her mother.

She kicks softly at the nightstand, flicks her gaze toward me, flicks it away when our eyes meet. “Wednesday.”

My brain latches onto the information with such quick and immediate relief—*this is a word we know; this is a day of the week where we are from*—that it takes me a few moments to realize I can’t remember what my last day was back home.

What do I remember?

Such a simple question, and yet it feels impossible to answer.

I remember my mother and my sister. I remember marrying Caleb, I remember giving birth. I remember the email from Shannon. For the record, I don’t think you’re a bad person. Oh, and that hopeful look on my husband’s face when he said, *It’s time to run*—

“Your eye, Mama,” Maeve says. She’s by the bed now. She hesitates, then steps closer, bringing a hand to my swollen face. I flinch and close my eyes, preparing for the shudder of pain. When nothing happens, I open my eyes. Her finger is hovering above my skin. She knows what a bruise is. She doesn’t want to hurt me. “Hungry, Mama?”

My stomach rumbles in response. “Yes,” I admit. “Very.”

“Come to the kitchen. Come have a biscuit.”

I hesitate. “Where is…” *Your father? Your boss?* “…that man?”

“Out working,” she says. “With Abel and Noah.”

Abel, Noah. Names as biblical as they come. How old is this girl? She looks like a six- or seven-year-old, but she speaks like she’s three or four. For a shameful moment, I want to grab her by the shoulders and shake her little body until the truth comes sputtering out of her like vomit.

When was I taken from my home?

How long has it been?

What happened to me?

Are my children and husband looking for me, right now?

Are the toddlers having meltdowns?

Is the baby screaming for me?

The baby. My hand flies to my stomach.

My little sea creature.

The baby’s gone. I’m not six months pregnant anymore.

My mouth gapes open in a silent scream.

—

Throughout my life, on so many different occasions, I’ve wondered with genuine curiosity how people were able to move through the world without faith. In college, I watched the girls in my hall so proudly emancipate themselves from every institution that shaped them: their families, their country, their Creator. They were insistent on snipping every last one of their tethers to the mortal universe. It was unfathomable to me: the idea of floating forward through the world, held up by absolutely nothing. What kept you from plummeting?

As Maeve guides me down the hallway and back toward the kitchen, her little hand tightly gripping mine, I remind myself I’m not alone, no matter how much it feels like it.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

I remind myself, with more than a little bit of unease, that nothing is accidental. Nothing in this world happens that is not a part of His plan. (Visions of martyrs dance in my mind: women burning alive, children losing their heads, so some man's faith might be restored. My hand drifts back to my stomach, and another wave of lightheadedness passes through me. *I'm not some sacrifice, am I, Lord?*)

The kitchen is quieter now. The two boys and the man are, as Maeve promised, nowhere to be seen. The older girl is bent over the kitchen table, her back to us. As we walk closer, I see her stirring something that looks like cake batter. She picks up the bowl and pours it carefully across a wooden grid, filling a dozen or so rectangle molds.

Soap. The girl is making soap.

I've done that before. It was one of the first tutorials I ever shared online, only a week or so after the (blessed!) day my account went viral. That video was sloppy and boring; I recorded it in one long take, wrote a painfully trite caption—cleanliness is close to Godliness!—and uploaded it, then watched with abject horror as all of my new followers shredded it to pieces.

> Why is this chick even famous
>
> This video is so out of focus lol
>
> Did someone accidentally lobotomize Martha Stewart???

In the year following that moment, I made a dozen more soap-related videos, each one cleaner—*ha!*—and more well executed than the one before. Before long, the praise outweighed the anger, and the anger itself shifted in tone, from criticisms of the execution—à la, why is she even famous—to criticisms of the concepts inherent in the video—à la, who has time to make soap?

When that happened, I knew I had won.

Now Maeve drops my hand and runs over to the table, where she climbs into the chair next to her sister. "Mama wants a biscuit," she says.

"Mama can wait until dinner," the older girl replies.

Maeve is now distracted by the materials on the table, and so she doesn't answer, instead reaching for a small wooden bowl filled with lavender sprigs. She grabs a fistful and dumps the flowers unceremoniously over the center of the grid, so that half the molds are covered completely in purple, and the other ones are untouched.

"You have to spread them evenly," the older girl says. "Let me show you." She takes her own fistful of sprigs and scatters them perfectly across the remaining untouched soap molds.

I point at the lavender sprigs. "Who taught you to add the herbs?"

The older girl turns to face me. "You did," she says calmly. "It was you."

4

“DRINK THIS,” my new college roommate commanded, and shoved a plastic cup into my hands. Her name was Reena Magliotti. Standing before me in her branded jeans, with her branded headband and branded sneakers and branded T-shirt, she looked like a walking, talking directory for the nearest luxury mall. It was the first night of college. We were hosting a pregame, the definition of which had been provided to me approximately fifteen minutes earlier.

I held the cup up, raising my voice to be heard over the rap music playing from the speakers on Reena’s desk. “Is there alcohol in this?”

“Don’t worry,” Reena said dismissively while she poured another cupful. “You won’t taste a thing.”

I sniffed the cup—*strawberry jam*—and then blushed at the sound of laughter. A few girls were sitting on Reena’s bed. They looked identical to the poster collage of models framed on the wall above: modern, manicured, and just a little bit surly. “It’s basically juice,” one of them offered. The other girl snickered again. Neither had opted to sit on my bed. They hadn’t even stepped over into my half of the room, which held the small handful of things I had brought from home: a hand-stitched quilt, a framed picture of my family, a desktop computer paid for by my scholarship. No posters on my side of the room.

I nodded politely, though it was starting to bother me, the way these women refused to answer the questions I did ask and pretended to hear questions I didn’t ask. Still, my mother’s voice bellowed through the hallways of my brain: *Be nice!*

Was it more important to the Lord that I abstain from alcohol, or get along with strangers? I took a sip. It was surprisingly sweet, less like juice and more like syrup, not unlike the fake wine they offered out at church service each Sunday.

I closed my eyes, then took a larger gulp from the cup, and then another, ignoring the girls as they laughed again, ignoring Reena's whoop of support —"Hell yeah, roomie!"—as the juice dribbled down my chin and dripped onto the lace collar of my dress, leaving a spattering of blood drip stains that would never come out.

—

The music was loud. Louder than loud. How were so many young women capable of fitting into such a small room? Worse: they all kept talking over and around and past me. From what I could gather, these girls all knew each other already somehow.

Friends of friends.

Summer camp.

Boarding school.

Your dad went to—?

No way, my mom pledged—!

Across the room, Reena stood in a semicircle of women who all looked like misshapen clay versions of her and were equally covered in the cursive scrawl of corporations. Standing together like that, they looked like a huddle of branded cows, freshly escaped from the hot iron poke. They were laughing, or screaming. The music—it was really so loud. And the floor—I couldn't see it, could see only dozens of sneakered feet, moving and shifting like snakes, the floor was filled with snakes, these people were snakes—

No. Silly. Sneakers. Not snakes.

Was this what it felt like to be drunk?

I wasn't drunk. *No, not drunk.* Well—maybe a little drunk. The room held the atmosphere of a jungle. Every few moments a gust of rank, warm

air drifted past. It felt less like we were in a college dorm room, and more like we were standing inside some horrible monster's mouth.

Monsters. Mouths.

The wicked are estranged from the womb: They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent—

There it was: the lurch of panic. A tear rolled down my cheek. I was standing in (around? alongside?) a group of girls who were all talking to one another simultaneously, a strange simulacrum of conversation that was clearly preventing any true exchange of information. One of them caught my eye, then leaned forward and said, "I like your hair!" She gestured at my braid approvingly. "It's so *long*."

At once, the torrential monologues ceased. All the girls were looking at me, now. The pressure of their collective attention felt like a gravitational force. I resisted the urge to drop to my knees. "It's so healthy," another girl chimed in. They were all grinning at me now. Unnerving: everyone I'd met so far at college had teeth so straight and white, they barely looked like teeth at all.

"Have you ever cut it?" a third said, mimicking scissors. "Have you ever cut your hair?"

Oh. That's what was happening here: these girls thought I was dumb. But how? I'd barely spoken enough to identify myself in a lineup, let alone to incriminate my intellect. I cast my gaze across our huddle, caught one girl frowning contemplatively at the juice-stained blouse of my prairie dress. She startled at my attention and looked quickly away.

So that was it. My hair, my dress—it signified stupidity to them. Too late, I wiped my tearstained cheek with the back of one palm and said shortly, "No, I've never cut it."

"*Woooow,*" they said as one. A desperate, childlike loneliness fell over me. My free hand clenched into a fist. What I would've given to feel my mother's skirt fabric in my grip, for me to look up and see her kind, authoritative expression peering down at me. *Ready to go home, Nattie?*

Yes, Mother. I'm ready to go home.

“I’d like to leave, now,” I announced, even though this was my bedroom.

“Sure,” one girl said comfortingly. “You can totally do that.”

As I walked away, the beginning of a new overlapping conversation unfolded: “She’s Amish, right?”

“I think Orthodox Jewish—”

“—Mormons are totally—”

“But have you ever met an Evangelical?”

—

For an hour, I sat in a floral upholstered chair in the recreation room, listening to the pregames taking place up and down the hall. When the last thread of laughter disappeared behind the entrance doors of the dorm building, I got up, walked back to my room, and began to clean up the mess.

This is Hell, I thought calmly as I scrubbed at the sticky red stains all over my brand-new computer keyboard.

No, *this* was Hell: four hours later, I woke to Reena stumbling into the room with a boy, talking loudly but in such a way that suggested she thought she was actually whispering. “You’re so hot. Here. *Here.* Quiet! My roommate is sleeping.”

There was the slow creak of her mattress as it sagged beneath the weight of two bodies. The boy didn’t speak, but I felt him in the room with us. I heard him breathe.

“Come here,” she whispered, and he did.

Soon, the sounds that came from the other side of the room were as intellectually incomprehensible as they were instinctually horrible. Laughter and grunting. Rustling of sheets. The sticking of skin against skin. A thick, wet slipping. A terrible mechanical suction. A long, choking, guttural sound, like water moving through a clogged drain. Then: a rushing gasp, not unlike the first breath of air one takes after breaching the surface of a lake.

Reena mumbled, “Didn’t like that.”

“Oh,” was the first thing the boy said. Then: “No worries.”

“Feel sick.”

Pause.

“Want me to go?”

I was praying so loudly in my head that it seemed possible they might hear me, too. *Please send him home please send him home please send him home—*

“No,” she said. “All good.”

They moved forward. A minute later, he was pushing inside her—*slower,* she said—only it felt like he was pushing inside me. The pain was unbearable. I wanted to scream *no,* to tell them to stop, please, *stop,* that I didn’t want it, I couldn’t bear it, but the pain and the fear and the humiliation had snatched the sound from my mouth, and so I lay there beneath the covers—heart still, blood frozen, mouth stretched open in a breathless corpse gasp—and let them have their way with me.

—

And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.

—

An entire lifetime later, the boy left. Reena got up and moved around our bedroom slowly in the darkness, getting dressed. Then she opened our bedroom door and shut it quietly behind her. I listened to her footsteps carry down the hall and into the dorm bathroom, and then I leaned over the side of my bed and vomited strawberry jam.

5

IN THE DAYLIGHT, it's easier to see how ramshackle this house truly is. The floorboards are old and rotted. Through the ceiling eaves in the kitchen, I can see slivers of sky. As for the kitchen, it's as simple as mine at home: a long wooden countertop; a big sink made of cast iron; a series of open shelves holding big containers, each of which I peer into and inspect. Some of the contents I recognize: flour and animal fat and potatoes, jarred peaches and cherries and pears. Then there are containers of seeds and syrups and strange-colored substances I can't begin to name. "For aches and pains," the older girl said, when she saw me scrutinizing a jar containing a scarlet-colored syrup. She frowned at me, suddenly watchful. "Do you have a headache?"

I did, but I wasn't going to tell *her* that.

—

In this kitchen, there's no hidden pantry containing a massive refrigerator, two dishwashers, and a microwave. There's no laundry room with a shelf of chemical-free, scent-free, dye-free detergents. No bathroom, either. Through the kitchen window I can see a small shed by the chicken coop, undoubtedly an outhouse. (I am actively, at this moment, ignoring the nerve cells screaming upward at my brain about how badly I'd like to use it.)

The floor plan of this house is identical to mine: a small, single-story house, with a large kitchen and living space, and four bedrooms down the hall. The bedrooms are in the same locations, but instead of bunk beds and

Pottery Barn bureaus, the children's rooms have straw mattresses and exposed wooden shelves, each of which holds a few small piles of ratty-looking clothing.

Like a time machine, I keep thinking as I poke my head into every room. *Like a bruised and beaten version of my life.*

—

Finally I can't take it anymore. I approach the girls at the table and say formally, "I need to use the restroom."

"Then go," the older girl says, without even turning around.

—

My head is pounding quietly, a drumbeat reminder of what happened earlier this morning. *A good wife doesn't speak to her husband that way.* I step outside onto the porch. The sudden brightness sends a high, arcing warning flare of pain through my skull, which momentarily lights up every thought I've ever had, and then just as quickly douses them in darkness. A breeze lifts my hair, cooling my neck. As my eyes adjust to the daylight and the pain recedes, I see that it's autumn here. The leaves on the trees are a deep golden brown, and the faraway mountains are just barely snowcapped. By mid-November, they'll be coated in white.

I stare at the mountains, my gaze slowly traveling back to the ranch, over the dips and rolls of thousands of acres of rugged Idaho wilderness, dotted by scrubs of sagebrush and not much else, until finally I reach the far fence line of the crumbling paddocks by the barn. A shabby show of an enclosure, nothing like my fences, which are painted every summer a blinding church-white.

Suddenly one of the boys—*door threshold; shorter one; Noah!*—walks out of the barn with a horse, guiding him to the paddocks. Our horse. Snickers. Beloved brown and white beast. Only—

No. Not our horse.

It feels like I'm looking at the world through an oil slick.

The horse's patches are in a slightly different place. The stripe of white on this horse's nose is wider than the one on Snickers's, and there's an extra white patch by his belly.

—

We should never have bought a horse to begin with. None of us were riders, and I kept telling Caleb to be reasonable, to think about it, *to consider for one second how much work a horse would be,* but Caleb insisted we would learn, he insisted it was *essential,* back when he—back when we—

—

A sudden agoraphobia sweeps over me. The fields, the woods, the mountains. An infinite stretch of land. *The Wild, Wild West.* Gold rush. Cowboys and Indians. Mountains of dead buffalo. *Manifest destiny!* Smallpox blankets. Rifles and covered wagons and dust bowls and herds of mustangs and Area 51 and spaceships and aliens, less like Planet Earth and more like Planet Mars—

Suddenly I'm half walking, half jogging across the clearing to the outhouse. I throw open the door and step inside. The stench takes my breath away, but still, I shut the door tightly behind me. I feel like a child again, operating on dream logic: if I keep myself hidden beneath the covers, the monsters won't see me.

Speaking of children and dream logic—silly, it couldn't possibly work, but—well—what if it did?

Forgive me, Lord—I have to try.

—

After I'm finished peeing, I stand up straight, close my eyes, organize my thoughts, and click my heels together three times.

There's no place like home.

There's no place like home.

There's no place like home.
I throw the door open and say, "Shit."

6

EVERY MONDAY EVENING, my mother called the dormitory phone line at seven on the dot to ask me how the week had been. How my social life was going. Had I met any French girls? What about Irish ones? Were there any —deep breath here—Jewish or Muslim girls in the building? Did they pray in front of me? Did they smell like me, or was the odor different?

My mother had given birth to my sister when she was eighteen, then me when she was twenty. College hadn't been a consideration. Worldly travels were not an option. The farthest she had ever traveled was to Arizona for a wedding. At the airport, her anxiety about my decision to go to college had been palpable, but now—perhaps because she'd never had the opportunity to do so herself, or perhaps as a means of redirecting her anxieties about her daughter living so far away—she talked nonstop about how exciting it was for me to be there. *I can't imagine how many interesting people you'll meet!*

In response, for the first time in my life, I lied to my mother. I told her it was exactly as she was picturing it, because I thought she'd have a nervous breakdown if I told her the truth.

—

No, college was not the intellectual oasis I had hoped it would be. There were no lecture hall sparring matches of the likes of Socrates and Plato, no passionate debates over free will and creation and the divine, intellectual light of man. Nor, though, was it Gomorrah, as my sister and mother had worried it would be. Or at least: not as they might have imagined it to be.

Rather, I'd found myself in a highly claustrophobic holding tank for rich kids. An artificially intelligent Eden: a warm, incubated landscape designed to keep the worst kids in America safe and warm and well-fed until they matured past the urge to peck each other's eyes out.

At first, I thought my roommate troubles would be my biggest challenge, but Reena hadn't brought anyone home since that first night, and then school began, and the true nightmare revealed itself to me. In the first several weeks, I sat frozen in the front row of each class while brash, marble-mouthed kids from Chicago and Los Angeles and Darien talked loudly from the back row. The boys complained about power hegemonies and overseas military interventions, waving their uncalloused palms, even their fingernails unnervingly clean. As for the girls, they proclaimed their horror at the wage gap between the sexes, and while I first thought a shocking number of them had the same medical issue, I soon realized their fingers and hands and forearms were all tie-dyed a grim shade of orange from the fake tanner that passed through our dorm hallways like a spiritual totem.

On weeknights, the girls in my hall piled into one room and drank Smirnoff Vodka mixed with zero-calorie grapefruit juice while they complained about their parents, their boarding schools, their high school boyfriends. No one was grateful to be here. As far as I could see, no one was grateful for anything at all. They all planned to be wives and mothers, and yet they absolutely hated men and kids. They talked about nuclear families the same way they talked about the nuclear bomb. It was a destructive, sexist, militaristic, heteronormative force designed to ruin the world. *Literally,* they would add for emphasis, at the end of every statement they made that could not possibly work in any literal sense. *Lit-tral-ly.* When they talked about stay-at-home mothers—specifically about *their* stay-at-home-mothers—their eyes didn't go misty with gratitude. Instead, they argued bravely that old-school femininity was a scourge. Any woman who chose to stay in the home instead of working in the world was complicit. Any woman who identified as a homemaker was both a victim and a perpetrator.

“Of what?” I made the mistake of asking once, in the beginning.

The girls exchanged a series of looks. *The Amish girl has spoken!* Then Reena—who, over the early days of school, had been visibly disappointed to realize she wasn’t going to climb as high up on the social ladder as she had clearly planned to, and who obviously found me at least partially responsible for this fact—cleared her throat and said tiredly, “The patriarchy, Natalie.”

Duh.

Someone always had a sister who’d left her job to take care of the kids because the daycare costs compared to her salary didn’t check out. Someone always had a cousin whose nipples and sleep schedule and sex life were being destroyed by breastfeeding. Someone always had a mother who was actively drinking herself to death in the suburbs while the father played 52 Pickup with some restaurant hostess in the city. One night, one of the girls said (I kid you not, I quote her verbatim), “I really want to get an elective C-section because then the baby’s head won’t be all lumpy when it comes out.” On another night, Reena told everyone about what happened the first night of school, about the horrible night she’d spent with that boy. He was a *predator,* she insisted. He gave off *major rape vibes.* He’d skull-fucked her, she said—*she could barely breathe!*—and then he’d pressured her into sex, and everyone should write his name down, they should remember it and *never go home with him,* because men like him could not, *could never,* be trusted.

I sat on the opposite bunk bed, mute with horror, while she went on. I was already aware that these young women enjoyed blurring the line between fact and fiction—*nuclear families were destructive? C-sections desirable? Pray tell, ladies, in what world?*—but here, now, was a glaring journalistic error, a false insurance claim about a hit-and-run that never happened, and I was the only witness.

Be nice, my mother warned.

I stared into the cup of sparkling water in my lap.

—

Each night, after two or three hours of this kind of group discussion, the girls would say good night, and I would slowly put my nightgown on, feeling lightheaded and a little bit sick. It felt like I was being waterboarded to death by modernity. As I got into bed—my fingers shaking so hard I could barely pull back my sheets—it was my mother my mind groped blindly toward, like a dying plant twisting itself into contortions toward the light. I thought of the aprons she hand-embroidered for my sister and me, our names in perfect pink cursive across the breast pocket, and I bit my tongue until it bled. An excruciating thing to admit: I missed being around women who were nice.

It was grim. I'd gotten exactly what I wanted: a school where everyone was profoundly, jaw-droppingly unlikable. I could practically hear the Lord whispering in my ear: *Be careful what you wish for, little lamb. You just might get it.*

The situation was not tenable. But each time I filed a request to move to a single room in another dorm building, the request was denied.

"Are you in an unsafe situation?" my RA adviser asked one day. After my seventh formal request to move, she had paid me a visit while Reena was in class.

"Well," I hedged. "Not *physically,* no, but spiritually?" I nodded vigorously. "Very much so."

But she was already handing my request back to me. "I'm sorry, but they're not going to approve this."

And then one night, the Lord delivered in the most unexpected of ways.

—

It was a Thursday evening. Reena was getting ready to host another pregame in our room. Tonight was going to be a big night for Reena, I had gathered, through the conversations she had with other girls in front of me. She was going to hook up with a guy she'd been talking to for weeks. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Reena take her fourth shot of vodka in twenty minutes. *Predator,* I thought, from the safe cocoon of my bed. I'd

long since given up the pretense of drinking at these events. I was in pajamas, under the covers, a textbook open in my lap.

A trio of girls arrived, looking nervously around at our empty dorm room. Undoubtedly they had thought more people would be here. “Are we early?”

“Ohmigod, hi!” Reena trilled, sailing past the awkwardness. “Come in, come in, come in, I was just pouring your drinks.”

Two of the girls lived in our hall and therefore had learned over the early weeks of school not to talk to me. *That Catholic girl is weird!* But one of the girls was from another dorm. “Hey,” she said. “Natalie, right?” When I looked at her, she added, “We’re in the same gender studies class.”

Reena frowned. “Isn’t that, like, a four-hundred-person lecture?”

“Well, yeah, but Natalie got into this intense debate with the professor the other day about biological differences. She had all these studies lined up in her arsenal, too, like *bam,* women are physically weaker, *bam*, men aren’t good at domestic chores because their eyesight is designed for predatorial work, *bam,* the female body is designed to nurture, and what do you think of *that*? The professor was *sooooo* pissed,” the girl said, and laughed. “It was honestly hilarious.”

I didn’t say anything. I had thought that the professor had enjoyed that debate. A terribly lonely thought fell over me: everyone here, even the faculty, seemed to hate me.

“Whatever,” Reena said. “Natalie doesn’t care what other people think. Do you, Natalie?”

Reena had done this occasionally in the first few days of school, speak up vaguely on my behalf, but now she used me more frequently as a prop or a punch line for her own flailing social life. I was a dove, and she was an amateur magician, standing in front of an auditorium of mostly empty seats, groping around for my feathers in the depths of her big black hat.

“What other people think of me is none of my business,” I said quietly.

“God, Natalie.” Reena gave me a preening look as she poured more vodka into her cup. “You are so precious. Did your mother tell you to say that?”

A flower of heat bloomed in my chest as the girls laughed easily with each other. It was a flippant joke, Reena certainly didn't expect me to respond—does the dove ever snap at the magician's fingers?—which is probably why she seemed so startled when I said, "Just because you hate your mother doesn't mean I have to hate mine."

A silence filled the room. Reena set down the vodka handle. "I never said I hate my mother." She looked at the girls. "When did I say I hate my mother?"

I returned my attention to my book.

"Seriously! I love my mother!"

"Of course you do," one of the girls assured Reena, but it must not have worked to soothe her, because when Reena spoke again, her voice was laced with fury.

"Do you want to know what I think, Natalie?"

No, Reena, I don't know what you think. In fact, I'm shocked to learn you have any interiority to speak of.

"I think that you think you're better than all of us."

I flipped the page.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Without looking up, I said, "Is that another rhetorical question? Or are you actually interested in hearing a different perspective on the world than your own?"

The girls behind her tittered in surprise. *The Baptist girl thinks!*

"You're mean, Natalie," Reena said. She was slurring a little bit, her tongue anesthetized from vodka. This conversation never would've happened if she wasn't drunk. "You roll your eyes when we talk. You make little comments under your breath. You think we don't notice, but we do. And you're *extra* mean to me, you ignore half the things I say to you, and I think it's because you're jealous of me, because I have friends and a boyfriend"—even in this moment, I registered that this was a big stretch for her to make, a surprisingly brave or perhaps embarrassingly drunk one, especially in front of these girls—"and *you,* on the other hand, are all alone with your imaginary friends, Jesus and Mary and the holy fucking spirit."

I stared at the page, my brain clicking softly as the girls laughed. I thought, for the millionth time that autumn, of my mother. What was she doing right now? Probably wiping down the countertops, putting away the leftovers from dinner. Humming one of the church hymns she always had stuck in her head. In my entire life, I'd never known my mother to hate anyone, but I felt certain she would hate these girls. At the very least, she'd be appalled to know what they spent their time thinking about. *You're wrong, Mama. Not everyone believes in something. At college, there are an astonishing number of people who believe in absolutely nothing at all.*

My mother had always encouraged me to be a shining light for others. But I was certain that no level of illumination would save these women from the horror of themselves. If anything, they seemed to revel in the pitch-black aimlessness of their lives. They were proud of it. Happy to wander blindly forth into a lifetime of selfishness. It was deeply disturbing. Most disturbing of all was the fact that these lost, hateful girls thought someone like me should inherently be jealous of someone like them.

No fucking way.

(Sorry, Lord.)

"I'm not jealous of you, Reena," I said. I closed my book on my finger to keep the page, then I looked at her. "If anything, I feel sorry for you, because you're unintelligent and you lack creativity. But most of all, I feel sorry because a person like you will never know true wonder, not once in your life."

Her mouth fell open. "You are such a bitch!"

"Well." I tapped my finger lightly on the golden embroidered cross on the book cover. "I don't concern myself with the opinions of whores."

"*What did you just call me?*"

"You heard me." I looked past Reena to her friends. "She lied, you know. That boy who went home with her the first night of school? He didn't hurt her. Not even close. In fact, she *asked* him to have sex with her. She practically begged him, and now she's telling everyone who will listen that he threatened her, when he did nothing of the sort. So if you ask me…" I shrugged. "She's the real predator. Not him."

There was an otherworldly noise, a shriek that split the world in two. In the single moment before my focus returned to Reena, her fingers were already in my hair.

—

Reena, poor thing, wouldn't remember any of the details of that night. She would wake up the next morning in a shirt covered with vomit, her knuckles bruised, a note from the disciplinary committee taped to our door. As for me, I would remember it mostly as the night I learned an old saying was actually true: the Lord did work in mysterious ways. After months of requesting and being denied, I finally got approved to move into a single. As it turned out, all I'd needed was to get my roommate to punch me in the face.

—

The next day, I moved into a small single on the opposite side of campus. Clean and quiet and mine. Finally, I could wake up each morning and whisper my daily prayer of gratitude without worrying she would make fun of me. I could read quietly at night with a door firmly closed, rather than suffering the backward looks of pity from Reena's friends while they came in and out to borrow makeup and clothing in preparation for their weekly excursion to the local frat house, where they would, if they were lucky, revel in ten to thirty minutes of verbal abuse with the object of their affections before he got bored and decided to finger someone else.

At night, while my new dorm neighbors laughed and screamed in one of the rooms down the hall, I stuffed a towel under the crack of the door. I did my homework, and then I did all my extra assignments, and then I sat at my desktop computer and scrolled through a series of low-fi internet forums, searching for answers to the questions that had sprung up since I arrived at college.

Why do modern women hate men so much?

Why do modern women hate kids so much?

Why do modern women hate themselves so much?

How can you have a full-time job and breastfeed at the same time?

Instead of answers, though, I only found stories, as well as more questions. *Why is the anger getting worse?* the modern women asked the forums. *Why am I not ready for kids? Where does unhappiness come from? Why can't I seem to remember what I was originally going to do with this college degree?*

—

At the end of my first semester, I ran into a girl I'd met at orientation. She was the same year as me, and she belonged to a church group that served Christian students from schools all over the city. I'd gone once, at the very beginning of the semester. It had not been my cup of tea.

"You really should come to a meeting again," she said. "We've got a great group of regulars."

"It's just not really my thing," I said. This was, I thought, much nicer to say than the truth: *The girls in your group are dumb as rocks, and the idea of sharing spiritual communion with them would probably feel like getting intellectually stoned to death.*

Her expression faltered. "To be honest, Natalie, I'm worried about you. You don't look so good."

I smiled stiffly at this girl who'd only ever seen me in passing. "Excuse me?"

"Your hair is greasy, and you have these dark circles under your eyes. Are you eating? Sleeping? Do you want to talk sometime?"

It was the kind of pathologically invasive comment I was used to getting from my mother and the other women at church service back home; the kind of thing you would say to a stranger only if you'd been raised to believe that one woman's failure to keep up appearances reflected poorly on all other women, too. Someone like Reena would've immediately told this girl that she was being rude and inappropriate and sexist. *Fuck off!* But neither of us was like Reena, and this girl knew it. Suddenly I was so

homesick I burst into tears. Before long the girl was hugging me, saying, “There, there, I know,” as I snotted up her shirt.

—

The next week I started going to the church group. It was held in one of the basement rooms of the main library at Harvard. I sat with the dumb girls, I suffered their little snuffling moans and sighs of *glory to God*, and it was fine. At least the people in the group knew the sky was blue. At least they didn’t spit out *mother* like the word alone was a pregnancy contraction. At least they were friendly to me. I was still lonely, but now the loneliness felt manageable, like something I could survive.

Then, one cold winter evening in the early weeks of my second semester, I met Caleb.

7

BACK IN THE OLDEN DAYS, *girls, do you know what it was like to live out in the new territories? The great Western expanse? Some people lived in small Western towns—smaller than any town you've ever seen. Imagine a handful of buildings clustered along a dirt road. A church, an inn, a general store, a saloon. If you were lucky, the church might have an organ, and the saloon might have a piano, and you might grow up knowing music, and community, and God. But some families didn't even have that, girls. Some people lived all on their own, in the middle of nowhere, huddled against the elements of endless prairie or mountains or woods. No saloons or general stores. No music or neighbors or heavenly worship to speak of. Their meals were simple and their lives were honorable. By day, they caught and cooked and cleaned. By night, they sat around the fire to keep warm, and the adults entertained the children with tall tales about great battles in faraway lands.*

How does that sound, girls? How would you like a life like that?

—

The sun is setting now. I'm sitting in a chair at the kitchen table. Through the window above the sink, I can see the sun falling behind the trees. Orange light spills through the warped glass panes, striping the room with radioactive glow.

My mind tilts and lurches uncontrollably, like a broken amusement park ride. *I am not, I will not, I cannot—I think I might be—no, no—I am your husband—Mama? Mama!—*

A few feet away from me, that girl is crouched by the fire, her skirt tucked carefully between her thighs to keep from catching flame. The only one whose name isn't notched into the threshold. I watch her flip each potato half, one by one, revealing a series of perfectly crisped skins, and I think of the careful carvings in the wood, and I know, I just know, that she is the bookkeeper in charge of these records.

"Excuse me," I say.

She doesn't reply.

"*Excuse me*. What is your—"

The girl stands up and turns to face me, and at the sight of her face—like me, like Clementine, *Lord save me*—I lose my train of thought. Her expression is not a crumble of disappointment, the way Maeve's was earlier. Instead, she looks annoyed. "Mary," she says. "My name is Mary. Now—will you go get more wood, please?"

I stare at the girl, suddenly sick.

"Mary," I repeat.

She nods impatiently.

For hours now, my thoughts have fluttered and flitted tirelessly around me overhead. Now they stop short and drop out of the sky, one by one, until just one remains.

—

"Do you want to know the gender?" the technician said brightly.

"Sex," I replied absently. It was summertime, a few months before Shannon quit. I was holding my phone steady as I recorded a video of the ultrasound screen; the Angry Women loved any chance they could get to crawl inside me. I glanced at the technician and added, "You mean the sex of the baby."

"That's what I said."

"You said gender. Not sex."

The technician glanced helplessly at Caleb, who said, "Yes, we want to know."

“All righty then, let’s just see what we can find…” The technician’s wand moved slowly over my stomach, like one of those deep-sea drones scanning the ocean floor for any possible signs of life. I stared at the gray matter, imagining my baby as a jellyfish, a sea otter; a darting silver minnow.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Mills, you’re having a girl!”

“What do you think about the name *Mary*?” Caleb whispered as we left the office.

At that moment, there was a quiet little thud in my stomach. Her first kick. “That’s her name. Mary.”

—

Mary.

My mind—which felt like a beehive up until this moment, buzzing and angry and alive—now feels hollowed out, my brain not a brain at all but a husk of one, a plastic replica. “That’s a beautiful name,” I say numbly.

Did Caleb tell anyone we were going to name the baby Mary? It’s certainly possible. We had been calling the baby Mary out loud to each other; he might have mentioned it to his parents, or his brothers, or maybe a neighbor in town. But even if he *did*—?

It’s hard to think clearly through my headache, which has returned in full force. I blink stupidly through the pain.

I hadn’t shared the name online, had I? No, definitely not. I did that only once, when I was pregnant with Junebug, and the experience was so miserable that I swore I would never do it again. I’d spent the last month of that pregnancy watching while thousands of people filled the comments section of my posts daily, ripping apart my child’s identity with glee, desecrating her existence before she even came into the world.

dear god the names keep getting worse

future ignorant bitch alert weee-ooo wee-ooo

But even if I hadn’t shared the name myself, that doesn’t mean someone might not have been able to guess it. Plenty of followers have guessed the names of our future children correctly in the past. When you have thousands of comments on a picture of your swollen stomach, it becomes a matter of odds—and besides, there *is* only a small collection of names that reasonably fits into our aesthetic. I know that.

A chill runs through me. Maybe Old Caleb is actually one of my followers. Maybe he’s a psychotic stalker, a man whose own striking similarities to my husband have convinced him of his entitlement to me, and who has designed this whole thing as some elaborate form of cosplay.

Even before this thought is fully formed, though, I throw it out. This, what’s happening here, would take too much work, too much *planning*, for one person to pull off. No. This is a multiperson job. These people, whoever they are, are cunning. They’re cunning, and angry, and dangerous. They’re —

“Hell-*ooo*? The wood?”

Mary is staring at me, waving a hand in front of my face—a distinctly modern gesture, I think suspiciously, before realizing I have no real evidence for that argument.

—

This time, I ignore the carvings on the doorframe. I open the door and step quickly onto the porch, shutting it behind me. The wood is stacked in the same place on the front porch as we stack it at home. I drop into a crouch and begin loading up an armful. When I’ve managed to stack six pieces in my arms, I stand up and look out, for the second time today, at the craggy mountain peaks backlit by the fading light.

This is my property. This is my land. These are my mountains.

And yet: This is not my house or my family. These are not my chickens. This is not my nightgown.

Something is lodged painfully in my throat. A rock, or maybe a memory. I try to swallow, but I can’t. My headache flares, and I wince. It

feels like my brain has been carved up with a butcher's knife.

I take a deep, shaky breath. With the wood balanced in the crook of one elbow, my free hand travels to my stomach instinctively, looking for a place to rest, to comfort, and then it freezes.

Mary.

Something horrible is happening here. This place, *these people*, it's—

I look out across the fields. The sun is nearly gone now. It'll be dark soon.

In an instant, the phrase takes on new weight: *Dark soon. Dark.*

As in: impossible to see.

Go.

In a breath I'm gone. By the time I register the sound of the wood clattering to the porch I'm already down the stairs, sprinting across the frostbitten grass, running, running, running, *faster now, quieter now, forget the driveway and just get to the woods—*

Behind me a door slaps open, someone cries *Mama*, the barn is a blur of red alongside me, and then it's behind me, and I'm flying toward the tree line.

"Mama!"

I don't look back. I reach the trees and then—*yes*—I'm in the trees, crashing wildly through the leaves, my heart thrashing to the rhythm of my pumping legs, the ghostly blur of birch trees flying past, and then the world goes white.

—

For the righteous one may fall seven times, and he will get up again. But the wicked will be made to stumble by calamity—

—

One second I am running, and the next I am on the ground, writhing, trying to understand.

What is—?

Why is—?

I see the pain before I feel it: a steel trap, clamped around my ankle. Metal teeth sunken fully into flesh.

No, I think distantly. *That can't be right.*

And then the nerve signals finally reach my brain, and a terrible noise pours from my mouth, a high wailing keen.

I'm on my side, trying and failing to pry open the steel maw with my own two shaking hands, when I see, in the distance: Old Caleb jogging across the fields toward me. I scream, or try to, and then my eyes roll back in my head.

My God, *forgive me—*

And then Old Caleb is here, on one knee. He presses something, and the trap springs open. "Relax, woman," he shouts over my screams of pain. "*Calm down.*"

"*My ankle,*" I scream. "*My ankle, my ankle—*"

I am in the leaves, gasping in pain, and then Old Caleb is carrying me back to the house, my body thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and then I am in the kitchen by the fire, Mary dabbing ointment along the jagged river canyons of my skin while I shout and twitch in agony. Even through the pain and the fear and the shock, I can't help but notice that the ointment smells like bacon grease.

"I need stitches! A doctor! Call an ambulance, right now!"

The two boys are sitting at the kitchen table, looking at their hands. Maeve is down the hallway, sobbing behind a closed door. *Mama, Mama, Mama.* Like she feels the pain herself.

And then there is Mary, pulling something out of a folded leather pouch. A needle, yes, and a thread so thick it almost looks like twine.

"Hold her still," she tells Old Caleb. "This is going to hurt."

8

THE NIGHT I MET CALEB MILLS, he was sitting in a folding chair for our church group. He held a flimsy paper plate steady with one hand and was picking at a mound of soft cheese with the other. He glanced up at me. He was cute. The kind of guy who looked like a farmer's son even while he was sitting in a church basement in Cambridge, wearing a button-down shirt and khaki pants. We made eye contact, then I sat down and we didn't look at each other again.

—

The next meeting, he asked for my name.

—

The meeting after that, he asked where I was from.

—

The fourth meeting: Did I want to get coffee sometime?

—

That's how slowly our relationship moved at the beginning. Dating in my religion works that way: it feels like you're rolling very slowly down a very long runway—then right as you think you're going to die for lack of

momentum, you find yourself lifting up, up, up, spinning wildly toward the sun in a sudden aerial ascent.

—

On our first date, Caleb bought me a scone. He told me about his family, his fancy political father and his soon-to-be-fancy-political brothers, all of them senators-in-waiting, like a little line of princes. Jack, John, George, Henry, Caleb. Such a perfectly American list that I would later wonder if their father had allowed one of his political consultants to advise on names with highest rates of electability. His mother had always wanted a daughter, Caleb told me, but instead she got five boys. He smiled ruefully at that, and I thought: *I would take five of those.*

In exchange, I told him about my dead father, my three-legged family. He learned about Abigail and her fiancé. He winced when I said *Bryce,* and that inspired a rare gift from me: a genuine laugh. Then I told him about the mountain range that circled my town, how rarefied the air felt at such high elevation. You can't help but feel like you're living closer to heaven.

"So you don't want to stay on the East Coast after graduation, then." Caleb was from the dust bowls of California. Like me, he thought the lifestyle inherent to living in a city was unnatural. A world meant for gerbils, not people. "Where do you want to go, then?"

I paused. Where did I want to go?

"I want a farm. With chickens. I want to live near my mother. I want a view of the mountains from my bedroom window, and I'd like to study theology. Part-time, of course, and only after the children are grown."

This was pretty much exactly what every good Christian girl back home claimed to want, except for the theology bit. I'd added that part for myself.

Caleb didn't say anything. Just cocked his head and gave me a strangely wistful smile, like he was already feeling nostalgic for the moment we currently found ourselves in.

"How about you?" I said, suddenly anxious. "What do you want?"

He looked shyly into his cappuccino cup. “I don’t know.” He shrugged, stared thoughtfully past me. “What you said sounds nice.”

—

On our second date, Caleb took me to dinner at an Italian restaurant in the North End, and I realized he was capital-*R* rich. Over eighty-dollar plates of truffle pasta and cold glasses of lemon water, he said, “I’ve been thinking about that farm nonstop since we met.” It was an innocuous statement, yet his face was suddenly bright red.

I reached for my water. I couldn’t decide if I loved the taste of truffle or hated it. “What farm?”

“The one you want. With the chickens. And the mountains?”

“Oh,” I said, fingers paused around the cool glass. “Of course. What about it?”

Now that I’d learned more about Caleb, the idea of a farm seemed like amateur hour for dreaming big. And anyways, the girls back home talked about farms only because it was distasteful for them to say what they really wanted: to be like Caleb. Wealthy.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” he said. “You could teach me everything you know, and I—well. I’m a quick learner.”

He was blushing so furiously that I might have worried he was having an allergic reaction, if I wasn’t so preoccupied with the present issue at hand.

Teach. What did Caleb mean by teach? I never said I knew how to farm, yet here we were, talking about living in the middle of nowhere, teaching each other how to—what? Rake dirt? Milk a cow? Cut a chicken’s head off? The way Caleb was staring at me with that intense, pained look in his face—he clearly needed an answer, but an answer to what?

Relax, I told myself. *This is just a moment. It doesn’t really matter.*

Here is what did matter: he was young and handsome and wealthy. Most important of all: he liked me. Really liked me. He said I was fascinating and funny and beautiful. No one had ever thought I was any of those things. I’d

spent my whole life alone, floating like a specter at the far edges of elementary school friendships, then glaring at the huddled cliques I walked past in middle school, then openly denouncing them in high school. And here, suddenly, was a fundamentally likable person, somehow liking me.

Is it a choice, if there's only one option?

—

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.

—

I leaned across the table and pressed my hand over His.

Sorry, I mean his. Caleb's. And at my touch, he let out a great gasp of air, and I realized he'd been holding his breath. Waiting for me to decide.

—

On the third date, we discussed marriage.

—

On the fourth date, Caleb stood stock-still as I leaned forward and pressed my lips, just barely, to his. I felt his heartbeat vibrating through my mouth. The kiss was dry. It lasted for a second. As I pulled away, I found myself imagining his tongue, the size of it. A shiver ran through me.

Caleb touched my arm. "You have goose bumps." He looked awestruck that he was capable of having that effect on me.

I didn't know what to say. I felt the heat rising off my face like steam. I'd never understood what it felt like to *want.* I stepped forward and pressed my face into Caleb's chest, suddenly desperate to feel compression against my skin. He wrapped his arms around me and we stood there like that for a

while, both of us breathing hard. Then I felt something long and firm pressed against my thigh, and I stepped quickly back.

—

The weekend of our engagement, Caleb's parents flew into the city to celebrate and paid for my mother to fly in, too. Caleb's father rented out the back room of a four-star steak house in Back Bay. I wore a white dress made of a crepe linen fabric. Caleb's mother had bought it for me and shipped it to my dorm room. She had also encouraged me over the phone to invite friends to the party, and I had tactfully declined, citing my interest in making this a family affair.

"You look like Jackie Kennedy," my mother whispered when she saw me at the restaurant. She was wearing a simple navy shift dress, a pattern she'd sewn herself, and was gazing at the fabric of my dress with an expression of nervous awe. "Let me see that ring."

I held out my hand, so proud that it felt like my head was going to lift off my neck and bob around by the ceiling. "It's an antique," I said as my mother turned my finger this way, then that way, letting the diamond catch the light. She looked as thunderstruck by the display as I felt by it. "It's just over four carats."

"Natalie," my mother breathed. "It's huge."

"I know," I said, matching her tone. "I told Caleb it was way too big."

She gave me a look of approval. That was the way women operated in my community: if you wanted to be a wealthy Christian woman and maintain good standing, you needed to publicly disavow your luxuries in order to maintain possession of them. It was a strange tug-and-pull I'd borne witness to my entire life. The only surprise was that it was finally happening to me. I was becoming the kind of woman other women were jealous of. Each time I looked at the ring, I felt an intoxicating combination of embarrassment and glee. It was a rich, decadent piece of jewelry. If I looked at it for too long, I started to feel sick. It was too much, it was a

shameful display of wealth, I should give it back and demand we find something smaller, and also: I'd launch a holy war before I parted with it.

As for Caleb, he insisted it was a perfect diamond for a woman like me. I was a flawless woman, he said. A timeless piece of decoration.

—

The engagement party was filled with Caleb's family's friends, as well as some major donors to Doug's current senatorial campaign. (What I would learn quickly: Doug was *always* building toward, in the middle of, or conducting a postmortem on a campaign.) For most of the evening, I sat in a booth with my mother while Caleb and his older brothers and his father, Doug, schmoozed through the crowd, bray-laughing and backslapping. I'd already lost track of which brother was which, they looked so much alike. *The tech one,* I thought firmly, staring at David—or was it Henry? No, *John* was the finance one, yes, Henry was the tech one, and George and Jack were the political advisers—

Amelia floated quietly behind the men, smiling brightly in their shadow, occasionally tugging at her pink Chanel skirt and blazer set like some Special-Edition Presidential Barbie. When I first met her earlier that night, she told me in a soft, fluttery falsetto to *call her Mama.* I had thought her teeth were so white they almost looked purple. Then I saw how much wine she drank, and I realized they were actually just purple.

I watched my mother watch Amelia across the room. I knew we were thinking the same thing. Then my mother turned and looked at me. A silent conversation unfolded.

This is what you want, then?

She seemed genuinely surprised. She didn't know Caleb or his family yet, but she'd seen enough to understand what was happening here. When she had talked about my future, it had always been *Natalie the professor, Natalie the academic.* Of course, the assumption of children and homemaking was always there, too, hovering in the white space between all those hypothetical careers. My mother, a breadwinner herself, was

lopsidedly progressive in that way: she didn't believe in divorce, but she did genuinely believe her smartest daughter would have it all: a good job and a good family, in Jesus's name, amen.

If you marry this man, she said to me now with her blinking eyes, *you will become his smiling shadow.*

A year ago, I wouldn't have wanted that. But the last six months had changed me. I blinked back an answer. *I thought I wanted the world, Mama. But I've seen the world now, and I want no part in it.*

At the other end of the room, Caleb's father clinked his glass. "Can the happy couple make their way to the stage?"

The crowd parted like the Red Sea before me. I didn't hesitate.

9

IT'S NIGHTTIME. I'm slouched on a wobbly, ancient, bullshit chair in the corner of this wobbly, ancient, bullshit kitchen, holding a big hunk of ice wrapped in a dish towel to my eye. Yes, my eye. Remember when my face was the problem, mere hours ago? Remember when the worst thing that had happened to me was getting slapped?

Well. Well, well, well.

I never thought I would look back fondly on a knockout.

My foot—*Lord, my foot*—is bandaged and elevated on a chair opposite me. I've passed out twice now: once from the pain of the needle piercing the muscle, and once when I woke up halfway through and saw what my stitched skin looked like. Now even looking at the tightly wrapped bandage makes me whimper with grief.

The pain. How to describe it? I'll be brave and say it has dulled to a roar. It feels like my body has depleted a month's worth of energy from the mere translation of so many nerve signals screaming *EMERGENCY* to my brain.

It's not just my foot, either. Every bit of me feels broken. My brain is a smashed computer drive, my memory and logic and intellect crushed into little shattered pieces, glittering and useless in the dim firelight. Emphasis on *dim:* the light from the fire just barely illuminates one half of the kitchen, leaving the rest of the room in shadows. I sit there in the flickering light while the girls move all around me, disappearing confidently into the darkness and just as quickly reappearing in the light as they walk around the room, making dinner. Perfect little homemakers. Big fat bitches.

Sorry, Lord—but—

"Excuse me," I call out weakly.

Mary says sharply, "Don't answer her," right as Maeve pipes up, "Yes, Mama?"

I shake my head softly. My eyes are warm with tears. "I want to go home," I whisper. "Please, take me home."

"But Mama—" Maeve starts.

Mary cuts her off. "Will you go get some firewood, Maevie?"

Maeve hesitates, her big bright eyes locked sadly on me, and then she nods and walks to the door.

As soon as Maeve is outside, Mary crosses the room in four short steps and crouches by my chair, so that we are face-to-face. "I'm going to say this once," she says, in a decidedly less friendly voice than the one she used with Maeve. "So listen closely: you are my mother."

I'm not your mother, I nearly growl, but I clench my teeth.

"This is your home," Mary continues. "This is your life. You're behaving like a child right now, and you're not a child. You're a grown woman, with children of her own to take care of—and do you know what? Your *actual* children can't stand when you act like this. Especially Maeve. It makes her very upset."

My mouth is open, I'm about to protest—*this is not my life, you are not my children*—but she barrels forward, leaving no room for me to speak.

"You're a grown woman," she repeats. "You should know not to walk willy-nilly through the woods during trapping season. So really, you have no one to blame but yourself. *Now,*" she says and claps her hands, like she's trying to startle me out of hypnosis, "I'm going to give you two options. You can pull yourself together for dinner, or you can go back to your bedroom and shut the door. So which is it? Bed or dinner?"

I take a quick inventory of my own needs: I have a raging headache, a foot that is connected to the rest of my body by twelve inches of string, and I'm starving. One of those problems can be fixed. "I'll stay and eat," I mutter.

"Wonderful," Mary says, in a tone that indicates otherwise.

—

Soon the two boys come barreling into the house, shouting and stomping their boots, followed immediately by Old Caleb, who tips off his cowboy hat and sets it on a hook. He walks over to Mary and hands her a large sack, which she takes and sets on the counter. I watch as she pulls three fish from the bag, each the length of her forearm and the color of quicksilver. “Beautiful,” she says, and asks Abel to fillet them.

He goes outside into the nighttime with the fish and returns ten minutes later with a handful of long white strips, which Mary drops into a boiling pot. “You can set the table for dinner,” she says to me over her shoulder. When I don’t move, Maeve and Noah do my chore for me.

And then we are seated at the table, me closest to the firelight, and Old Caleb at the far end, barely visible in the darkness. Mary is walking around, ladling soup into our bowls. The spread for dinner looks nothing like the meals I’ve made for our Natural Dinner series. In the videos, I showcased homemade cornbread, baked carrots, thin strips of pork with homemade cherry marmalade spooned over the plate in mouthwatering swirls. On the table before me is a single steaming crock of watery-looking soup with some vegetables and chunks of white flaky fish bobbing along the surface, and a small plate of biscuits. The meal looks, frankly, like shit.

“Are you feeling better, Mama?”

I look up. It’s Abel who spoke to me. He’s staring at me from the opposite end of the table. Just a meekly firelit shadow, and still through the darkness I can see he’s the spitting image of Caleb. Ruddy cheeks; blazingly innocent eyes. His voice is soft and light, it hasn’t yet cracked—but he holds himself like he’s planning for it to crack very soon.

“Well?” Old Caleb says loudly from the dark, startling me. “Answer the boy.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good,” Abel says. “You really shouldn’t be wandering around in the woods all alone. That’s how the savages will get you. Right, Pa?”

“Right!” Noah chimes in. “Better be careful, or they’ll stick you in the belly with an arrow, like *this*!” He mimes stabbing himself in the stomach, then leans back in the chair with a groan, eyes wide, the very picture of a shocked and dying soldier.

“Mary,” Old Caleb says, ignoring the boys. “Lead grace.”

The hilarity dissipates immediately. Noah sits forward in his chair, Mary clears her throat, and they bow their heads as one.

—

I watch everyone eat for a good long minute. The boys shovel big sloshing spoonfuls of soup into their mouths. Mary sits with her hands in her lap, watching her brothers with obvious disdain. Maeve stirs the broth with her spoon, talking quietly to the bits of carrot and celery and fish that bob along the surface, until Mary snaps at her to stop playing with her food, so Maeve lifts a spoonful of soup to her mouth, looking regretful to have to kill such precious friends.

I hesitate, then reach for the biscuit that looks the least likely to be poisoned. A fluffy golden one from the dead center of the pile. If it were possible for a biscuit to look cheerful, then this one does. It’s slick with butter, warm in my fingers. I take a small bite, chewing slowly. *Oh.* It’s delicious. The butter is as fresh as anything I’ve ever made, and the biscuit is perfect in texture. Soft and fluffy and just a bit crumbly. For a moment, I stop thinking altogether. I take another bite, then another, and suddenly the biscuit is gone and I’m reaching eagerly for another.

—

After dinner, as the fire is dying and this world is turning slowly to black, Mary and Old Caleb half walk me, half carry me to bed. I’m feeling a bit nauseous now. My cheeks are hot to the touch. “You poisoned me,” I mutter as Mary tucks me into bed, the room just a few shades lighter than pitch-black. “Those biscuits. You—”

“Quiet,” she says. “You just have a fever. You’re lucky it’s not worse, after all you’ve done.” She leaves the bedroom and then comes back. “Here,” she says, and shoves a spoon roughly into my mouth before I can protest. She misses my mouth a bit and a thick liquid drips down my chin. I swallow the amount that made it into my mouth, making a face. It tastes like rancid cherries. “That will help,” she says. “You’re welcome.” And then she’s gone.

I turn over onto my other side, and suddenly I’m staring straight into Maeve’s wide eyes. Like a little owl. *Hoo, hoo.* She must have climbed into bed while Mary was guiding me in. “Hello, Mama,” she says, barely visible.

“Hello, Maeve,” I mumble back. I’ve never felt weaker in my life.

“Sorry for your boo-boo.”

“Thank you, Maeve.”

We lie like that for a long time. My breathing becomes hoarse and ragged. My teeth begin to chatter. I wonder if I will die tonight. “Maeve,” I say softly, “where are we, *really*?”

“Home,” she whispers back. “Home, home, home.”

Pointless. This is pointless. Like slipping quarters into an empty gumball machine. “Is there another word for home? What do you *call* home, Maevie?”

“Oh,” she says, as I drift slowly away from her. “Yesteryear, Mama! That’s what we call home.”

10

THERE WERE FOUR HUNDRED PEOPLE at our wedding, which was hosted at Caleb's parents' estate in California the summer after my first year of college. I wore a strapless gown with a pearl necklace. Caleb wore a navy suit. We stood beneath the shade of an olive tree as the pastor said the magic words I'd been waiting to hear my whole life: *I now declare you man and wife.* The audience rose to their feet in a breathtaking ovation. The pastor's final words, his prophecy of our future, disappeared beneath the waves of applause. Caleb grabbed me and twirled me and dipped me low, so my hair was brushing the ground. Then he whispered in my ear, "I can't wait to taste you."

—

At the reception, a twelve-person band was playing a famous song by Cher, and I was sitting in one of the chairs at the main dining table, drinking a glass of water, enjoying a moment alone after so many rounds of small talk with balding, Botoxed billionaire donors—*Vote Mills!*—when my sister dropped into the chair next to me and said, "I think I might be pregnant."

She was twenty-one years old that night, wearing an emerald chiffon bridesmaid dress that Amelia had picked out. The dress had looked beautiful in the catalog but had the unfortunate effect of making my sister—who was generally understood to be the prettier of the two of us—look like an unappreciated vegetable. She and Bryce had married several months earlier, with a backyard reception at his parents' house. She had cried all

day long, insisting they were tears of happiness. Bryce had passed out shirtless on the lawn well before nightfall.

She amended her statement now: “I took two tests, and they’re both positive. So I’m most likely pregnant.”

“Well.” I set my empty glass down. “I’m so happy for you.”

She sighed. “I just wish Bryce wasn’t so drunk right now.”

I tried to channel the patience of my mother. “Isn’t Bryce always drunk?”

She didn’t reply, just looked longingly out at the dance floor, where Bryce was headbanging wildly, his tie fashioned like a hippie headband on his forehead. He mimed an electric guitar, then dropped to his knees and licked the length of the invisible neck. “He’s been so temperamental lately.”

Temperamental, I thought, was a particularly dignified way to describe a man who had, earlier that day, screamingly accused the concierge of the four-star hotel where they were staying (courtesy of the Mills family) of rifling through his varsity football high school duffel bag to steal the Visa gift card from his wallet.

“Go tell him,” I said, suddenly desperate for both of them to be gone. “Tell him you’re pregnant right now!”

“You’re right. That’d make him so happy, don’t you think?”

“Of course it would! A child is always a gift.”

Then my husband—*my husband!*—walked up in his immaculately tailored suit, and all the bad feelings fell away.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Caleb began, but I had already jumped up and taken his hand.

—

It was midnight when we left the reception. We were staying in the carriage house on the opposite side of the estate. In one moment, we were stumbling through the open door, kissing and pulling at buttons, and the next moment, we were naked on the bed, frozen in Grecian poses of despair.

Both of us were virgins. I could see now that Caleb's comment to me earlier at the altar had not been, as I originally thought, an indication of pure erotic instinct, but rather an act of deep courage, a last-ditch Hail Mary effort to summon his own sexual prowess into the world before he faced the most intimidating vision of his life: his wife's naked body.

Caleb's hand hovered over my breast, then pressed firmly, hands spread wide like a catcher's mitt. Both of us let out a noise, a pairing of grunts. He'd never seen an adult woman's body, he told me that night. (I would later learn this was technically a lie—that his mother had a tendency to take baths with her sons well into their early adolescence; that he'd gone to third base with a second cousin at a family reunion.)

In an effort for momentum, I reached down and wrapped my hand around his penis. So this was what it felt like. Soft, like lamb's skin, but—honestly? About 50 percent less inflated than I expected. Caleb let out another grunt and rocked his hips against me. I was equal parts nauseated and aroused. I could feel his heartbeat pulsing in my grip. Caleb's eyes were closed, his mouth parted in a grim expression of pleasure. "Maybe," he muttered, "you could, you know…"

A thread of irritation stitched itself in my chest. "No, Caleb, I don't know."

"Well, you could spit into your hand, or maybe, kinda use your mouth, you know, to—"

"Nope!" I cried out. "No thank you. Let's just do it the normal way, please."

He sighed and opened his eyes.

It took several minutes for him to maneuver halfway inside me. It helped that I was wet. It didn't help that he was about as hard as half-risen dough. I couldn't believe it. All my life, I'd been imagining a sausage or a cucumber; something to fill me completely. I had not been prepared for sex to feel and to look like Caleb's penis did, which was fine in girth and length but lacked the fortitude to enter me of its own accord. I felt like I needed to throw a dish towel over his penis and wait an hour to let it rise.

The silver lining of Caleb's softness was that losing my virginity didn't hurt. It felt more like a sponge was moving near my stomach; like someone was very gently cleaning me from the inside out. "I love you," I whispered as he breathed heavily in my ear. "I love you, God, I love you, God—"

Caleb met his first missionary ejaculation with abject panic. "Oh holy shit," he gasped. "What the hell?"

—

A year later, the spring of my sophomore year, I was walking to a review class for an upcoming final when I ran into Reena for the first time in a long while. The poor thing was not doing well. I was living off campus by then, in an apartment that Caleb's parents had rented for us, so it spoke to just how big of a story this was that I'd overheard it in the hallways to begin with: the boy Reena had been seeing had unprotected anal sex with someone else. In response to that, Reena needed to get an AIDS test and had been so infuriated by her own humiliation that she retaliated by giving a blow job to his brother, a high school student who'd been visiting for the weekend, and in response to *that*, her crush had called her a fat ugly whore in the middle of a packed dance floor. Lord have mercy on their souls. Now she looked awful, bloated and sweaty and hungover, like a human beer can. She was smoking a cigarette outside the building I needed to enter. When she saw me, her mouth actually fell open. "Natalie. My God."

I was just past six months pregnant. She stared at my bump with a look that harkened a word I hadn't thought of since childhood: *gobsmacked*. She looked absolutely gobsmacked.

"You're glowing," she said, with obvious disappointment.

I pointed at the cigarette in her fingers. "Do you mind?"

She stubbed out the cigarette, still eyeing me with abject surprise. I knew what she was thinking: I was twice as beautiful as I'd ever been. I'd never been ugly, per se, but there had always been a certain sharpness to my expression, a hawkishness to my gaze, that kept me from being outright attractive. At first I'd thought the pregnancy might have added some fat to

my face, some much-needed softening. Eventually, though, I realized what it was that made me look so different: for the first time in my life, I was happy.

"I got married last summer," I said. "To a man named Caleb Mills. He's a senior. Do you know him?"

We smiled cagily at each other. "Of course I know him," she said. "Well—I don't know him, but I know of his dad. Obviously." Her gaze reached my ring finger. "Congratulations." Like she was swallowing a mouthful of blood.

"Where are you off to this summer?" I asked.

She stared longingly at the crushed cigarette by her boot. "An internship at McKinsey."

It was exactly the kind of opportunity that girls like Reena said they wanted: competitive and respectful and well paid. And after all the time I'd spent online in those lonely months of my first semester—all those midnight hours poring through panicked chat threads and editorial screeds about the desperate plight of the uppity working woman—I knew exactly what would come next. As long as Reena didn't screw up royally over the next few summers, she'd get a job offer from the firm after graduation, six figures right out of the gate. *Living the dream!* She would start working seventy or eighty hours a week, subsisting mostly on a diet of cocaine and Red Bull. Her coworkers would comprise a bullpen of male colleagues, men who screwed the small handful of women in the office nonstop, personally and professionally. From here on out, Reena's life was going to be hard. She would have to work hard to get the job, and hard to keep it, and even harder to get promoted, and any promotion she received would lead only to more work, more responsibilities, more hours in the office, and in the meantime she would have to squeeze out a few free hours a week to do everything else: date, stay fit, buy groceries, see friends. If she was one of the lucky ones, she would keep receiving small little bumps to her salary—smaller, of course, than the bumps her male colleagues received, but no matter. *No biggie!* Reena would grow used to this quickly: the simple act of receiving less than she wanted at the same exact time she watched someone

else receive more than she could have hoped for. She would spend her twenties feeling disappointment and labeling it gratitude, and then she would convince herself that this was a form of Buddhist enlightenment: *be happy with what you have.* This is what she would tell herself each time she was faced with the fact that she had once again received less money, less praise, and even a smaller portion of blow than her male coworkers. *Don't forget to say thank you!* Little bumps, little bumps. During this time period of *professional growth,* Reena would also do her best to fall in love and get married, and if she managed that, then years later, when she finally got around to having kids, she would act utterly shocked when her doctor informed her she was a geriatric candidate, and it would be an uphill battle to get pregnant. If she was lucky (and from what I had seen, Reena had never been all that lucky), she'd have to do only one or two rounds of IVF, and there would be only a small handful of months where she found herself joking loudly about lighting money on fire while her husband jabbed at the fat of her ass with a needle (his mind starting to wander past his miserable aging wife to the fun young assistant in his office, the one who was easy and light and funny, the one who had started to look subconsciously to him like the appropriate age for a woman to become pregnant), and when the time came, when Reena finally gave birth, when she finally looked around and realized she'd made it—she was at the top of the mountain, *she had it all!*—the landscape would look like this: her husband no longer wanted to touch her, and her boss no longer wanted to promote her, and her childless friends no longer wanted to spend time with her, and her friends *with* children no longer had time to see her, and Reena, sweet precious Reena, would complain about none of it, not the disappearing husband or the flailing career or the crushing loneliness, not a word of it to anyone, because she would technically be one of the lucky ones—a flush retirement account and four months' maternity leave, in Jesus's name, amen—and in the world that Reena would soon inhabit, you don't get to complain about those kinds of problems. You don't get to complain about privilege.

It was clear Reena was dreading it, not just the internship but the rest of her own life. As if she'd been shot through by some fairy-tale curse. As if

she wasn’t one of the most spoiled people on the planet, free to do whatever she wanted, if only she had the brains or the courage to consider any other path forward beyond the one that feminism, that nasty witch, had offered her. Silly, stupid Reena had bitten the poisoned apple, straight down to the core. Standing there that day, she looked so miserable at the prospect of her own empowered future that I nearly laughed out loud.

“Well,” I said brightly, “congratulations to you too, then! I know those internships are *so* hard to get.” I was practically choking on my satisfaction at this point. The euphoria of my victory was making my vision blur. *I won, I won, I won! You stupid fucking bitch (sorry, Lord), I won!*

“Well,” Reena said, “I guess I’ll see you around or something.”

“You won’t, actually!” I couldn’t resist. I just couldn’t. “I’ve decided to leave school. Caleb’s graduating this spring, and I can always finish up my degree online. We *really* want to spend some time in Paris before the baby comes. It’s a girl, by the way. Did I mention that? I’m having a girl.”

If I could’ve punctuated that sentence by socking Reena straight in her miserable little face, I would’ve. What perfect synchronicity that would have offered to our short, joyless relationship. Instead, I waved goodbye, making a point to really wiggle my fingers so the diamond caught the light, and then I slipped past her, the first angry woman in my life, and skipped forward into the future.

11

I DREAMED I was giving birth on a farm in the middle of nowhere.

No—not right.

I dreamed I was giving many births—all the labor of my life—at once.

A doctor and a husband and a midwife stood over me. They shouted, *PUSH*.

I was terrified and calm and euphoric and regretful. The baby wouldn't budge; the baby slipped right out. I felt the earth-shattering horror of the first time—on my back, staring wildly at an antiseptic ceiling—and the easy chemical slip of the following three, and the roaring triumph on all fours of the fifth—finally at home, finally in charge—and then dozens of babies were pouring out of me, one after another after another after another, crying and gasping on a dirty hardwood floor, bloodstains on my thighs, years of them, caked in sedimental layers on my skin—

The doctor and the husband and the midwife had mouths but no eyes. None of the babies had feet. *MAMA!* everyone cried.

12

ON THE FOURTH DAY of a record heat wave in August, I met our first child, a six-pound girl with coal-black eyes. Clementine.

Caleb thought she was my clone. I thought she looked nothing like me. In fact, I didn't think she looked like any baby I'd ever seen. Her eyes were so dark they appeared aquatic, and even when she was crying, her lips remained frozen in a perfect O, so that she almost looked like a wax doll with a sound machine buried inside. And what could I say about the way she looked at me when I was holding her in my arms? How else could I describe the expression of this child, if not malevolent?

Of course, I didn't say this to anyone. In front of my mother and my husband and my in-laws and the nurses, I cooed and cried and said, *Isn't she perfect?* But when I was alone with the baby, I held her at arm's length. I whispered, "Who are you?"

It didn't help that I was exhausted. It didn't help that I had wanted a home birth, then panicked from the pain at the last minute and told Caleb to call an ambulance, even though I was already on all fours in a pink inflatable pool, my midwife begging me to reconsider. It didn't help that I'd never really *thought* about giving birth in any practical sense, in the same way I'd never thought hard about any of the parts of my life I was predestined for: motherhood, marriage, the afterlife. Why worry over inevitability? All my life, I'd understood and accepted that I was brought into this world for the explicit purpose of eventually bringing other lives into this world, like a never-ending baton pass, an infinite relay of God's

glory. I'd assumed I would step into the role naturally since the role itself was natural, was *nature*. But nothing felt natural about this.

"I feel like an experiment," I told my mother. "I can't stand all this beeping and poking and prodding."

It was the closest I could get to telling her how I felt; the closest I could get to saying, *You're sure this one is mine?*

"You'll feel better when you get home," my mother said airily. "Childbirth takes the wind right out of you."

It was midmorning, the second day.

My mother was fluttering around the room, rearranging the half dozen flower arrangements I had received, fluffing the one decorative pillow on the hospital chair. "No one said childbirth was easy, honey," she said over her shoulder while she fiddled with the window blinds. "They just said it would be worth it."

I stared moodily at nothing. No one had said either of those things to me—and no one, certainly *no one*, had mentioned how ugly childbirth could be, how gruesome and messy. If I was three ounces stupider, I might have expected the stork to drop a baby off at my doorstep, baked to perfection. Of course I'd known, in some rough practical sense, that my body would have to split open for a child to leave it, but I hadn't been remotely prepared for the bald terror of it; hadn't known that my softest and most private patch of skin would rip a full inch; hadn't known the delivery room would smell like iron from all the blood loss, not to mention literal human excrement. I felt like one of those teenage boys shipped off to Normandy for D-Day. From my position in the hospital bed, I kept staring wildly around with bright unseeing eyes, one half of my brain certain someone was going to swoop in and save me, heal me, wake me up from this terrible dream, and the other half certain I was already dead.

"I don't want to go home." I hadn't meant to say it aloud, but there it was. My true thoughts, floating in the air-conditioned space between us.

My mother stopped fiddling with the blinds. Her eyes flashed to me, suddenly watchful. "Is it Caleb?"

The nurse in the corner was suddenly very busy with her clipboard.

The only warning my mother had given me for this period of my life had been that Caleb might not find me attractive after the baby was born. “It’s only natural,” she added, “it’ll pass.” This was the latest iteration of a piece of advice she’d given to my sister and me for years. *Men are like babies—their needs are not negotiable.*

“It has nothing to do with Caleb,” I said. “It’s just—the thing is, I think there’s been—a mistake.”

My mother cocked her head. When she spoke again, her voice was artificially bright. “What kind of mistake?”

The nurse set her clipboard down.

“The baby doesn’t look like me, Mama. Do you honestly think she looks like me? And the way she watches me…” I would never say it aloud, the word I wanted to use to describe the feeling I got around my baby: evil. It wasn’t a term we bandied around in my family. But I felt it clearly when I was with her, a deep, dark sensation, like all the joy had been sucked from the world.

My mother was staring at me now.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I snapped. “I’m perfectly aware of how disgusting I am.” I’d gained twenty-six pounds throughout my pregnancy. Ten of them were now outside me. Those sixteen lingering pounds felt like a second suit of skin. Itchy and ill-fitting.

“You’re going to be back to feeling like yourself in no time,” my mother said. She sat down on the hospital bed and patted my blanketed legs. “You know what might make you feel better? What if you went on a little jog around the hospital? Get your endorphins up? You never were one to enjoy lying around.”

The suggestion struck me simultaneously as completely insane, and also as the first rational thing a person had said to me in days. The old me *did* love to jog. The old me *did* hate lying around.

The nurse was looking at my mother now. “She absolutely cannot go on a jog right now.”

My mother made a *tsk* noise, like she’d forgotten to mention the most important part. “She ran track in high school.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that she needs time to heal.” The nurse gave my mother a meaningful look. “And if you ask me, it sounds like she needs to see a psycholo—”

“You know,” I said, ignoring the nurse entirely, “I *do* think a jog would be nice.”

My mother gave me a look of thoughtful surprise, like she hadn’t just essentially told me to do it. *Now* there’s *an interesting idea!*

“You are not going on a jog right now,” the nurse said firmly.

My mother rolled her eyes behind the nurse’s back. For the first time in days, I smiled.

—

It took ten minutes to wait for the next nursing shift change to take advantage of the commotion and sneak down the hallway wearing nothing but a hospital gown and my mother’s sneakers. It took another fifteen minutes to jog/walk around the perimeter of the emergency room parking lot. By the time I closed the loop at the hospital entrance, it felt like I was experiencing the early stages of organ failure. My heart was thwapping wildly in my chest, my appendix screaming its threats to rupture, and with each step forward, I could feel, literally *feel*, the precious stretch of skin *down there* as it ripped open again, the doctor’s stitches no match for my mother’s voice in my head.

Thatta girl, Natalie, get those endorphins up, up, up!

Blood ran in slick rivers down my thighs. I collapsed into a nurse while I was walking back through the hospital entrance. The nurse half carried me back to my room, helping me fall into my mother’s arms.

“What’s all this about?” my mother said lovingly while I cried into her lap. Like I was a family dog coming home from some neighborhood walkabout with a coat full of burs.

“I can’t do it, Mama,” I sobbed. “I can’t do this.” It was hard to breathe through the sheer panic coursing through my veins.

“Oh, Nattie.” My mother rubbed my back in great, sweeping circles. “Of course you can.”

“How do you know?” I wailed.

“I know you can,” she said softly, “because you have to.”

She kept rubbing my back, whistling a cheery hymn about His love and glory while I shuddered and sobbed in her lap. When that song was over, she sang another. She moved through a whole church service’s worth of music while my body slowly went still.

Right as I was about to drift into unsettled sleep, Clementine began to cry. My mother leaned over and whispered into my ear, “Get up.”

13

GET UP, NATALIE, my mother whispers into my ear. *Come on, now. It's time to wake up.*

I can't do it, Mama. I can't do this.

Of course you can.

How do you know?

I know you can because you have to. Now get up.

Get up, Natalie.

NATALIE, GET UP.

—

I startle awake. Clementine is sitting at the foot of the bed, looking at me.

No, not Clementine. Mary. Frowning at me with interest. Between her tightly pulled braids and her navy buttoned dress, she looks in every way like the sternest candy striper on the planet. "It's time to get up," she says again.

"No." The word shapes itself like a sob.

"Yes," she says firmly. "You've been in bed for long enough. Your fever has broken, and it'll be good for you to move around."

The more I blink awake, the more aware I am of my leg. My God, it hurts. I close my eyes, desperate to fall asleep and wake up somewhere else.

"Come on." She shakes my good leg, and I moan pitifully. "You have to get up. I can't keep neglecting all the other work I need to do in order to tend to your violent moods."

I open my eyes and look at her incredulously. “Is that what you would call what happened to me? A *violent mood*?”

She rolls her eyes, smooths the wrinkles off her lap, and stands up.

“You people are criminals,” I hiss wildly. “You’ll rot in jail for what you’ve done to me.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to walk out the door without answering me. But then she points a finger at me and snaps, “If you’re not up in five minutes, I will come back here and saw your foot off myself.”

She stomps out of the room before I can respond.

—

I feel like I’m living in the aftermath of a failed punch line.

As I slowly sit up, wincing at the throbbing in my leg, a distant memory surfaces: Mary, leaning over me, her voice a distant echo, her face a rippling reflection: *She’s lucky she didn’t snap the bone clean in two.*

And then Old Caleb, amending angrily from across the room: *It’s not luck, it’s science. That trap is meant to catch ferrets and squirrels and marmots, it doesn’t have the force necessary to crush a human bone!*

And the babies, all those babies—what a strange, terrible dream. It seemed to last forever. A whole lifetime, caught up in a single nightmare, with the doctor and the midwife and my husband standing over me—

My husband.

Hold on.

Old Caleb. Where has he been sleeping, if not here in this room?

Another strange vision surfaces, half memory, half recollected fever dream: Old Caleb walking through my bedroom in the darkness. Crawling into bed with me.

And me, pinned to the bed by my own terror, moaning in pain and fear. Did it happen, or did I dream it? Us, lying there, side by side in the pitch-black? What I remember: feeling each of his heartbeats like they were my own. The two of us, like a pair of foxes tucked into a knoll. And then he

turned to me and said in my mother's voice, *IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD, NATALIE—*

No. That can't be right. In fact, I think wildly, looking around the room, *None of this can be right.*

"Mama?"

I glance sharply at the doorway. There's Maeve again. Sweet small thing. My brittle heart softens at the sight of her face. I think of my own little girls. Jessa, Junebug; how Caleb would sometimes walk into the bedroom to see me snuggled together beneath the covers with them. How he would chuckle and call them my little shadows. *They'd crawl back inside you if they could.*

Yes, I think bitterly. *The little girls love me. It's the older ones who give me trouble.*

Well. If Mary will go on hating me, might as well make a friend of Maeve. "Good morning, sweetie pie."

Maeve's face lights up. Before I can say anything else, she crosses the room and climbs into bed with me, her fingers snarling into my hair, her breath warming my ear. I wonder if she loves me like a child loves her mother, or like a child loves a new pet. "How's your foot, Mama?"

"It's—" A whimper escapes me. "It honestly hurts a lot."

"Poor Mama." She strokes my face gently, her little face crumpled with almost comically adult concern. "Poor, poor, Mama." She's like a little kitten, purring at the first gentle hand. As we lie there, she tells me about her dreams, one by one. She was a princess, then a pony, then a princess pony. She flew through the sky. *Whoosh.* She held the whole world in her cupped hands, and it felt cold and smooth like a marble, and in the marble she'd seen me, tiny as a chicken, waving up at her. *Hello, Big Maeve! Peep peep!*

"Maeve," I say, "Mary wants me to get out of bed. But what in the Lord's name am I supposed to do?"

"Chickens," she says immediately. "Little ladies."

A chill runs through me. "Yes. Let's go see the ladies. First I need to get dressed." But my foot. How am I supposed to walk? And then I see it,

placed carefully by the door: a hand-carved walking stick.

—

I ask Maeve to help me pick out my outfit for the day, and she thrills at the idea. I'm hoping the activity will kill at least forty-five minutes; it can't be later than seven in the morning, and the promise of the day looms impossibly before me. Every minute I spend with Maeve, in here, is one less minute I have to be out *there. It'll be cute,* I tell myself glumly as we get out of bed. *You can try on a bunch of different outfits, like some romantic comedy montage. See, Natalie? See how you can create fun no matter where you are?*

Quite the contrary. Unfortunately, all I apparently have to choose from is an unbelievably sad little bureau with three drawers, each one containing the same kind of god-awful clothing the others have been wearing. The shirts and the skirts are so dated they look like costumery. Civil War–drab fashion. The fabric manages to be depressing and colorless and stiff, all at once. I feel a sharp pang for my closet at home. My garment bags, my steamer. My sweaters, fluffy and fitted and oversized, each one plucked to perfectly match my exact coloring, which is Light Summer, according to the colorist expert I'd met years earlier. I look best in lilacs and chocolates, the purest vanilla creams. And while the clothing I'm looking at now technically *has* colors, somehow the fabric still feels colorless, like it's designed to match the skin tone of a corpse.

The first drawer contains three prairie dresses, neatly folded into a row of what I would kindly describe as faded earth tones, olive and taupe and gray, as well as two additional nightgowns, both of which are the kind of white that makes me think of teeth in need of a good bleach. (Perhaps the single most valuable learning of college: that teeth could, and should, be bleached.) I pull out the olive-colored prairie dress. "This'll do."

Next drawer: sweaters, all in bruisy blues and gym-class grays. My God, is everything starched cotton? I feel a near-romantic yearning for linens and flannel blends. Wool! How have I been so unappreciative of

wool? Just the thought of cashmere makes my throat tighten. Even a terrible polyester blend would make me cry in relief. I take a deep breath, then sigh all my frustration out. I pull one depressing gray sweater out of the pile of folded depressing gray sweaters. Then I give Maeve my best cheery look, even though I'm starting to feel a little suicidal. I slip on a piece of fabric that feels like a burlap sack, then find a small, sad pair of lace-up boots by the bureau. I put one on; it fits snug around my foot. Practically form-fitted. I leave my bandaged foot free.

"Well?" I say to Maeve, once I'm dressed. "What do you think?" I do a little spin, and she laughs and claps for me. I don't need a mirror to know it looks terrible on me. I feel like an American Girl doll. I fix the buttons on my sweater and say to Maeve, "Chickens?"

"Chickens," she agrees, and reaches for my hand.

—

The sky is a light purple when we step outside. It's early morning. Maeve guides me down the steps and toward the coop. I limp slowly forward, resting all my weight on the carved handle of the walking stick with each half step. The blood has rushed downward; my leg is now pounding with near-excruciating heat. It feels like I'm rising to a boil from the inside out.

I glance over at the mountains, their peaks and crags lit with the rising sun, and feel a sudden and overwhelming urge to bash my head against something hard. The night before (or maybe the *night before the night before*, or *the night before the night before the night before*), when I was lying in bed alone, delirious with pain and panic, I tried to convince myself that the things I'd seen weren't actually there; that in my fear, I'd misunderstood a cardboard cutout for the real thing. *You're on set,* I told myself while I was shivering and moaning and crying beneath that kill-yourself quilt. *You're at Universal Studios, thousands of miles away from your home. It's all a big, fancy, expensive illusion. Even the steel trap, even the pain—all of it is a magic trick, a miracle sleight of hand.*

As I walk outside in the frigid mountain air, the words that had worked so well to comfort me now ring hollow and childish. The great, shark-bite gash on my ankle is not fake. The pain is not imagined. Those mountains in the distance are not cardboard. This crisp, thin air is not being pumped through a vent. I'm still exactly where I've always been. If anything, it's everyone and everything else in my life that have left, my real family and my real house and my real clothing. My whole world has packed up and left me behind. All of it, replaced by cheap impersonations. Like one of those artificial pioneer villages you see advertised on the billboards along Route 66.

At that moment, Mary steps out onto the front porch with a rug and beats it over the side of the railing. I watch the dust carry away in the air. It's such a perfectly trained moment, like something out of a movie, that I think suddenly: *Too perfect.*

A second later, Maeve is tugging me along, chattering her good morning to the rising sun and the falling moon and the big purple sky, when I trip on something with my good foot and cry out.

I look down and see something by my boot. There, buried halfway in the dirt, is something small and black.

"Mama," Maeve chirps.

"Hold on," I murmur. I drop to a one-legged crouch and pick gently at the nub until I'm able to pull it out of the packed earth. It rolls lightly across my palm, leaving a trail of dust, coming to rest at the center of my love and lifelines.

It's plastic. It looks like a broken piece of lapel microphone, the kind you clip to a shirt collar or tuck away by a windowsill. I've used them thousands of times before.

I scrutinize the little black nub. I haven't been taken away to some faraway film set—but perhaps the film set has come to me.

"Mama!" Maeve says, more impatiently now.

"I'm coming!" I glance quickly at the house, and then over my shoulder at the fields. I tuck the nub into my skirt pocket and stand up.

14

THE DAY OF MY DISCHARGE, I sat in a wheelchair at the hospital entrance, my child squirming angrily in my arms, my mother's hands resting firmly on my shoulders, while we waited for my husband to navigate the parking lot pay machine. I swallowed the urge to let the baby roll off my lap, to raise the swaddled blanket over my head and chuck her as far as I could manage.

"Beautiful day," my mother said.

"It is," I replied. A car alarm went off in the distance. While my mother hummed the melody to "Lamb of God," I gazed up at the sky and prayed furiously for death.

—

At home, I got out of the car, left the baby in the car seat, and walked straight up the stairs and into my childhood bedroom. At some indeterminate point between the moment I told my mother I didn't think the child was mine and the moment I was discharged, it had been decided that we would be staying at her house for the indefinite future.

I got into bed while my mother carried Clementine upstairs behind me and moved to the diaper table in the corner. "There, there," she kept saying, over quick Velcro rips. "That's a good girl." To whom, I wasn't sure. I pulled the covers over my head and waited for them to leave.

—

Time did not pass. I lay beneath the comforter, frozen beneath the frigid beam of His fury, staring up at a gauzy layer of purple fabric, which functioned like a roving eyelid, reducing the world to a series of lights and shadows. It felt like I was a baby, floating in amniotic space. It felt, also, like I was dead, waiting for the Lord to pull the spirit from my hardened body. My mother must have sensed the general direction of my hopelessness, because she kept saying an old Sunday school line to me every time she came upstairs to change a diaper or bring me a meal or help me with a feeding: "Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith, sweetheart."

I didn't reply.

—

Sleep, breastfeed.

Breastfeed, sleep.

Sleep, sleep, sleep.

Breastfeed. Cry.

Breastfeed. Sleep.

Kill yourself.

No—sorry.

Sleep.

—

At one point my sister came to visit me. Abigail was a mother of two now: she had given birth a few months after my wedding, then immediately gotten pregnant again, and now had a one-month-old in addition to her fourteen-month-old. Two boys: Brandon and Brady. (She thought the matching *B* names were cute. Privately, my mother had concerns about this strategy: If, God willing, Abigail had a family of five or six or seven, would she really have all the names start with *B*? Wouldn't we all grow tired of the sound?) As Abigail perched at the foot of my bed, I tensed myself, waiting for some version of my mother's speech. *Doubt your doubts, et cetera!*

When Abigail finally spoke, though, her voice was so quiet that it nearly blended into the whizzing drone of the rotating fan. “It’s awful, isn’t it?”

I said nothing. Didn’t even let myself exhale, for how surely a *yes* would slip out with my breath.

“Not the babies. The babies are—perfect.” She let out a quick ragged gasp. “I’m just so tired. And *Bryce*—” Another pause. “He always wants to have sex. And I’m just—and the boys are so—”

I closed my eyes. Where were the boys, anyways? Downstairs, probably, with my mother, the only woman in this house who seemed actually interested in taking care of these children.

“I think I might be pregnant again. Can you imagine? Three babies in three years. I can’t believe it. I never thought it would—*happen,* this fast.”

There was a stirring in my heart, a deep agitation. My sister and I didn’t talk like this. We never had. Our relationship had always felt a bit like the relationship between a queen and a pawn on the chessboard: we danced around each other, sometimes as allies, sometimes as rivals, but never once, in any sense, as equals. The idea that we might finally have found ourselves on equal footing in this moment—as complete and utter failures of motherhood—was not a recognition I was equipped to handle.

“I’ve been thinking about it, you know,” she whispered. “Getting birth control. Bryce doesn’t believe in it, but I heard you can just go to the doctor and get it. Without them knowing, I mean.”

This was my breaking point. I sat up, startling her, and hissed, “Birth control? Lying to your husband? These are sins, Abigail.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry you’re having a hard time, but it’s not fair for you to project your issues onto my life.”

For a moment it looked inevitable that Abigail, crybaby of the family, would collapse into sobs, but she didn’t. Instead, her eyes, liquid soft, seemed to harden and dry. “Of course not. I just wanted you to know, if you’re having a hard time—”

“I’m not having a hard time. I’m just tired, and I like to sleep when the baby sleeps. Which is why I was trying to take a nap before she woke up.”

I lay back down in bed, pulling the covers high around my head. At that moment, there was a gurgling peal from downstairs. Undeniably Clementine.

“I’ll let you sleep, then,” my sister said. “Before she wakes up.”

But she sat there anyway for a long time, motionless at the foot of my bed, her hand on my feet, before finally she whispered something about getting home to make dinner, and then I was alone again.

—

The next time I saw Caleb, he said, “Your mom mentioned you might need a little pick-me-up.”

We’d been home from the hospital for ten days. I’d showered once. My young, jovial husband was sitting at the foot of my bed for the first time in days, a handful of presents in his lap. He handed me the first one, a small box. I opened it to find a small silver flip phone.

“That way I can call you wherever you are.”

I looked at him. “But I don’t go anywhere.”

“That brings me to gift number two.”

I opened the bigger box. Inside were a brand-new pair of turquoise running shoes, along with a handwritten note. As I read it, I could practically hear my mother as she instructed Caleb, word for word: *A new pair of baby blues to run the other kind away.*

“The lady at the store said this brand is everyone’s favorite,” Caleb said. He pointed at the foam heel. “Famous runners use this style.”

Before I could reply, he leaned over and picked up another bag, pulling out something black with mesh straps. “I also got this,” he said, lifting it up so the straps dangled in the air. It was a baby carrier. “So the baby can go with you when you run, and you can bring the phone in case you need to reach me. Neat, huh?”

This was the moment the crisis became clear to me. This was the moment I realized my husband was an actual, honest-to-God idiot: when he suggested with all the sincerity in the world that I might like to bring our

two-week-old newborn with me on a jog. I imagined Clementine's tiny brain bouncing around like a bruised fruit in her playdough skull while I stumbled through an asthma attack on some nearby sidewalk, phone to my ear, waiting for someone at home to pick up. On one of our early dates, Caleb had said he wasn't "book smart," but that wasn't the full truth, was it? The full truth was that he wasn't *anything* smart. He was a nice, dumb rich kid. And what did that make me? A fool. An embarrassment of a woman. At the most important moment in my life, I'd made a critical error of judgment: I'd mistaken a man's wealth for his intellect. I'd assumed that Caleb's presence at Harvard justified some sort of success of critical thinking skills—but I hadn't considered until now that he'd gotten in on the worth of his last name alone. The realization filled my mouth with a bright, acidic flavor. Like I'd swallowed some sort of lemon-scented disinfectant. I blinked rapidly, my eyes stinging.

A girl like Reena never would've made a mistake like this.

My husband was an idiot. Worse, there was absolutely nothing to be done about it. In the world that I came from, *divorce* was a German word that translated loosely to *a lifetime of destitution and misery followed by an eternity in Hell*. You didn't leave your husband if he slapped you in the face, or had an affair, or set you up on a weekly allowance so sparse that you snapped at your children when they spilled a glass of milk, and you *certainly* didn't leave your husband if he was just some dumb rich guy.

The disappointment was so big that I had trouble seeing it with any clarity. I felt myself stepping back, and then back again, in an effort to see the picture more fully.

The coffee date. The fancy Italian dinner. The engagement party. The wedding. All our sunny afternoons sitting on patios in Paris, smiling mildly at nothing.

What did we talk about?

I couldn't remember a single substantial conversation.

There it was, I couldn't avoid it now: the dawning, prickly sense that I knew my husband as well as I knew the elderly cashier who bagged groceries in my hometown.

I was feeling a bit woozy now. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the realization that this man was nowhere near as handsome as I had been telling myself he was. Maybe it was the nausea. But no—*no*, his eyes were closer together than I thought they were. And the tip of his nose—had it always been so bulbous? And what about the acne on his chin? Did my husband have a pizza face on the day of our wedding?

Caleb registered the force of my attention. “Is everything okay, Nattie?”

At the sound of my own name, my self-awareness snapped back into place. I shook off the misery with the shivering force of a wet dog. “Tell me,” I said. “How do you know me so well?”

He grinned. He kissed me. He helped me out of bed so I could lace up the straps.

—

I was just over two weeks postpartum. I couldn’t run or even jog without ripping my stitches and unleashing a rush of clotted blood. But I could walk. Boy, could I walk. And so I began a daily ritual of walking for hours through my neighborhood in the late afternoon. In the beginning, I left the cell phone and the baby carrier and the baby at home, and before long it was my favorite part of the day. I liked watching the steady stream of cars rolling down the road, peeling off one by one into various driveways. I watched the husbands get out of pickup trucks and SUVs and small sleek sedans. I glanced into kitchen windows to see wives in purple and blue and pink aprons pulling roast chickens out of the oven, setting the trays down, and calling over their shoulders for their children to come down for dinner. The kitchens gleamed. The lawns were lush and vibrant. This was the world that the girls in college had found so revolting; these were the driveways they prayed their cars would never pull into. And yet it was unmistakable: these wives and husbands and children were visibly happier than anyone I’d gone to school with. The families were assembly-line functional. The marriages were superglue-tight.

The epiphany arrived slowly for me. With each house I passed—each husband hopping out of the car with a spring in his step; each wife joyfully pulling a tray out of the oven—the realization became clearer and clearer until I had completed the neighborhood loop and was standing back in front of my mother's house, right where I started.

—

Inside, my mother was holding Clementine at the kitchen island. "I'll take her," I said.

She carefully transferred the swaddle of pink into my arms, blinking away tears as she stepped back and watched me become a mother.

My daughter looked up with cold, unimpressed eyes. Caleb was right. She did look just like me. I held her gaze, trying to communicate silently. *We've gotten off to a rocky start, haven't we? Let me reintroduce myself. I'm Natalie. I'm your mother. And I'm going to be in charge from here on out. You don't have to pretend to like me, but I'm going to pretend to like you. I will fake the emotions until I genuinely feel them. That's a promise, okay?*

She blinked twice, then snuffled her grudging approval. I lifted her head to my lips, kissed her tissue-soft forehead. "I think I'll take her on my walk tomorrow," I said.

"I think that would be very nice," my mother said gently.

Then I walked into the living room, where Caleb was watching football. "Caleb," I said, positioning myself between my husband and his sight of the game. When his gaze moved slowly to me, I said brightly, "When are you going to get a job?"

15

AS I LIMP SLOWLY toward the chicken coop, Maeve's small warm hand in mine, I can just barely feel the small little nub bouncing softly in the skirt pocket against my thigh.

On the outside, I think—I hope—I look calm.

On the inside, I'm screaming.

Maeve lets go of my hand and opens the wire entry to the coop, then runs over to the chickens, who *bockbockbock* at her in greeting. "Hello, ladies," she says grandly. She turns around and looks at me with that little-girl expression I know so well, the look a child gives her mother when she wants approval. I weakly echo the same statement to the coop. "Hello, ladies."

I really think I might throw up.

Maeve pets each chicken on the head as she passes. She has a name for each one of them. Teacup and Little Loaf and Missus Princess Sweater. Before I know it, she's sitting cross-legged among the ladies, chatting happily to each of them like she's at a tea party, the task of collecting their eggs forgotten for the time being.

I stand by the entrance, my hand in my pocket, the pebble held tightly in my fist, small and hard like a bullet.

Someone is watching me. I know it. In fact I don't just *know* it—I *feel* it, too, deep in my gut. Every move I make is being logged somewhere, every action recorded, every word transcribed. There's an artifice to this world, a subtle glimmer of surreality at the edges. It feels less like real life and more like an *idea* of real life, less like reality and more like a show—

A show.

A *reality* show?

I play back the last two days as if it were a pilot episode in reverse. The microphone, the clothing, the steel trap, the soap molds, the slap—

"Be extra nice to Mama today," Maeve says sternly to the bobbing, idiot chicken heads like a little schoolteacher. "She has a big boo-boo. She isn't feeling good."

"What are you guys doing out there?" Mary is standing on the porch, calling over to us. "Hurry up already."

"Coming," Maeve calls in response, then stands up, wiping the dust from her dress.

What kind of reality show would allow a man to slap a woman? What kind of people would stand idly by while she stepped into a steel trap and nearly chopped off her own foot?

None, I tell myself while Maeve drops eggs one at a time into my basket, the little black nub hot in my fist.

Then I pause and consider it.

—

I've had a sweet tooth for reality television ever since my college days. I started watching a number of franchise shows in Boston and could never quite bring myself to stop. A dating show, a married-at-first-sight show, a strangers-living-together show. I've been watching these shows for a decade now, so I know there's always some kind of scuffle in the penultimate episode of the season, some drunken slap fight to stoke bitter conversations at the reunion. Granted, those fights nearly always take place between members of the same sex—but still. There's no denying that they're getting scummier every year, the scenes slanting downward into more degrading and outlandish scenarios. At the outset—back in the days when I was sitting alone in the dorm rec room, the only person still in the building on a Friday night at ten—the reality dating shows were filled with cheerily idiotic women able to convince themselves to some degree of logic that the

experience would be an enjoyable milestone in their lives. A decade later, no woman with two brain cells and a pulse could be able to convince herself of that fact. The new crowd of young women know the world that claims to love them so much actually wants nothing more than to bloodlet them slowly over time. To devour them alive. These girls aren't disciplined or well-bred enough to choose a life path like the one I chose, the poor things, so they have to find another way to build currency. They have to whore themselves out. Smash the glass, get the cash, and run. Not an ideal path, but also not the stupidest by a long shot. The stupidest path is Reena's path: accepting a job in an industry designed, filled, and run by men.

The truth is that whoring yourself out can take you pretty far, if you do it with intention. Look at Mary Magdalene. Now there is a woman who understood the assignment.

When I think about the most recent seasons of my favorite dating shows —how even the more upscale, family-friendly shows have started forcing the girls to give confessionals while groggy with sleep deprivation and cross-eyed from a steady gargling of mimosas for the better part of a day—I feel a strange, numbing sense of relief.

America hates women. What a comfort to remember.

It is, I decide, entirely possible that a reality show premiering in the next few years would allow a man to hit a woman and knock her out; equally possible that they would allow that same woman to wander through a minefield of archaic booby traps and nearly blow off her foot in the process. In fact—this really perks me up—it's more than possible. It's likely. Arguably inevitable. Practically necessary! The Angry Women, after all, are defined by their own infinite capacity for restlessness. If you want to keep them entertained, you must be willing to constantly raise the stakes.

Nothing too serious, I can see the producers saying to one another in some brightly lit conference room, over gold-flecked green juices and caviar-topped salads. *Just one little knockout. Nothing that could* actually *hurt her—and besides, we'll have the paramedics on-site in case anything goes awry!* I watch them in my mind's eye, hemming and hawing over the precise angle of the shot, the correct velocity of the slap, the precision of

the metal trap clapping shut around my ankle. *Hard enough to cause a blackout, soft enough to avoid brain damage. That's the needle to thread here, boys. Oh—and we must make sure the trap has the right force to break the skin but not the bone. Otherwise we'll need to airlift her out of there.* I float overhead as they walk out of some production office in Culver City, clapping one another on the back for a job well done. *Maybe this year we'll get an Emmy.* I follow them as they drive home in electric cars littered with pink bumper stickers—*Save Our Oceans; Believe Women!*—and I let out a long sigh of relief at the hypocrisy of modern coastal elites.

As for the vanished pregnancy?

I don't like to think about it. Even now, as Maeve drops the last egg into the basket—this strangely fraudulent world so *real,* so *crisp* all around me, that it makes my brain flicker with discomfort—I have a hard time accepting the fact that I'm not pregnant.

In fact—yes, I would really like to stop thinking about that now.

I gaze out at the property. The barn. The fields beyond, long grass rolling in waves beneath the breeze.

You fuckers, you masochists, you wolves in sheep's clothing: Where are you?

"This reality show blows," I say aloud as Maeve tugs me back to the house. The wind whistles in reply.

16

AT FIRST CALEB ARGUED that he didn't need a job.

"We have money," he said. "What's the rush?"

He would go to graduate school in a year, he said. Or the year after that. Or we could travel. *Let's take the baby to Rome!* We could feed each other handmade raviolis at some patio table tucked away on some cobblestoned alleyway while Clementine slept peacefully in one of our laps. He would get a job *eventually*—finance, maybe, or law; he could teach, or own some business; he'd always been fascinated by the world of day traders, or maybe he could open a bar!—but there was no need to rush into it. Why not enjoy this special period of our lives, newlyweds with a newlyborn?

By the end of this argument, which was delivered to me at least a dozen times, my teeth would be so clenched that my jaw felt wired shut, and I would have to take several long breaths before I could reply, as coolly as possible, that the idea of taking our one-month-old to Europe made me want to stick my head into an oven and turn up the burners.

"Fine," he would say easily. "No Europe. No travel. Let's buy that farm!"

At which point I would shake my head and say in exasperation, "Do you know how much work a *farm* is? I can't do that with a newborn!"

"I think it would be fun. We could get some chickens and cows. I've always wanted to ride a horse!"

"We're not buying a farm right now, Caleb."

"Okay, then let's buy a house. Settle down. Grow some roots."

"Buy a house *where*?"

He gestured out the kitchen window. “How about here?”

I imagined buying a house on my mother’s street. Caleb’s father would undoubtedly give us the money for it. We could pay cash. Our expenses would be negligible. And each day, as all the husbands drove home to their families, at least one man would glance over at our house, where the car would already be parked, the football game already on, and slowly, the word would get around: the new couple in town were a shameful pair.

You had to hand it to my husband, this fairy-tale fever dream of a man-child I’d married: he’d offered the only vision of the future that felt more damning to me than the one of us carrying a screaming infant around Italy.

It was hard to keep my cool during these conversations; hard, even, to think straight when I felt a desperation so overpowering it verged on self-harm. My husband’s lack of ambition was astounding, quite literally hard for me to comprehend. I’d never known a man who didn’t want to work. Then again, I’d never known a rich man. Was this what happened when you were born into such wealth and preestablished power? Or was this the only clear way in which my husband, the father of my child, was special?

“People don’t just work for money,” I tried. “They do it to create meaning in their lives. To establish *order.*”

At this, he smiled wide, revealing his yellower-than-I-remembered teeth. “Why can’t I stay home and help you with the baby?”

Because your idea of helping with the baby is saying “Awww, isn’t she cute?” I thought but didn’t say. *Because you aren’t even remotely helpful with the baby, you can’t clip her nails or apply her diaper cream or give her a bottle in the dark without causing her to wake up, and because I don’t need you to be a nanny, I need you to do the things I cannot do and be the things I cannot be. I need you to get a job, dear husband. I need you to be a man.*

“Because it’s not healthy to do nothing!” I screeched instead.

These conversations always ended in some relatively agreeable place, where Caleb would promise to *look around* online for *something that might fit.* And then five days would pass, and I would ask him how it was going, and he would give me a blankly shameful look, the look of a dog who’d

briefly forgotten they weren't meant to piss inside, and then I would have to walk into the bathroom, shut the door, lock it, turn on the shower and the bathroom faucet, and scream into one of my mother's lovingly embroidered hand towels. *God bless this house!*

And then one afternoon Caleb came home with the weekly grocery haul and a new yoga mat. "For exercise," he said, when my mother asked nervously what he planned to do with it.

"Ah!" she said. "Of course." But she kept glancing at it with a look of genuine terror, like it might just become a murder weapon if she didn't keep tabs on it. Eventually after dinner, she picked up the yoga mat and disappeared down the hallway. When she came back, the yoga mat was gone. She caught my eye and winked.

But my husband had other plans. The next day he wandered around the house, whistling absently, opening drawers and closet doors until he found the mat rolled up behind the umbrella stand. He took the mat, stepped outside, rolled it out in the driveway, and dropped to his stomach in the early morning sun. I watched through the kitchen window, stricken, as a seemingly infinite line of cars rolled past us on their morning commute, a long procession of men in suits glancing out with suspicion at the young father frozen in downward-facing dog on a Tuesday at 8 a.m.

This was it: the moment I lost my patience. So I did what any good Christian woman would do when she can no longer bear to do nothing: I went to my mother in tears, and she instructed me to call *his* mother in tears, and then his mother called *him* in a hurricane of humiliation and fury.

—

The journey to California was silent. Caleb drove the whole time. He was angry with me, obviously, but I think he was also shocked by what I had done. And do you know what? It was strangely gratifying to watch him sit there in the driver's seat, grinding his teeth with anxiety, occasionally looking over at me and just as quickly looking away when he caught my eye. I'd spent the last month becoming slowly horrified by certain aspects

of my husband's character, traits that were emerging only long after the opportunity had passed for me to change my mind about picking him, so it felt like the inevitable next step for him to become equally horrified by me. I could practically watch his brain as it made slow, thoughtful jumps toward grand conclusions: Natalie, the perfectly agreeable wife, was capable of going behind his back and complaining to his mother. Natalie, the prim and faithful girl, was not afraid of snapping at her husband's neck. Maybe even: Natalie was not as pretty as he remembered. (Was it just him, or was her face a bit more…*angular,* perhaps, than it had looked at their wedding? Had her chin always been so pointy? Had her eyes always been so lifeless, so cold?) Oh, what a shame, what an absolute shame. Poor Caleb had been conned, bamboozled, tricked! His young, beautiful, fertile wife had been so relaxed for the first year of marriage. So easygoing. So quiet! She hadn't demanded a single thing. Now—cue the horror movie soundtrack in his head, *dun dun dun!*—she'd started to speak up. She'd started to make some demands.

As we drove through the flatlands in silence, I could practically hear our minds moaning in unison: *It isn't fair.*

—

Six hours into the twelve-hour drive, Caleb cleared his throat and said, "I didn't know that—"

"*Volume,"* I whispered in terror. I was practically sitting sideways in the passenger seat, glancing backward at the car seat every thirty seconds. Clementine was napping fitfully; each little squeak she let out made my back go rigid with fear. I glanced over at him, then whispered proddingly, at the volume I wanted him to match, "What didn't you know?"

"That you were unhappy," he said (to my relief, quite quietly). "I didn't know. You didn't tell me."

I frowned. *Happy*—that wasn't a word I had considered in this situation. "It's not that I'm unhappy. I just want us to settle in, Caleb."

“And so you called my mother.” This, the deadened quiet tone Caleb was using, was new. I felt like I was watching a pet perform a naughty trick I hadn’t taught them. A parakeet unraveling a toilet roll. *Where did you learn that?*

“You should have to tell me,” he said. “If you’re unhappy, you should be required to tell me that.”

“I’m not unhappy,” I said again. We were both staring at the long ribbon of highway ahead, barren salt flats all around us. In the corner of my eye, I clocked Caleb’s tight, double-handed grip on the wheel with an almost-academic interest. *So* this *is what an angry husband looks like.*

“You know,” Caleb said, “it’s really not that unusual to not know what you want to do with your life right out of college.”

“Of course it isn’t. But—”

“It’s not that unusual. Really, it isn’t.”

I didn’t reply. The clarification I had wanted to add—*but ideally a man should have some purpose before he decides to bring another life into the world*—now felt too combative.

“I just thought,” Caleb said. “I thought you would be—”

The silence stretched too long. “What? You thought I’d be *what*?”

“Never mind.”

We didn’t speak again for the rest of the drive.

—

Caleb’s parents lived outside Napa Valley, on an old Spanish estate with twenty-four-hour surveillance and an active working vineyard. The property had been in their family for four generations. It was nearly as old as the family’s most precious heirloom: their history of political ambition. As we pulled onto the Mills estate driveway, a long and winding road buffeted by live oak trees—and beyond the oak trees: migrant workers, hundreds of them, sweating beneath the late afternoon sun—I breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank you, Lord, for the Inheritance.*

Doug and Amelia were waiting for us when we rolled up to the great circular entranceway, Doug in a button-down shirt rolled up at the elbows, Amelia in a collared shirtdress. Not a wrinkle between the two of them. Like a pair of vintage figurines, Mr. and Mrs. America positioned *just so* in front of the massive double-entrance oak doors. The car rolled to a stop, and they approached us with matching grins. Doug opened the passenger door for me, and I turned to him with the biggest, fakest smile I could muster.

"Look who made it!" Doug roared.

"Where's my gorgeous little grandbaby?" Amelia exclaimed.

Clementine was half-awake when I opened the back-seat door. I unbuckled and pulled her out of the car seat with all the care and precision of a bomb-disarming expert. To my amazement, she performed perfectly for the moment, gazing up at her grandparents with a little twinkle in her usually miserable dark eyes. I stared down at my daughter with a new measure of respect.

"You sure can make a mean baby, Natalie," Doug said.

Before I could reply, Amelia lifted Clementine out of my arms. "That's a darling little girl, *yes*, ma'am." Then she looked up at me, her face a veneer of hostess perfection. Pink-painted lips, eyebrows plucked into a perfect bridge. "You must be exhausted, Natalie. Let's get you a cold glass of water, then I'll have Maria make you a cappuccino. You'll love Maria. She's an absolute godsend."

(As it would turn out, I would never actually get to know Maria at all. The employees at the Mills estate were trained to be *discreet*, which meant that they optimized their work schedules such that they were practically invisible to me throughout the day.)

Caleb slammed the car door shut. The three of us looked over at him.

"Hello, Mother," he said formally. "Hello, Father."

Caleb walked around the car and stood there, arms limp by his sides as Doug gave him a bear hug. He stared blankly at me over his father's shoulder, as if to say, *Are you happy now?*

But Caleb's parents seemed unbothered by his gloom. As we walked inside, I fell a few steps behind the three of them and watched as Doug and

Amelia talked at him simultaneously, his mother relaying the latest gossip with the neighbors while his father brayed about how lazy the new garden workers were.

"—couldn't honestly understand why she would send little Richard to a boarding school at such a young age—"

"—caught 'em *napping* at lunch time, snoring, can you believe it—?"

I could practically see Caleb wilting with each step he took farther into the house. He looked like a houseplant getting tortured with a hair dryer.

"You've had *such* a long drive," Amelia said to us. She was holding Clementine in the practiced crook of one arm. "Why don't we get Luiz to take your bags upstairs?"

She rested a tentative hand on Caleb's shoulder. He shrugged it off and said, "I can carry my own bags."

"Not a problem," she replied smoothly. "In the meantime—can I get you both something to drink? A seltzer or a coffee?"

Doug chimed in. "Pint of beer?"

Caleb's face was a crumple of fury, but still he muttered, "A glass of milk would be nice."

My expression was frozen in a debutante scream. Milk. My husband wanted milk. Beneath the artificial delight was a curdling feeling, a distinctly unsettling sense that I had unknowingly married and been impregnated by a toddler.

At the exact moment my mask fell, my father-in-law glanced over at me. His gaze was every bit as curious as his son's was hostile. I could practically hear what he was thinking: *Why did you marry my son?*

How to answer that question.

Natalie's like a border collie, my mother used to say to the other women at church. *She needs a project, otherwise she starts chewing the cabinet corners.*

Are you saying my son is a project? I imagined Doug saying.

No, I imagined my mother replying. *I'm saying he's the cabinet corner.*

—

The Mills estate was large and sparse and cold. The hallways were so wide they felt academic in nature—a far cry from the *corridors*, which snaked alongside the hallways, no wider than three feet, to be used exclusively by Maria and Luiz and all the other *godsends* who worked at the estate. Each room was painted in earth tones and contained about three fewer pieces of furniture than the space called for. Amelia claimed that clutter gave her anxiety. She also claimed that too much company at once (another form of clutter, I supposed) gave her anxiety, which meant we would only ever see Caleb's brothers and their families at holidays, for a few days at a time—and even then, nearly everyone but us would retire in the evenings to one of the nearby four-star hotels, though there were more than enough rooms to house everyone at the estate. Another left turn in my marriage: I'd thought I was marrying into a big, boisterous American family, but I would never actually get to know Caleb's brothers, nor their wives or children, and they would never take an interest in me. Years into our marriage, I would learn accidentally over a New Year's celebration that the four other families went on vacations together, and this was when I realized that the strangely pungent anxiety radiating from the Mills family was not a universal stink, but rather one that was exclusively associated with Caleb and his mother. After that, on the rare occasion all the families *were* together, I would watch how the four older brothers instinctually grouped themselves away from Caleb, showing their backs to him like puppies crowding out a sick runt, and I would wonder if this animal dynamic had happened the night of my engagement party. Then, like a one-two punch, I would remember a strange, small detail of our wedding: Caleb hadn't had a best man. His brothers had sat in the front row with all the other guests.

On that first day, though, none of this was immediately clear to me. I carried Clementine into the bedroom where we would be staying. It was Caleb's childhood bedroom, Amelia said, but it might as well have been a suite at the Ritz-Carlton, it was so decadent and anonymous.

"Welcome home," I whispered to my daughter, once the door was shut and we were alone. I gave her a hopeful smile. She began to cry.

Reena was entering her junior year of college soon. That was what I thought about while I held my wailing child in my arms. This week—maybe today, even—marked the beginning of the fall semester. *Back to class*, I thought distantly.

I would never complete my degree.

17

MAEVE AND I bring the basket of eggs inside. I stand, holding the basket, while she marches around the kitchen, getting a bowl and then guiding me to the kitchen table. She climbs onto a chair and then cracks the eggs one by one and begins to stir. Mary is by the fire, carefully pushing a covered pot into the coals, positioning it until it's surrounded by embers, but not actually touching flames. Biscuits. My stomach growls. For pretty much the entirety of my twenties, I never thought about food. I was a woman of discipline, not cravings. Now I'm constantly hungry in this world.

While Maeve carries the bowl of scrambled eggs to Mary, I sit down at the kitchen table, exhausted.

"We need the frying pan," Mary says to Maeve. "I'll get it." She crosses the room, throwing me a dirty look as she passes. "Well, don't you look cozy."

"What? Isn't breakfast about to start?"

"Breakfast won't be for another hour." She grabs the frying pan from the counter and returns to the fireplace.

"What should I do until then?"

Mary looks back at me with an unnerving maturity. Fifteen, going on fifty. "You should get to work."

I look around the kitchen, my gaze coming to rest upon a half-full container of flour on the kitchen shelf. "Do we need bread?"

—

Flour, salt, water. A jar of sourdough starter. At the sight of those simple ingredients lined up in a row on the countertop, I feel an unfamiliar pressure building behind my eyes. I've never been one to cry, but right now, I could.

Hello, old friends.

The jar of starter is surprisingly well-kept. No crust around the rim, and the starter itself looks bright and airy, not the dark color of jaundice that happens with even a week of neglect. Not surprising, I suppose, given how militant Mary is with housekeeping. She must be keeping an eye on this little yeast ball, along with everything else in this house. I wouldn't be surprised if the girl does chores while the rest of us sleep.

As soon as I dive my fingers into the wet jar, a calm falls over me. I scrape as much of the bubbling starter out as I can, then drop it into the bowl. I pour three cups of flour on top, then add a sprinkling of sea salt. Then I begin to knead, my fingers digging deep into the dough in a quick, restless pattern.

The trick to baking a good loaf of bread is to build tension. You have to fold and press the dough in on itself, *just* enough to lock air within the layers of flour. Too much kneading, and it becomes a rock. Not enough kneading, and it comes out mealy. As I work the dough into a tight, springy ball, I remind myself that I am being watched. I lovingly pat the ball of dough, then place it into a bowl and spread a towel over it to let it rise, right as Old Caleb steps inside and hands Mary a large steel bucket. She takes it carefully. It looks heavy. As she walks over to the kitchen sink, taking care not to slosh the liquid inside, I peek into the bucket. It's raw milk. *A delicacy,* I used to tell my followers, *a medical marvel, capable of curing any known ailment,* except this bucket is smeared with cow shit. Mary takes out a gray rag and wipes down the sides of the bucket in a businesslike fashion, then takes the bucket and carefully begins pouring it into two pitcher-like containers. Then she turns to me. "I think we should change your dressing."

I feel the blood leave my face. "No, thank you, I think I'm fine—"

—

Two minutes later, I'm sitting in a kitchen chair, my foot in Mary's lap while she carefully unwraps the bandage, revealing something that looks more like a pickled chicken foot than any leg I've ever seen. The skin is yellow and wrinkled and streaked with dry blood, and the stitching looks like a beginner's crochet project gone awry, and—my God, the little flecks of hardened muscle that got caught on the wrong side of the seams—

I cast my gaze quickly to the ceiling.

Frankenstein's monster. That is what I feel like. I close my eyes as Mary begins to apply the ointment. I twitch at her touch, and she says, "Oh, stop being such a baby. Look how it's already begun to heal!"

No, thank you. I'm all finished with the looking part of this assignment. Instead, I keep my gaze trained on the kitchen window, which, from where I'm sitting, offers a portal into a clean square of blue sky.

My foot jerks uncontrollably again.

"Stop moving!"

I find the little microphone in my pocket and hold it tightly in my grip.

Hello, America.

Are you watching me, right now?

Are you entertained?

18

THERE COMES A POINT in every marriage when a woman realizes that the man she married is a freak. This is inevitable. It cannot be avoided. The only real question in the matter is what type of freak your husband will be —meaning: *if you are lucky*, you will find out your husband is preternaturally into vintage children's train sets, and you will *not* find out that your husband pays high school cheerleaders for sex. That is the best we homemakers can hope for in this life: a man whose freakishness is not unspeakably violent or technically illegal, and therefore is something we are able to bear.

This is what my mother told me on our daily phone calls in those first few weeks of my time at the Mills estate, whenever I mentioned my husband's particular *behaviors:* his refusal to get a job, his adolescent mewlings at his parents when they were simply trying to be nice. I would tell my mother about these moments while pushing Clementine in a stroller down the long, tree-lined driveway, and she would listen patiently before reminding me that it was a woman's job to encourage her husband to be normal.

"The problem, Mother," I would say at this point, "is that he isn't *trying*."

"Well," she would reply. "I'm sure he will soon."

And then the phone conversation would drift off in a quiet deflation of mutual uncertainty.

—

I had hoped Caleb's parents would whip him into shape upon arrival—that Doug might offer some sort of ho-hum rallying cry for the tenets of traditional masculinity, or that Amelia might grab her son's wrist and squeeze tightly, telling him in as few words as possible not to *embarrass the family.* But so far they'd done nothing of the sort. They'd barely said anything to him at all, had only reprimanded him mildly whenever he slouched through the kitchen in sweatpants in the early afternoon.

We'd been here for weeks—*weeks!*—and nothing had improved. If anything, it had gotten worse. Caleb now spent all his time in our bedroom, the glow of his computer screen turning his face an unworldly blue while he played video games, or read niche culture blogs, or watched porn.

Yes. Porn.

This, I hadn't told my mother: One afternoon, I walked into our bedroom to find Caleb's laptop open at his desk. I glanced over to our bathroom door and saw it firmly shut tight, a band of yellow light by the floor. I walked over to his desk, hoping to find the browser open to a job listing. Instead, I found a grotesque still of a couple, naked and frozen mid-thrust. Before my brain short-circuited, I noted the long line of tabs open at the top of the browser—Husband + wife (REAL COUPLE) fuck passionately for one whole hour; Intense kissing leads to squirting orgasm!!!!; Amateur couple have hot intimate fuck session (lots of pussy licking)—then I stepped forward and slammed the laptop screen shut.

My wagon was hitched to a sex pervert.

—

Then one night, the moment I was waiting and hoping and praying for finally arrived.

It was evening. Late October. We'd been at the Mills estate for a month. I was on my way to the laundry room when I came across Amelia and Doug sitting beneath the dim light of the island pendants, a bottle of white wine sweating on the counter between them. Doug was about to leave for a week in DC. A black rolling suitcase lay by his feet like a family dog. His tie,

lipstick red, was loose around his neck. It was a casual scene, somewhat nostalgic. Like a Norman Rockwell painting: a nightcap between a traveling salesman and his homemaker wife. But something about their expectant faces unnerved me—I hadn't expected to catch either of their gazes so quickly, nor had I expected those gazes to hold such quiet urgency—and suddenly I felt destabilized, like I was floating through the half second when dream tips over into nightmare. The moment when you realize an intervention is taking place, and the person it's meant for is you.

"Natalie," Amelia said. "Could we chat for a moment?"

"Of course," I said, though my heart sank. Clementine was just starting to sleep through the night, which meant that *I* was just starting to sleep through the night. But nothing threatened my nine o'clock bedtime more than Amelia with a bottle of Pinot Grigio.

"You know how much we love having you here…," Amelia said, a bit breathily. It was clearly a *beginning*, a first half to a sentence she'd already rehearsed in full, and yet she paused unnaturally here, like a teleprompter was frozen. She looked helplessly at Doug.

"Natalie," Doug said. "Can we have an honest conversation?" He gave me a congenial, we're-all-friends-here kind of look. Sitting there in his starched white shirt, with an American flag pin fastened neatly on the breast pocket, I could suddenly see him perfectly at a campaign stop in West Virginia, sitting down in a booth filled with coal miners, ordering a round of pints for the table, giving some hearty speech comprised entirely of one- and two-syllable words, closing with some rowdy punch line about *God, family, and beer.*

"It's about Caleb," he said.

"Oh?"

"When he told us he was engaged," Amelia added, "we were *so* thrilled. We thought it was just the thing to…*help* him, but it wasn't, or it didn't, I suppose…"

"We thought a wife and a baby might make him grow up," Doug said. "Help him become a man. But we were wrong." He swirled his glass around, aerating it, his eyes on me.

A shriek of fear whistled through me. All this time that I'd been hoping Caleb's parents would fix their son, they were hoping the same of me—and all the time I'd been wondering why they weren't doing more, they were wondering the same of me.

"We want to help you, of course," Doug said. "We're a family now."

"Absolutely." Amelia reached for her glass of wine. "*Teamwork.*" She was very drunk.

My spirit buckled softly. I whispered, "I don't know what to do."

"Well, first things first: we've got to find Caleb a job, of course. A good, respectable job—but one he can actually handle." Doug paused meaningfully, and in the silence I considered all the jobs Doug had probably gotten for his son over the years that hadn't worked out. "Business school would've been ideal, a nice little time waster, if he hadn't screwed up the interview."

Interview. What interview? I bit down on my lip to keep my expression perfectly blank. I knew nothing of this business school plan. I wondered when the plan had formed, and when it had fallen apart. Doug was watching me closely now. Trying to see, no doubt, if I knew what he was talking about. "Well," I said finally. "It wasn't in God's plan."

Amelia tipped her glass toward me in a wobbly cheers. "A-*men.* Always been a dreamer, our Caleb. A gentle soul. He wrote a beautiful poem about the Garden of Eden when he was in grade school. I'm sure I still have it somewhere. Do you remember that poem, Dougie? How he rhymed *Eve* with *believe*?"

"He could be perfect for politics someday," Doug said, ignoring his wife entirely. "It's actually one of the few positions of power where it benefits you to underthink. If you don't think too hard, you never get rattled."

"There *was* that one silly little debacle with the classroom rabbit," Amelia went on, frowning mistily at no one. "But it was an accident. He didn't *mean* to."

"I imagine him as a state senator…"

"…*multiple eyewitnesses said the rabbit bit him first…*"

I said nothing. I was having a hard time processing so much information at once. My husband, a former poet, a future politician, a convicted rabbit killer, a presently unemployable man.

“We’d put the right advisers around him, of course,” Doug said, sensing my panic and diagnosing it incorrectly. “But I’m getting ahead of myself. Right now, I think we should just get him a stable job, keep him busy and working, and then we figure out something from there.” Here, Doug gave me a smile that was at once condescending and encouraging, and for a moment I felt myself in that booth again, a pair of sweating beers between us. I was a coal miner, a warehouse worker, a union man, and he was the man who would save my job, feed my family, resurrect my town. Then I blinked and remembered who I was, and the room tilted a degree. I placed a hand on the counter to steady myself. “What are you asking me to do, exactly?”

“Well, Natalie: For all intents and purposes, you are the man in the family right now.” Big sharky grin. “I can get him a job, sure, but *you’ve* got to make him do it.” He paused, seemed to realize only then that I was standing while they were seated. “Would you like to get comfortable?”

I walked around the island and pulled out a stool, like the good little dog —I mean wife—that I was. *Bark bark.*

—

There was a vineyard down the road, apparently. Doug was good friends with the owner. There was a management position available for Caleb. Nothing special, but it would keep him busy all day long, and he would oversee the farmworkers on the property. If he got a job in business someday, he could *technically* describe this work as “management experience” on a bullet point, and if he opted for a political run, he could say he had experience working “alongside people from all walks of life.” If he got fired, well. No one would be the wiser.

As Doug went on, describing a position that basically amounted to *vineyard janitor,* I found myself nodding along like a bobblehead. It was the

opposite of what I had hoped for, and still I heard myself say, as if Doug had popped a quarter into the back of my skull and cranked some hidden shaft: “What a perfect idea.”

—

When I came back upstairs with the laundry, Caleb was standing over the bassinet, staring down at our daughter in the darkness. I paused at the door threshold. Caleb gave me a thumbs-up, *still asleep*, and I sighed with relief. I set down the laundry by the bed and walked over to him.

“I wish there was a job for playing with babies,” Caleb whispered. “I’d be great at that.”

I didn’t say anything. The panic I’d felt earlier in the kitchen was gone now, replaced by a dull, sweet throbbing in my chest. He *was* good at playing with babies. He never grew bored or irritated with Clementine. He found her endlessly entertaining. In fact, that was the problem, wasn’t it? He had no desire to do anything else.

My husband wanted too little from his life. And me? I wanted too much.

Suddenly it was so obvious: Caleb should’ve been born a woman, and I should’ve been born a man. A sad sickness turned my stomach. We were equally broken in that way.

“Listen,” Caleb said quietly. “I know this hasn’t been easy. I just need to figure out what my purpose is. What I want to be. And I will, Natalie. I promise.”

I looked up at my husband in the darkness. Then a miracle took place: the beauty of His divine will broke over me. It felt like the childhood game the girls in class had played with one another, but never with me: *Crack an egg on your head, let the yolk drip down—*

I shivered, suddenly alive with His presence.

Marrying Caleb had not been a mistake, or an act of ignorance. No. Quite the contrary: it had been the beginning of a *divine mission.* We were put on this earth to teach each other how to *be.* To give each other purpose. I would help Caleb become a better man, and he would help me become a

better woman. Through my example, Caleb would grow stronger, more ambitious, and through his example, I'd grow softer, more loving with our children. Like a balancing of liquids: he would take, and I would give, until we met each other in the middle. It would be the job of a lifetime for both of us. We were a match made in Hell—I mean heaven. I could see it now.

I tilted my face upward toward him in the darkness, and for the first time since the baby was born, we kissed with tongue. "Make love to me," I whispered bravely. We tumbled backward into our bed and had breathless, missionary, mushy-penised sex. Afterward, in the darkness while Caleb snored beside me, I cried silent tears at the beauty of the Lord's bounty.

—

The next day, midafternoon, I woke Clementine up from her nap and brought her to Caleb. "I'm busy right now," he said, holding our daughter in the air between us like she was a leaking food delivery bag.

"Not for the next hour, you're not. You're taking our daughter for a walk."

I stood in the doorway, waving merrily at my husband as he pushed the stroller down the driveway. When he was far enough away, I shut the door and crossed the house to Doug's study.

"Tell your friend thanks, but no thanks," I said to Doug, once he'd welcomed me in. "I'll find Caleb something better."

"Oh?"

"Yes. It's my job, anyways. I'm his wife." Then I added, before I lost my nerve, "You're wrong about Caleb, you know. He's not a man yet, but he will be."

Doug let out a bark of surprised laughter. "It kind of sounds like you're making a bet, Miss Natalie."

I held out my hand. "May the best man win."

19

WELL. The worst possible thing to happen has happened—worse, even, than having a foot caught in a steel trap.

The bread I made was bad.

Actually, bad is an understatement. It was completely inedible. Hard like a rock in some places, mealy and soft in other places. No flavor whatsoever, even though I remember—*I remember!*—sprinkling my regular amount of salt into the bowl.

Mary told me to make another boule. She said it doesn't matter, that *food is food*, and I should get over it. And in response, I told her—at a decibel level that I really do now regret—that something is wrong, wrong, wrong, *something is terribly and utterly wrong*, and really, how many times do I have to explain this to her before she understands? Then she yelled at me to go to my room until I could control my temper, and I yelled at her to *LEAVE ME ALONE, STUPID LITTLE GIRL*, and so she screamed for me to *GET OUT OF THIS HOUSE RIGHT NOW*.

So now I'm standing on the front porch, fighting tears, feeling sorry for myself, when suddenly the front door opens and the two girls step outside.

I glance over my shoulder at them. They're wearing coats, which are worn and stained and covered in patches. Mary is fastening a hand-knitted cap on Maeve's head. Maeve says, "We're gonna find flowers, Mama!"

I turn away to face the mountains.

"We'll be back in an hour," Mary says to my back. "In the meantime, why don't you go take a nap inside?"

I roll my eyes and hiss over my shoulder, "Wouldn't *you* like that."

Mary sighs loudly. “Come on, Maevie.”

I stare firmly out at the mountains, listening to the tip-tap of their footsteps down the stairs. Maeve’s chattering voice carries them farther and farther away. I turn around right as their figures are disappearing over the nearest hillside. It’s quiet now, except for the occasional clanging from the barn. The boys and Old Caleb have been in there all morning.

I cast my gaze beyond the barn. Even the farm animals seem distracted today. The chickens are huddled quietly in one corner of the coop, all staring blankly in one direction; the horse is walking slowly away from me, up the shadowy hillside toward the sliver of sunlit paddock.

The air is brisk, but there’s no breeze. The sun is still rising.

Go. Run. Now.

I stare at the fields, considering this intrusive thought. I wonder where it comes from, if the voice in my head that is telling me to run is the Lord, or my gut instinct, or a byproduct of an undiagnosed concussion. It’s foolish, anyways. A terrible idea. I’ve tried it twice now, and received a beating for it both times. And besides: running is no longer an option. The best I can manage is a slow crawl.

No reason to try to escape right now, I think, leaning on my walking stick. *Might as well just…stay…here.*

I rock back and forth on my one good heel. Yes, I should stay here. That’s what a good Christian woman would do: bake another loaf of bread, and then maybe wash the floors, and then start preparation for dinner, and then scatter more feed across the coop, and then check the chickens’ feet and feathers for any sort of disease, and then ask them if they’re bored, and then give the cow a bubble bath, and then—

Wait, I suppose. That’s what I’m meant to do. Wait here on this porch, day in and day out, until someone—or *something*—saves me.

And yet.

At this very moment, I feel my mind repelling itself from the house, pushing me backward, like a magnet with incompatible charge.

No need to run away—but I could always go for a walk, couldn’t I?

I limp down the front porch stairs.

—

This time my pace is calm, my walking deliberate, the kind of movement that doesn't trip a single sensor. Right down the road, too—none of that nonsense of darting into the woods and getting shot down like some moronic woodland creature. No. I am a *human,* and *humans* are meant to walk down *roads,* and so I am walking when a voice stops me from the barn.

"Where'ya going?"

I freeze. Turn slowly to see one of the boys, standing at the barn entrance. Noah.

"Nowhere!" I glance down the road, gesture merrily with my walking stick at nothing. "I thought I'd get some fresh air."

Noah peers down the road. I know that look of consideration on a little boy's face: he's considering the merits of such an adventure. "Can I come?"

"Of course," I say, though my heart sinks.

I don't have a plan. Clearly I don't have a plan. I'm a one-legged woman with an eight-year-old sidekick walking at about a mile-an-hour pace. Regardless, we walk along the path together for several minutes. I don't say anything to Noah, and he doesn't say anything to me. This doesn't surprise me; my Samuel and Stetson are just the same.

Were just the same.

Are just the same.

I send a little prayer to the Lord for my boys right as Noah starts to whistle. He doesn't seem to mind walking at this pace. He's holding a long stick, waving it in the air occasionally, but mostly dragging it through the dirt behind us while I limp steadily forward. At one point, I glance back at the house to see how far we've gone, and I notice a long, shaky line in the ground, as if the boy is carrying a tether to the farm, slowly unspooling it while we walk.

Soon we're at the base of the hill, beneath the trees. This is the farthest I've been from the house. Noah's whistle slowly peters away. He gazes

around with interest. A strange thought occurs to me: Is this the farthest *he* has ever been from the house, too? Or is he acting? Trying to fool me?

"Do you come here with Pa?" I say, as calmly as I can manage. "Down this road, toward the highway?"

"Highway," he repeats, frowning. Then he looks up at me and nods quickly. "Mhmm. O'course."

He's lying. A shot of adrenaline rolls through me. "What else do you do with Pa these days?"

"Lots of stuff."

"Lots of stuff, like what?"

"All the manly chores. Fence work and wood chopping and stall mucking and the like. I'm growing up, you know. I'll be a man soon."

I glance at his tiny little arms. "Chopping wood?"

"Well." He shrugs abashedly. "I guess I mostly watch that. But I'm in charge of the horse, completely. I brush him and shave his hooves and keep him in good health."

"What's his name?"

"Whose name?"

"The horse."

He snorts. "Horses don't have names, Mama. Don't be silly."

"Ah," I say after a moment. "Of course. Silly me."

"*Very* silly," Noah says happily. "But yes. The horse is my job. And it's a very big job if you really think about it. I have to feed him twice a day, and check him for scratches or injuries, and keep him occupied so that he doesn't chew on the fence on account of boredom."

"What about Abel?"

"Abel's better at chopping wood than me," he admits. "Pa says Abel's almost old enough to go out with him into the far woods. Thirteen is when it happens. I can't go yet 'cause I'm not old enough."

"Where will they go?"

He shrugs. "Everywhere. All over the place."

"All over the place, like, where?"

Suddenly my ears ring with silence, the sudden absence of sound. Like a radio has been turned off. I turn around and see Noah standing ten feet back, stick paused in the dirt. The spool, apparently, has run out of thread. “We can’t go any farther,” he says.

“Why not?” I laugh lightly, a flimsy trinkle of sound.

He stares past me, at the road beyond. “There’s evil out there,” he says, with the uncanny calmness of a child who barely understands what they’re saying. “Wolves and Indians and other souls who are bent on our spiritual destruction.”

A breeze rolls through. The leaves whisper overhead. I am staring at this boy, and I am thinking that the evil *out there* is surely no match for the evil right here, standing in front of me, claiming to be my child.

“I’m your mother, and I am telling you it’s fine,” I say. “So come on now. Let’s go.”

Noah doesn’t move. Just looks at me with a face of plain skepticism.

“It’ll be fun,” I cajole, “an adventure!”

Nothing.

“Come,” I snap. “*Come here.*”

“No!” he shouts. He drops the stick and runs back up the road toward the house. I let out a wail as he sprints away, his boots kicking up little plumes of dirt along the path. He’s up the hill, and then at the top of the hill, and then he disappears into the barn.

One, two, three—Old Caleb comes crashing out.

Run.

I don’t, because I know it’s a glitch of a command, a neural instinct that no longer applies to my current situation. I cannot run. I cannot hide. And so I just stand there, leaning on my walking stick, practically humming with fear and sadness and fury while my husband barrels toward me, his own face twisted with fury. *There’s nothing to be ashamed of,* I tell myself. *You’re only going on a walk. Do not apologize for going on a walk.*

And yet, right as he reaches me, a different kind of instinct takes hold: I drop my walking stick and fall to my knees, fingers clasped in prayer.

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry,” I cry to his bloodied, dirt-smeared boots. “Forgive me, dear husband, and deliver me from evil—”

20

DAWN.

Wake to whiny snuffling. Fumble through the darkness until fingers wrap around cool wooden edge of crib. Change diaper. Breastfeed, breastfeed, breastfeed. Rock, rock, rock. Put baby back to sleep. Walk past snoring husband to guest bedroom down the hall, turn on light, sit down at desk, open laptop, and click on file labeled “CALEB_RESUME.” Tweak, tweak, tweak. Fudge, fudge, fudge: 3.4 GPA, previously rounded up from 3.3, now rounded farther up to 3.5. Submit résumé to at least five job openings, optimizing for respectable but relatively unchallenging work. Look out the window. Watch the sun rise.

Pray.

—

Morning.

Walk downstairs to find Maria’s daily cappuccino waiting in the empty kitchen. Pick up mug right as baby starts to wail. Swallow the cappuccino whole in three scalding gulps and return upstairs. Change baby’s diaper. Breastfeed. Breastfeed. Breastfeed. Wonder why the baby drinks milk so slowly. Chastise self for thinking ill of His creation. Walk past still-snoring husband with baby; set baby down on the bathroom floor, then reach for toothbrush. Brush teeth while the baby runs her fingers around an outlet. Chastise the baby. Pick baby up and walk downstairs, waving to in-laws in the kitchen. Strap baby into stroller. Walk down the long driveway. Wave

hello to the vineyard workers, already sweating and scattered throughout the fields. *Hello, hello, hello! Oopsies—Hola, hola, hola!* Pause the stroller occasionally so baby can say *hola* too. Thank the Lord for a beautiful day. Ask the Lord if He could please wake up snoring husband by the time the walk is over.

Pray.

—

Afternoon.

Spend nap time scrolling through job posting sites and highlighting potential listings for tomorrow's five required applications. Keep face blank when husband ambles past. Make comment of support when he mentions going on a jog, or applying to some jobs, or looking at the jobs you've sent over, even though you know he will do none of these things.

Pray.

—

Evening.

Wake baby from nap. Change diaper. Breastfeed. Breastfeed. Breastfeed. Close eyes and count to ten over the sound of baby's sudden, inexplicable wails. Swallow very strong instinct to slap the baby. Ask the baby in a cooing murmur what she wants. *What do you want?* Rock baby. Breastfeed baby. Consider shaking baby. Resist urge to shake baby. Strap baby to chest. Help mother-in-law with dinner. Steak or chicken or pork chops. Biscuits or sliced sourdough loaf or cornbread. Asparagus or broccolini. Hold hands. Pray. Spoon peach mush into baby's mouth while father-in-law considers aloud, for the millionth time, a presidential run. Agree with mother-in-law when she says her line about him being the right man for the moment. Agree with father-in-law when he says his line about the need to return to traditional family values. Agree with husband when he says his line about the chicken being cooked perfectly. Give all the credit to your mother-in-law, even though she is riding high on a pharmaceutical

steed and almost loaded the chicken into the oven when it was fully frozen. Smile. Smile. Smile. Smile. Smile. Smile.

Pray.

—

The days passed, but just barely. Like a deck of trick cards: so little variation.

—

One night, I was standing in the kitchen, swaying back and forth to keep Clementine asleep in the carrier, watching Amelia drown some stalks of broccolini in olive oil, when she set down the bottle and said, “You look tired.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was tired, of course I was tired, but Amelia and I did not share vulnerabilities with each other. I wasn’t even aware she had intimacies to provide. She was like a porcelain doll, that woman. If there were two kinds of Christian housewives, then my mother was the first kind—the kind who spends her whole life pursuing a work ethic so breathtakingly valiant in its refusal to account for basic necessities like sleep that mere secular mortals could only shake their heads and mutter some needlepoint idiom about these women finding hidden hours of the day—and Amelia was the second kind, the kind who floated through the dreary tapestry of domesticity via a steady cocktail of Chardonnay, painkillers, and practiced ambivalence. This, too, was hard work, but of a different sort.

Nothing rattled Amelia. Not her useless son, nor her power-hungry husband. I’d been living with her for the better part of a year, and I hadn’t seen so much as a shudder of pain or pleasure cross her painted smile—which is why it was so unnerving, to bear witness to her first genuine expression of concern, and to realize that the subject of concern was me.

“Really, honey: you look a bit *gray.* Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine.” I tried to smile and found that I couldn’t. The bridge of my lips was frozen in place.

“What’s wrong? Isn’t Clementine sleeping through the night?” Amelia clucked disapprovingly. “If she’s not, honey, she should be. She’s not a newborn anymore.”

I paused, looked down at Clementine’s large, fuzzy head. Funny, I hadn’t even taken a moment to think about it, but it was true: she wasn’t a newborn anymore. She was seven months old now. Crawling and making noises and, yes, sleeping through the night. *Things should have gotten easier by now,* I thought with surprise. *I should be thinking about having another baby soon.*

“You know,” Amelia said, “sometimes when I’m feeling really tired, I throw on the brightest shade of lipstick I’ve got.” Her lipstick today was an almost-neon floral red. Now that I was really looking at her face, she did look exhausted. “Do you want me to watch Clementine while you take a shower?”

“I’m okay.” *Yesterday morning,* I thought vaguely. *I showered then. Or maybe the day before that.*

“Honey, I insist.” She beckoned again, her smiling growing wider. “In fact, I won’t take no for an answer.”

—

I reluctantly left Clementine in the kitchen with Amelia and went upstairs to our bathroom, where I found a little collection of gifts waiting for me on the sink countertop: a blow-dryer, a curling iron, and four tubes of lipstick, plus a sticky note with a scrawled cursive message pressed to the mirror at eye level: *Take your time, Mama!*

What an elegant little ambush. Amelia might as well have scrawled the true meaning in all-caps lipstick across the mirror: *Pull yourself together, you selfish little freak :)*

Then I noticed the little white pill placed next to the lipstick tubes.

I felt a sudden thrashing desperation to hear my mother’s voice. I pulled out my cell phone and called home. She answered on the second ring. “How’s my Nattie girl?”

“Mama,” I said, then paused. What was I thinking? I couldn’t tell her what happened. She would be horrified to learn that her daughter let it *get this bad* in front of such a well-standing family. The very *thought* of her daughter standing in the kitchen of a senator’s house in sweatpants with greasy hair would give her a heart attack. “Can I ask you a question?”

There was the sound of water sloshing. I could see her perfectly: standing in our kitchen, ear pressed to her shoulder to keep the phone in place while she scrubbed the dishes. “Ask me anything, sweetheart.”

I sat down on the closed toilet, buried my head in my free hand. “How were you always so *good* at everything?”

She laughed. “Honey, I don’t think anyone ever accused me of being good at everything before.”

“I just mean the little things. The house was always clean. You always got dressed and put makeup on. We always had outfits planned for us. How did you do all that, on top of your job and the knitting?”

“Well.” The water sloshed in the silence. “You know, I don’t know if I ever really *thought* about this, Nattie, but do you know what trick I used to do, once your father had passed on, God rest his soul?”

It still amazed me, how easily she referenced his passing. She really had convinced herself he was dead.

“Whenever I was reaching my wits’ end, I would pause for a moment and—do you know what I would do?” Her voice lowered to a conspiratorial register. “I would imagine I was being *watched*.”

I opened my eyes and frowned at the tiles on the bathroom floor. “Watched?”

“It’s lonely, you know. Housework. But it felt a bit *less* lonely when I pretended I had a little audience sitting on the couch with me. Watching me vacuum or take out the trash. Cheering me on!”

I didn’t say anything. I felt suddenly nauseous. So that was the secret: all those years I’d spent watching my mother and the other women in our community, marveling at how effortlessly they performed their roles as mother, homemaker, wife; all the moments I’d thought of them at college, summoning their easy joy and holding it in my hand like a lucky rabbit’s

foot while the girls in the dorm complained about everything—it was a lie, wasn't it? If not an outright lie, then certainly not the full truth, either. They weren't actually happy. They were just pretending that they were. "And the Lord is fine with this? With you needing to…pretend?"

My mother didn't skip a beat. She'd locked into her argument and was on a roll now. "Oh, I wouldn't call it pretending. It's more like a form of *remembering*, don't you think? After all, who do you think encouraged me to come up with that little idea to begin with? Who is our Lord and Savior, if not the *original* audience member for our lives?"

"Huh," I said. I couldn't argue with that.

I said goodbye to my mother, hung up the phone, and stared at myself in the mirror. Tried to imagine a small group of women standing in the corner of the bathroom, watching me, holding little score sheets, stern-faced and mascaraed, like an Olympic judging panel. I hesitated, then picked up the pill and dropped it into the toilet.

There it was, undeniably: the sudden swell of applause.

—

Middle of the night.

Wake up. Shower. Wash and condition hair. Exfoliate. Shave. Blow-dry hair. Curl hair. Layer creams and pigments onto skin. Foundation, blush, eyelash curler, mascara, brow liner. As your mother-in-law would say: the bare minimum. While the sun rises outside, stare at reflection in the bathroom mirror, inspecting for flaws. Practice saying, *It's nothing.* Practice saying, *I just like starting my day with a little bit of me time.* Swallow the rising misery in throat. Swallow the fury. Swallow the anxiety. Swallow the desire to light the house on fire and walk out the front door while husband, baby, and in-laws burn to death. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Kill yourself. No—conjure the audience. Conjure Jesus. Conjure mother. Conjure Reena. *Yes,* that's the ticket. Reena back east, pulling an all-nighter in a corner cubicle in the basement library of school, slouched before a beam of artificial light. Eating some tasteless protein bar, so filled with chemicals it

could survive a nuclear holocaust. Watch her as she pauses. Gets the sense, prickling on the back of her neck, that she's being watched.

She looks up and scans the room. Her gaze lands on you.

Oh—the baby's crying.

Go get your baby.

—

Reena disappeared from the bathroom, leaving me alone with my reflection, which grinned sharply back at me.

—

The days passed more quickly after that. And then one afternoon, Amelia pulled me aside in the hallway to compliment my "fresh new look." I was like a brand-new woman, she said, her eyes wide with approval. She stepped closer to me, close enough for me to smell the Chardonnay on her breath as she said, "Work like a charm, don't they?"

"What do?"

"Oh, *you* know." She winked, or tried to wink; her facial expressions seemed to suffer from an extended stutter step of removal from her nerve signals. The result was that one eyelid closed very slowly and reopened, giving the effect of a malfunctioning animatronic doll. She leaned in and whispered, "Do you know what they called them in my day?"

I shrugged helplessly.

"*Mother's little helper.*"

The awareness dawned uncomfortably on me. It had been weeks since she gave me that one pill. Did she honestly think, through some deranged thread of Pinot Grigio–soaked dream logic, that a single dose had kept me going for weeks?

"I'll get you a prescription," she slurred. "I have a doctor friend. A friend who's a doctor."

"Oh," I said quickly, "I don't want to put you out—"

“Oh, honey. I get them in bulk. And anyways—what do you think family is for?”

Then she stepped forward and gave me a strange, drapey hug. Standing there with her arms wrapped around me, I felt like I was in the embrace of a great stiff-winged bird, feathers fluttering with wind—no, not feathers, not wind, but then what was that shuddering movement?

I stiffened, and the arms wrapped tighter. She was sobbing, I realized. Sobbing hard into my neck. Mumbling something that sounded like—

Help.

“Amelia,” I said with shock. “Oh, there, there…”

Just as quickly she stepped back, and I swallowed a gasp. Her eyes were bloodshot and raccoon-rimmed with mascara, and she was smiling fiercely, even though she had started to hiccup a bit from the force of her sobs. “Oh, don’t pay attention to me.” *Hiccup*. “I’m just happy for you, that’s all!”

“Amelia—”

“*Call me Mama*,” she hissed, smiling wider. She gave my shoulder one last rub, emitting a gleeful little sob, and then said, “I’m going to freshen up before dinner.” Then she loped meanderingly down the hallway and turned in to the master bedroom, the door shutting behind her with a click.

21

I'M OFFICIALLY ON HOUSE ARREST. A humiliating blow to the last remaining ounce of dignity, not to mention mobility, that I had in this horror show of a world. A fabric rope made of three ragged towels is tied in an infinity loop around my ankles, right above my bandage, making it just barely possible for me to shuffle around the kitchen at a glacial pace. Even at a creep, it's hard to keep my balance, even harder to use my walking stick properly, and so I keep nearly falling over or gasping at the pain of my bandage rubbing against the fabric as I follow Mary's commands: *Bring me the potato basket, go get the sharper knife, carry this crock to the fire, sweep up the crumbs from the floor.* I can't help but notice that she's intentionally making me do as many trips back and forth to the kitchen as possible. I can't help but think she's desperate to see me trip and fall flat on my face.

"You know," I say, on my tenth crawl toward the fire to retrieve a spoon that she magically forgot to ask for when I was there earlier to drop off the crock pot of venison stew, "that *your* life would be much easier if you were just doing this without me. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do. But Papa said."

Papa said. I roll my eyes and grab the spoon, then begin my pilgrimage back across the room. *Papa sure did say.* In fact Papa said specifically, *If you cause another problem—if you try to leave this ranch, or even worse, try to take a child with you—I'll tie you up by the horse and see how you do overnight, you exhausting wretch of a woman.*

I hand her the spoon. “I can barely walk as it is, you know. Don’t you think this is a bit unnecessary?”

“This morning, I would’ve agreed with you,” she says breezily. “And then you tried to run away on one leg.” She reaches for a covered bowl of milk that has been sitting on the counter by the window since morning. She takes the cover off and begins to skim the cream off the top and into another bowl. Butter. She’s making butter. As she takes the bowl of cream and pours it into an old wooden churner, I think of my electric mixer and feel a rush of yearning. *Afternoon, y’all! Today we’re making butter from scratch—well, except for the fact that we’re using my good old KitchenAid to do the churning part, otherwise we’d be at it all day, and no one wants that! Ha! Ha ha!*

Ha. Ha ha ha.

Mary starts to churn, working the cream with the wooden ladle in effortful thrusts, putting her shoulder into the movement. Over the steady clunking, she says, “Why do you try to run away so much?”

She isn’t looking at me, which is perhaps why I’m able to tell the truth. Or maybe I’m just exhausted to the point of being incapable of thinking strategically. Or maybe I am a lunatic, stuck in a nightmare, and there is nothing left to lose. Or maybe I am dreaming. Or maybe this whole world is going to shit and I am a victim of my own motherfucking—

“Because I’m not supposed to be here. That’s why.”

She pauses mid-churn. Looks at me. “You’re not supposed to be here?”

“No. I’m not.”

“*You* are not supposed to be *here*?”

“No!”

“Where are you supposed to be, if not here?”

I gesture helplessly at nothing. “I’m supposed to be *here*, but *here* should be *different*.”

“But *this* is what is *here*. What else could be *here*, if not *this*? Who could be here if not *us*?”

I feel like I’m frozen in the pages of a children’s nursery rhyme. I am *here*, I am *there*, I am miserable *everywhere*! “Forget it,” I say.

Mary gives me a chiding look. “Really, the way you let your mind run wild with fiction, no wonder you’re so exhausted all the time.” She begins to churn again. “Anyways: you know not to go to the woods. There are all manner of terrible things in there. Wolves and Indians and other souls who are bent—”

“—on our spiritual destruction,” I mutter sniffily. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Mary stiffens. The churning increases in speed. “You know, there are people in the world who don’t have a family at all. And how would you like that? Being all alone in the woods, no one to save you when you stumble into a trap?”

A gust of anger whips through me, strong enough to snap a neck. “*You. Are. Not. My. Family.*”

Mary freezes. The room falls silent. “Go get more firewood,” she says quietly, and I’m suddenly transported back to my real house, my *real* life, as I say to Clementine: *Go tell Nanny Louise to check the forecast.* The kind of meaningless command designed to remind someone who’s in charge. Designed, also, to give you a moment to collect your shaking breath.

Mary doesn’t speak to me for the rest of the night. At dinner, though, she does hand me a piece of bread slathered in fresh butter. A peace offering. This world, I realize, is full of them—or rather, the girl holding the buttered bread is. She stares at me, palm extended.

The butter is delicious.

22

ONE SATURDAY MORNING, Caleb burst into our bedroom and said triumphantly, “I’ve found my purpose!”

It was wintertime. The holidays had come and gone. Caleb’s brothers and their families had descended upon the estate for Christmas and New Year’s, the veritable flock of Mills children dragging mud through the hallways, the brothers sharing raunchy jokes in Doug’s office, the women smiling mildly at one another over champagne flutes in the kitchen, and then they had all gone again, returning to their lives in San Francisco and Manhattan and DC. And still, Caleb and I remained here.

Now it was January. Which meant Reena was back in Boston in her off-campus apartment. At this very moment, she was probably still in bed, perhaps just waking up now, leaning halfway over the mattress, fingers dragging groggily past empty red Solo cups on the floor, searching for a half-drunk bottle of Gatorade or a Tylenol bottle to soothe her pounding headache. I, on the other hand, was at the changing station, moving through the fourth diaper blowout of the week. My fingernails were dark with shit. I had a deranged expression on my face, something between a grin and a grimace. *Pretend you’re being watched,* my mother whispered in my mind —an especially easy task at the current moment, since Clementine was lying on her back, actively glaring at me while I pulled out the fifth baby wipe. “Hold on,” I sang softly, “that’s it, almost finished…”

I glanced over my shoulder, only just processing my husband’s entry into the room. “Your purpose?” I tossed the final wipe to the side and began

fastening Clementine into a new diaper. I resisted the urge to reply in singsong, *Did you finally check the couch cushions?*

"Remember when we drove past my old school the other week?"

"Uh-huh." Clementine let out a warning shriek, and I moved more quickly with the diaper straps.

"Well, I stopped by the other day, just to say hi to everyone"—*That's my husband,* I thought merrily, *saying hello to everyone at a private school in the middle of nowhere, not a concern in the world, while his wife uses her last five brain cells to power wash a baby's butt crack*—"and they need a substitute kindergarten teacher this spring. The current teacher is on maternity leave, and they love to find teachers who are alums. Perfect timing, don't you think?"

I fastened the snaps on the diaper and picked Clementine up, then turned to face him. "What about that is perfect?"

"They need someone to fill the position. I need a job." He held his two palms up in the air, weighing them equally, like a math equation had been solved.

I sat down on the bed, letting Clementine crawl onto the comforter and into Caleb's arms. "You're saying you want to replace her."

"Don't you remember our conversation a few weeks ago? How I said I wished I could play with kids for a job?"

A kindergarten teacher. My husband wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. My first thought: I had never met a kindergarten teacher who wasn't a sixty-year-old woman. Then the second thought arrived. "What's the salary?"

"I didn't ask."

He didn't ask. Of course he didn't ask. "I didn't know you wanted to be a teacher."

"I didn't either, but now that I think about it—I think I'd be good at it."

A pit formed in my stomach. He *would* be good at it. He'd be incredible. He would probably love spending all day with children, teaching them all the benign bits of information about the world that any idiot adult could master. *Blue is a primary color! Fish have gills!*

If he started this job, he would want to do it for the rest of his life, and the dream of a respectable life would be over. We would be consigned to life as a kindergarten family. Dimly, I registered that there was some poetic justice to the phrase. We were a couple with a diagnosis so serious it bordered on medical: failure to launch.

I watched as Caleb played pattycake with Clementine's feet. She let out a gurgle of laughter, the kind she never did with me, and my chest constricted. A sad, quiet thought: none of this had gone the way I thought it would.

I looked at my husband, who was now making goo-goo faces at our daughter. "Do you even know what they teach children in school, Caleb?"

"What?"

"They teach them that being a Christian is a terrible thing. That gender is a construct and that marriage is some destructive force. Do you want that for our kids?"

"Of course not," Caleb said. He frowned. "Do they really teach that, these days?"

I nodded somberly. "They teach little white children to feel guilty about the fact that our country used to have slaves." My public school hadn't taught this, but I'd heard of other schools that had. Or rather my mother had heard about it from another woman at a church bake sale, who had heard about it from her sister's best friend, who was a principal at an afflicted middle school in California or Maryland or Canada. My mother (or the woman or her sister) could never quite remember where.

"But that ended centuries ago!"

"It doesn't matter. They don't care about facts."

"Well, I'm sure they don't teach that in *kindergarten*."

It's a job for a woman, I nearly snapped. Instead, I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, thinking. "I suppose that's true. I just worry that you're selling yourself short on something more…intellectually rigorous." He didn't answer. He was counting Clementine's little toes, and she was making little shrieks of delight. Time to switch tactics. "You know, I had an interesting conversation with my mother the other day," I said. "She told me

about how sometimes, when she has to do something she doesn't want to do, she imagines that she's doing it for an audience."

"An audience." He snorted. "That's funny." He made a face at Clementine. "Isn't that funny?"

"Yes. An audience. Like, if you took a job as a financial analyst, maybe you would imagine a bunch of smart, admirable men watching you. Almost like a game."

Caleb frowned. "Are they real people, in this audience? Or are they angels? I'm imagining angels. Like, of God."

I could feel my smile straining on my face, the stitches threatening to snap. "The *point* is sometimes you have to pretend to like something at first, and if you pretend for long enough, you might just end up liking it."

"You mean pretend to like one of those jobs you send me every day?"

"Exactly! Yes."

"But I know I *wouldn't* like that." He gave me a meaningful look. "You know what I would like? Being a kindergarten teacher." He raised his eyebrows at Clementine, like, *Checkmate! Daddy won!*

What had I been thinking? The strategy worked only if opting out was not an option. But for Caleb, it was always an option. In every single waking second of his life, he had the opportunity to say, simply, *I don't want to do that.* Imagine if I said that. Imagine if Clementine started crying and I rolled over in bed and said, *I don't want to do that.* Breastfeeding: *I don't want to do that.* Scrubbing Caleb's little flecks of calcified shit from the toilet bowl in the guest bathroom, even though there were housekeepers here, because my mother had always taught me that what your family does in the bathroom is no one else's business but your own. *Nope, don't want to do that.*

"Well!" I said shrilly. "You shouldn't do things you don't want to do!" I felt like my brain was going to melt into a pool of liquid and drain out of my nose.

"Exactly," Caleb said. He looked relieved and victorious. His wife had actually started making some sense. "So I'll call the school in the morning and we can—"

“Hold on.” I pressed a hand to my forehead, which felt like it was overheating. “Just—just hold on a second.”

This was the longest conversation we’d had in months. My mind stretched and contorted in little panicky grabs at a plan, a strategy, anything to stop him from taking that position. “Being a kindergarten teacher cannot be the only thing that you would have fun doing. Think, Caleb. *Think.* What *did* you want to be when you were younger?”

He scrunched up his face. “I dunno,” he said. “I don’t think I ever had a clear idea of it. I mean, when I was little, I wanted to be an actor. Or a cowboy. But that was just kid stuff.”

A cowboy, or an actor. *Lord, give me strength.* The options were so absurd as to render me without any clear opinions to begin with. It would be years before this moment made sense to me in any intellectual sense. Specifically, it would be just under a decade from now, at the campaign stop in Iowa where Doug would announce his third presidential bid, when the introducer would describe my father-in-law as *the last living John Wayne*, and I would turn to look at my husband and see the light in his eyes, and the memory of this conversation would click into place.

Caleb didn’t want to be an actor, or a cowboy. He wanted to be his father. An icon. A true American patriarch.

Men and their legends. Embarrassing.

Well, I thought. *Here we are, at the end of the road. Kindergarten teacher, actor, or cowboy. Pick your poison. Drink it quickly.*

Then I looked at my husband and remembered our first date. His misty eyes at the idea of a farm. *What you said sounds nice.* Over the last few months, Caleb had mentioned the idea in passing several times, talking wistfully about growing our own crops, taking care of our own livestock. I hadn’t even remotely entertained it as a possibility. But now I felt the weight of the idea drop into my lap. The Lord might not have given me a mother’s instinct, as I’d been praying to receive for months, but He *had* given me something even better: a plan to make the father of my child a man.

A substitute kindergarten teaching job was the professional version of a fully flaccid penis. Humiliation incarnate. But a real-life cowboy? *That,* I thought with surprise, *I can work with.*

Caleb didn’t have to be good at farming. He didn’t need a strong work ethic or even a working knowledge of how to keep farm animals alive. He just had to learn how to pretend.

A chorus of angels sang *Hallelujah* in my mind.

23

WHAT WAS IT my mother used to say about those days of yore?

The pioneer days were not for the faint of heart. Think how brave your great-great-great-grandparents had to be. Imagine facing down Indians with arrows, defending your cattle from wolves—

No, not that part. The other part. The part where she'd had just a little bit too much to drink at the Christmas Eve church mixer and was pink-cheeked and misty-eyed, kicking off her boots and crawling under the covers with us, her breath sweet-sour with vermouth.

The winters were long, girls. Very long. Long, long, long. The nights seemed to last forever, and the snowstorms—like you wouldn't believe. They had to rely on the food they'd stored from the earlier seasons, and sometimes resources would become scarce.

My sister, at this point, would usually butt in. "What would they do if they couldn't find food, Mama?"

"They would eat their dogs," I would say with authority. "And if they had no dogs, they would eat each other."

"Natalie!" My mother would give my sister a reassuring look. "They never ate each other." And as my sister and I stuck out our tongues at each other behind her back, she would go on: *No, they always found a solution before it came to something like that. They were so plucky and brave, and do you know what helped them stay alive, more than anything? Trust. Trust in each other, and trust in the Lord.*

And then she would turn out the light, and the three of us would fall asleep in bed together, dreaming of the frontier.

—

“You can untie me now,” I say.

It’s late evening. The children are gathered around the fire. Abel is sharpening a knife and talking quietly about battle tactics to Noah, who is idly poking a stick around in the fire, listening thoughtfully, nodding occasionally, like a little hardened war general, the flame reflected in the whites of his eyes. *If they came from higher ground, we would take up defensive positions by the barn…*

Maeve is sitting in Mary’s lap, and Mary is brushing her hair with a needle comb. Old Caleb is sitting on a chair, watching me with a look of complete and total distrust.

“Please,” I say again. “Untie me.”

Mary stops combing Maeve’s hair and looks to Old Caleb, who is still staring at me. He gives me a long, appraising look. Burps. Says, “You’re not going to run away?”

“No. I’m not going to run away.”

At this point, it hardly feels like a concession. I have a foot that is literally hanging on by a thread. The rest of my body is torn and bruised and beaten, and I’m so tired that I have worried, on several occasions in the last few hours, that I might fall asleep sitting up. At the same time, I am facing another night of sleeplessness. I can feel it coming, my eyes threatening to roll back in their sockets at the promise of another long, cold night in this Hellish place, no one to keep me warm, nothing to keep me safe from my wild, roving mind. At the very least, I would like to be free of these fabric chains.

Old Caleb unties me. I twitch at the feel of his rough, calloused fingers on my skin. If he notices, he doesn’t say anything about it. He simply says, “Mary?”

—

Five minutes later, I'm sitting closer to the fire, massaging my one good foot, when Mary comes to me with a mug. "To help you sleep."

I sniff the mug. The liquid smells cold and bitter. Completely different from what she gave me for my fever. I look at Mary. Her expression is calm. "It will make the bad feelings go away," she says. "Trust me."

Trust me.

Another peace offering.

Except I don't trust her. Not even a little bit. I don't trust anyone in this house, least of all myself.

"Go ahead," Mary says softly. "Drink it." She's looking at me now with pity, like I'm the most wretched, helpless person on the planet.

My gaze wanders past Mary, across the kitchen—*this is my kitchen; this is not my kitchen*—and then past each of the children's sleepy firelit faces—*these are my children; these are not my children*—and then comes to rest on Old Caleb's face. *This is my husband. This is not my husband.*

I feel like I have been dropped into an unfinished pencil sketch of a maze. No way out. Except, of course, for sleep. The briefest of exits.

I bring the cup to my lips and drink it all, quickly, gagging a little bit at the taste. Then I let Mary guide me to my bedroom, her arm hoisting me up by the armpits, taking the brunt of my weight. She tucks me into bed and stands there, silent, while I turn away from her. "There, there," Maeve says from the doorway. "Sleepy time for Mama."

My eyelids flutter shut.

24

ONCE I KNEW what needed to be done, I called my mother and told her the plan, and she called every realtor she knew, and all of them sprang into action. Not exactly surprising, their enthusiasm: we were dream clients. A wealthy young couple interested in finding a lot—*and I mean a* lot, I said to my mother, and my mother repeated to them—of land.

The listings flooded in. The property we would eventually buy arrived in my inbox on the very first day.

It was an old cattle ranch that had fallen into disrepair. Five hundred acres, set in the rolling hills between two mountain ranges in the southwest region of Idaho. There were old-growth forests and sprawling pastures, a hundred-year-old apple orchard, a series of creeks that crisscrossed through the acreage, and about a thousand feet of frontage to the most trout-plentiful river in the state. The land was veined with old fences and man-made trails, even nineteenth-century stone walls in some sections. It sat at the end of a long dirt road, several miles in length, surrounded by reservation land.

By the time I found the listing, there were already multiple active bids on the property. At the encouragement of my realtor, I called the owner to plead my case. He was an old man who was moving to a retirement home. His only son—a banker who lived in Sun Valley—had planned to take over the property and had accordingly done some major renovations on the main house in preparation, but had died several months earlier. Pancreatic cancer. A total shock. This was the information I was given in the first minute of speaking to the man, and already I was desperate to get off the phone. There

was nothing that made me more uncomfortable than sudden access to the painful sentiment of a stranger.

“It’s real wilderness out here,” he said. “Gets so quiet at night that your ears start to invent sounds. Crickets and the like. That’s on the nights when the wolves don’t howl.” He paused. “You ever hear a wolf howl?”

“Not *personally,* no, but—” I was hiding in the darkness of the foyer coat closet. “We’re quiet souls, my husband and me. We spent some time in the city, but it’s not for us.” There was a rustling beyond the door and I froze. Amelia’s drunken humming carried closer, and then I heard her open the coat closet on the opposite side of the foyer.

“Hello?” the old man said gruffly. “You still there?”

“Yes,” I whispered, covering my mouth with my hand against the receiver. “Just one sec—”

There was a rustling of hangers, a clanging sound, a rattle-clatter, a “whoopsie!” and then the whisper-click of a prescription bottle being picked up off the floor. (“Hello? Did I lose you? Hello?”) Then the humming carried down the hallway until a door shut and it was silent again. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Yes! Hi! I’m here. Listen, sir: We want to give our children a true American childhood. And my husband is a natural at farming!”

“Well,” the old man said. “That’s nice. My son—well. He was a natural, too.”

The man cleared his throat wetly, giving sudden sound to his grief. A long silence unspooled itself. Anxiety took hold of me. “We have big plans, sir,” I said quickly. “We’re going to revive your cattle farm.”

“That’s nice,” he said again. “But you know, farming’s hard work.”

“Absolutely. Absolutely it is.”

“The margins were never great, and they’re getting worse every year.”

I nodded vigorously to no one. “Such a shame.”

“I don’t mean to make any assumptions, ma’am, I just mean to say—” He paused here. “I know it’s trendy, now, for young people to fancy themselves farmers. And I just—well, I wouldn’t want you to bite off more than you can chew.”

Trendy. I nearly sputtered at the word. “Thank you so much for the concern—but with all due respect, sir: my husband and I are nothing like the young people you know.”

—

Not long after the phone call ended, my realtor texted me. He’s going to go with someone else ☹️ ☹️ ☹️ not to worry, we will find something better!

I texted her back and told her to make one last final offer.

Go over ask by half a million dollars

I imagined the old man sitting in his kitchen, reading the number on his phone. I hoped he felt happy. I also hoped he felt—just a little bit—defeated.

—

Later that evening, my realtor texted me the happy news. I stared at the message on my phone for several minutes, then set my phone down on the counter and walked down the long hallway to Doug’s office. I knocked on the door, and Doug hollered immediately, “Come in.”

Doug’s office was a fever dream of 1950s manhood: the walls were dotted with diplomas and pictures with famous people, there were two leather chairs positioned in front of a fireplace with a cigar box sitting between them, and he, at this moment, was sitting behind a mahogany desk so large and ornate that it must have taken three or four men to get it in here.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing at the chair in front of the desk. As I was lowering myself into the seat, he said, “I just paid a consulting firm a hundred thousand dollars for them to tell me I’m old.” He barked out a laugh. “I’m fifty-five! In the prime of my life! But apparently, according to them, I am, and I’ll quote them here”—he rustled through a loose stack of papers on his desk, pulling out the one he needed—“ ‘rapidly falling out of favor with a number of core demographics.’ ”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I was only vaguely aware of Doug’s politics to begin with. *God, family, and beer. A traditional values man!* I thought of Reena, who had spent the summer interning as a consultant, and wondered if it was her firm that had done the audit on Doug’s electability. Surely she would have relished that work. “Is it your—policies?”

Doug’s eyes flashed to me, and I knew I’d overstepped. “It’s never about the policies,” he said sharply. “A good politician doesn’t change his policies. Only the messaging.”

“Right,” I said immediately. “Of course. Well, you obviously are the expert. I’m just a housewife.” It was the first time I’d said that word aloud in reference to myself, and now I felt a not unpleasant reorganizing sensation in my body, almost like I was face down on a chiropractor’s table, feeling my spine crack gradually into a strange and new, if technically correct, alignment. A pain that promised to give way to relief.

“Well,” Doug said. The *housewife* comment had clearly mollified him. “No need to solve the questions of my political career today. What can I help you with, Natalie?”

I took a deep breath, then said exactly what I had rehearsed. “I found a solution for Caleb. Not just a short-term one, either, but something permanent. Something life-altering.”

Doug said nothing, merely raised his eyebrows.

“Caleb isn’t right for the corporate world. We both know it. You could get him a thousand jobs, and he would quit a thousand times. But this, I think he would enjoy.” I handed Doug a slip of handwritten paper, and he frowned at it. “This is an address,” he said.

“Look it up online.”

Doug pulled the listing up onto his computer, then whistled slowly. I saw the message in all red (SALE PENDING) and my heart shot into my throat. Doug was still staring at the first picture on the carousel, an aerial shot of the barn and the pastures beyond. “I don’t even know what I’m looking at.”

“You’re looking at a prime piece of Idaho land, which will eventually be your son’s cattle farm.”

Doug didn’t say anything, just clicked through the pictures. Finally he leaned back in his chair and looked at me. “You think my son is capable of running a cattle farm?”

“Of course not. We’ll hire people for that.”

“You’ll hire people.”

“Yes. We’ll start small and then expand. Local meats, fresh eggs, raw milk. Did you know how much people love raw milk?”

“I did, actually,” he said absently. “One of my interns wrote up a report on it.” He was tapping his finger absentmindedly on the desk, in a rhythm that matched my heartbeat. *Tap tap tap tap*—“I have to say,” he said suddenly, “I have half a mind to encourage this just to watch it all fall apart.”

For a moment I forgot to breathe. I could practically see his little horror-show daydream playing out in the air between us in real time: *Drop the dumbest son and his bitchy little wife out into the heartland and watch them as they claw and scratch and struggle to survive.* If there was popcorn on the desk, he would’ve reached for a handful.

“It won’t go wrong,” I said. “It’s going to work.”

“And you want me to pay for it.”

“Yes. I do.”

“And if my eyesight isn’t failing me, you already put an offer on it that was accepted.”

My blood went cold. I tried to nod. My chin just barely moved.

“How much do you need?”

“Five million dollars. That covers the purchase amount and the first three years of operation.” My heart was a cricket in my throat. It felt breathtakingly unhinged to say that number aloud. My mother had never handed me more than a crisp twenty-dollar bill. But I knew that this was how men like Doug operated: you couldn’t blink. And anyways, that *was* how much it would cost to get the ranch up and running, according to a small handful of websites I’d scrolled through earlier that day.

“All right,” Doug said briskly. “I’ll give you the money.”

A strange liquid cocktail of euphoria and disappointment dripped through me. I'd done it, I'd secured the funds, but also—it seemed like I could maybe have asked for more.

"But in return, Natalie, you need to give me something else."

There was a stilling in the room. My father-in-law was smiling at me in a strange way. It was a transparent look; the kind of look my husband hadn't given me since our wedding day. The look a man gives a woman when he's imagining her naked body. Considering what he will do with it. The warmth of it, the softness. Fingers molding skin like clay.

A hotness pooled in my stomach, spreading down my legs. "What do you want from me?"

What I had known from the very first moment I met him: Doug was a real man. Effortlessly masculine. He didn't ask for power, or respect, or submission. He demanded it. He was the kind of man to climb up a mountain of dead bodies in the name of touching the sky. I hated him, I wanted him dead, and also: I sometimes imagined what it would feel like for a man like that to have me. Biblically, I mean. Which is another way of saying: If Doug had asked me what I thought he was going to ask me, I might have given it to him. I might even have liked it. Might even have asked, when everything was said and done, for more.

"I want you to have more babies with my son."

The warm, liquid feeling in my stomach hardened and froze.

Doug was still looking at me, but his gaze had dropped from my face to my stomach. As if the force of his own imagination might be enough to impregnate me on its own. None of this felt erotic anymore. It felt cold and mechanical. Impossibly sterile. The only way this man wanted to enter me was through a scheduled procedure. Frigid silver tongs and a long bovine syringe.

"Amelia says you're still breastfeeding," he said. "It's harder to get pregnant if you're breastfeeding. You know that, right?"

Close your eyes, Natalie. Relax. You're going to feel a small pinch in three, two, one…There we go. Nice and easy. Now, hold still—

“That’s the deal. I’ll pay for this little farm fantasy, and in return you’ll give my son a big American family.”

A terrifying thought: Did Doug know how cold my marital bed was? Did he know that his son preferred to stare with pained focus at some point in the distance over my head whenever he found himself in the disappointing position of having to thrust over me? Did he know that even *that* poor attempt at a performance happened so infrequently as to feel like a revelation whenever it finally did?

“I will!” I said, as brightly as I could. “That was always the plan.”

“Well,” Doug said, and reached for his phone. “Just wanted to make sure. I’ll make the call to the accountant today.” He was looking at a paper on his desk now, trying to make sense of his own handwriting. “Thanks for coming in, sweetheart,” he said without looking up. And with that, I was dismissed.

—

I left Doug’s office and walked down the long hallway to the foyer in a daze. It was just after five, a time of day that usually reminded me of my mother. She hated that strange dusky hour when one could be sitting and reading a book with none of the lights on, only to look up and realize she was sitting in the pitch-black. There was nothing my mother found more disturbing than a sudden wash of darkness. But from now on, I knew, this time of day when the light left the world would remind me exclusively of Doug.

I reached the foot of the stairs. Across the hallway through the kitchen, Amelia was standing at the counter, humming “Für Elise” softly to herself, a large pork loin defrosting on a baking tray behind her. I watched as she crushed one of her small white pills with the back of a spoon against the countertop, then swept the powder into her palm and sprinkled it into a small cup of fat-free pudding. She took a big bite, closing her eyes in rapture.

—

Upstairs, Clementine was still in her crib, napping, and Caleb was at his desk, watching some YouTube video where a man with an absurdly gelled goatee was gesticulating wildly, the volume on low.

“Caleb, I told you that you have to wake her up by four.” I crossed the room and reached over into the crib, patting Clementine’s bum softly. “Now she’s going to go to sleep late.”

“Sorry,” he said. “My bad.”

I glanced over my shoulder as Clementine started to squeak awake. “Are you even listening to me? Or are you just used to saying ‘sorry’?”

“Yeah,” he said absentmindedly. “Hey. Did you know that there are teachers who vaccinate kids at school? Like, without even telling the parents?”

I picked Clementine up from her crib, then turned back to him. “I’ve never heard of that, no.”

“Unbelievable, right? And apparently, there’s this one school in Southern California that makes the kids crawl around on their hands and knees all day to make them feel like insignificant little worms.”

I sighed. The conversation with Doug had left me drained, almost physically sore. It felt like my father-in-law had handled me roughly—squeezing me, rolling me around in his palm—and now my brain and my uterus felt equally tender, like a pair of bruised fruits. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s true! I was doing research on what you said to me the other day, about what schools do to kids? And you were right, Nattie—only it’s worse, so much worse.”

I crossed the room and peered down at the paused screen while Clementine drowsily patted my cheek with her tiny fingers. The title read, in all caps, THE HIDDEN TRUTH OF AMERICA’S PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM!!!!

“This guy looks like a whacko,” I said finally.

“He’s a doctor, Natalie. Show him some respect. And anyways: he’s the one who helped me realize how ridiculous it was for me to want to be a kindergarten teacher. Do you know, Natalie, why I’ve been struggling so

much lately? Why I can't seem to find my purpose? It's not my fault, actually. It's the people in charge of this country who are trying to feminize men."

"Isn't your father one of the people in charge of this country?"

Caleb sighed. "Yeah, but like, only in an institutional way."

"And he's trying to…feminize you?"

"No." He seemed frustrated that I wasn't understanding. "*Everyone* is. Think about it: in the olden days, I'd have been a soldier by now. Or a blacksmith."

"Since when do you want to be a blacksmith?"

"I don't. My point is just—I wasn't meant to live this way."

I had no idea what he was talking about. If there was one thing I knew for sure, it's that Caleb would've been the worst soldier on the planet. It was ironic: we were close to alignment—I couldn't agree more that my husband had been behaving, as of late, like a silly little girl—and yet also I'd never felt more lost in a conversation. Clearly it had been a mistake to send him down a public-school-curriculum rabbit hole. I made a mental note to circle back on that soon. But now was not the moment for that. *Now* was showtime; the single biggest presentation of my life.

"Listen," I said, "speaking of your purpose. I found something that might interest you."

I showed him the listing. Clementine played with my hair while I stood by his chair, watching as he flipped through the slideshow, each picture reflected neatly in the whites of his eyes. Rolling fields. *Click.* Big red barn. *Click.* House buffeted by distant mountains. *Click.* When Caleb finished the slideshow, he looked at me with a gaping, almost lustful expression. *Checkmate.* "You'll do this?" he asked. "For me?"

"I will do this for you, with one condition. We need to have sex more often."

Caleb looked pained. "Natalie, I—"

"I don't need you to say anything," I said. "I just need you to agree. Once a week, minimum, and at least three times in my fertile window." I paused, then said meaningfully, "For Clementine."

A basic tenet of Christian life: to deny your child the gift of siblings was the cruelest act of child abuse imaginable. “For Clementine,” he repeated. “And we can homeschool them out there on our farm. Keep them away from the pedophiles in the school system.”

I hadn’t planned on homeschooling the kids. At first, a flare of panic lit up in me at the thought of another role to fail at—mother, wife, homemaker, *teacher*—but then I remembered the money and relaxed. Teachers were cheap. We’d find room for one in the budget.

“Fine,” I said. “We can hire a teacher. I’m sure there’s some sort of curriculum package online that we can order.”

He considered this. “Can I choose the curriculum package?”

“Sure. You can choose the curriculum package.” So this was how it felt: marital compromise in action.

“Oh,” Caleb added, “And also: no cattle.”

“But it’s a cattle farm.”

He shook his head firmly. “We’ll grow vegetables.”

“Vegetables?”

“Do you know how cows feel when they die, Nattie? Terrified. So what do you think you’re eating when you eat beef?” Meaningful pause. “Terror. You’re eating terror.”

I stared at my husband. I couldn’t even begin to think of a coherent yet gentle rebuttal to that claim; I wasn’t even sure if I needed one. Wasn’t this the man who had happily eaten a hamburger three days ago? How many videos had he watched today, anyways?

Caleb nodded decisively. “That’s what we’ll be known for. Nutritious, organic, *non-terrified* sustenance. And also, all good ranches have some sort of name. We’ll have to think about what we name ours.”

“Actually,” I said sweetly, “I already have a name in mind.”

25

MORNING, AGAIN. I open my eyes and realize, with fathomless relief, that I made it through the entire night without waking up once. No nightmares. No insomnia. Just sleep.

A miracle: for the first time in days, I'm not crippled by terror. My thoughts are still jerky and loose-limbed, my mind humming along nervously, but the panic is softer now, less urgent. After three days of exposure to the light, my fear has grown a layer of peachy fuzz. I can hold it in one hand.

I can manage this.

A moment later, like clockwork, Maeve is in the doorway. "Mama?"

This time, I'm ready for her. I'm not afraid.

"Hello, darling," I say lovingly. She lights up in response, leaps into bed, nuzzles her head into my neck.

Mamamamamamama, you're back.

—

When Maeve and I walk into the kitchen, Mary is sitting at the table, stitching a piece of clothing. "Good morning," I say brightly.

Mary stops sewing and looks at me, her expression frankly critical. "Good morning," she says. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes." I look around at the kitchen and feel a sudden rush of amazement. This is incredible. A feat of engineering. It truly feels like I'm living in the pioneer days!

I turn back to Mary. “Can I—shower?”

Mary looks at me for a long moment. Then she sets the fabric down.

—

Together we walk outside to one of the tin wash basins set by the porch stairs.

“Wait here and I’ll get the water,” Mary says.

It’s a brisk autumn morning. The sky is bottomless and blue. You can feel it, the promise of winter in the air, but the sunlight cuts through and warms my skin. In the distance, the cragged peaks of the mountains are so sharply vivid it feels like I could reach a finger out and prick myself on them. I feel suddenly and deeply alive.

I stand there by the washbasin while Mary pulls the nightgown over my head, then slowly unwraps my ankle bandage. The skin underneath is—well. From the quick glimpse I manage before casting my gaze just as quickly back up to the sky, it looks like a pair of lips have been sewn bloodily shut.

“Lean on me,” Mary instructs, and I do, a hand on her shoulder as she places a wooden children’s stool in the washbasin, then helps me hop awkwardly in. I sit down on the stool. My bad foot stretches awkwardly out in front of me. I stare firmly past it while Mary talks above me, a series of chiding little comments that are delivered in a gentle tone, how it’s very inconvenient for me to bathe on a separate schedule than the family, it’s so much less work when the boys are around to haul buckets of water from the well for all of them to use in one single go of it, and Maeve isn’t nearly as strong as her brothers, so we’ll have to be patient with her bringing back half-filled buckets of water every five minutes, really, the girl always finds a way to dilly-dally…

Beautiful day, beautiful day. I wince each time Mary pours a bucket of ice water over my head, but it doesn’t hurt. It feels like waking up. Mary scrubs my skin with a misshapen bar of homemade soap, up my arms and down my legs, carefully around my mangled ankle, and then back up again,

over my belly and breasts and then across my back. She reaches every nook and cranny of my body, even the most private parts. Before long, the spongy suds have turned the color of clay. All the while, Mary talks. There's so much work to be done today, so we must be efficient, we can use this water for laundry when we're done, and then after that we can use the water again to mop the floors, and then we need to collect the eggs from the ladies, we should've already done that, so technically we're behind for the day…

The rhythm of her voice is so comforting, I wish I could disappear inside it. Instead, I start to cry. Mary doesn't stop washing me, but she does become gentler with her scrubbing, saying *there*, *there* every few moments. "This'll make you feel better, Mama," she says at one point. Is it the first time she's used that word? I can't recall. Regardless, it makes me cry harder.

"Don't be sad, Mama," Maeve says, when she sees me in the tin.

Oh, darling, I want to say, *I'm not crying because I'm sad. I'm crying because of how good it feels to be clean again.*

Instead, I smile and say, "Hello, ladies!"

—

After I'm clean, Mary takes care of laundry while Maeve and I go get the eggs. Together we make breakfast, Maeve monitoring the eggs over the fire while I try my hand at another bread boule to be eaten at lunch. *This one will be better,* I tell myself, and as I watch my hands move of their own accord, I actually almost believe it.

When the boule is cooking above the fire and Mary has finished mopping the floor, we go to the barn. Usually Old Caleb milks the cow early each morning, and she isn't our problem. But today, Mary says, he told her about an infection on the udders, so we have to check on her.

As Mary leads us into the barn toward the far stall, I pause by a farming scythe hanging on the wall. Next to the scythe, an iron ax, the kind used for

splitting wood, and next to that, a sharp metal rake, which looks a little bit like a pitchfork.

A current of queasiness runs through me, and I swallow it. *Props,* I think to myself, willing the good cheer back through my limbs. *That's all they are. Tools for imagination.*

The cow is standing totally still in the back stall when we arrive. Mary shows me how to spread the ointment all over the udders, taking extra care in the places where the skin has grown red and irritated. "Big girl," I say quietly while I work, Mary watching behind me. "Beautiful girl." When I'm finished, I pet the cow's nose, even though I know how stupid cows are. They're not like dogs, or horses. I used to hate spending any time around Sassafras, the way that four-legged lard monster would roll her tongue across my hair whenever I got too close to her head. *She's like a golden retriever,* Caleb would insist, to which I would say: *If the retriever had brain damage, sure.*

"Good girl," I say to the cow. She stares at me with those black marble eyes, so spiritless she might as well be filled with stuffing.

—

After that chore is finished, Maeve asks if we can go look for wildflowers to make a crown. Mary hesitates—*so much to do*—then says, "Just a few minutes."

We walk up the hill by the barn. At the top, Maeve crouch-walks around, looking for colorful buds, and finds none. Then she casts her gaze upward to the sky, which has started to speckle with clouds. "I see a bunny," she says, pointing at one incoherent white wisp. "What do you see, Mary?"

"Hmmm," Mary says patiently. "I see…a horse."

"What do you see, Mama?"

I see, I see. What do I see? The loneliest landscape on the planet. Fences in disrepair. The roof of the barn bowing dangerously. The horse that is not my horse standing quietly in a paddock corner, not even his tail swishing,

like a battery-operated game that is currently turned off. It looks and feels like the end of the world. Like Judgment Day came and went and took everyone but us. It looks like Hell, I think happily, and then pause.

Hell.

Happy.

Shouldn't Hell terrify me? Yes, I think it should. But I can't seem to summon fear—or anger, now that I think about it, or even sadness. Those emotions are far away right now, behind a padlocked door down the longest of long hallways.

All I feel is—fine. I feel fine.

I cock my head at the thought. Why do I feel fine?

The tonic.

The tonic Mary gave me. That must be what's making me feel this way.

Terrible, I think experimentally. *How terrible of her to drug me.*

But it doesn't feel terrible. It feels incredible. Clear and cool and calm, the world around me sweetly blurry, like I'm floating face down in a river, eyes open underwater, staring at the muck and the grime, saying hello and then goodbye as I float mercifully past.

Thank God someone finally drugged me.

"Bunny," I manage finally.

"I already *said* that," Maeve says. "Something *else*, Mama! Something else!"

I play along, gaze traveling upward. What do I see?

I see a cloud that looks like my piece of shit pioneer husband when he's standing over me, watching me scream. *Yeehaw!* I see a cloud that looks like the kind of bread I'm capable of baking these days. *Lumpy lumpy lumpy.* I see a cloud that looks very much like—what did Caleb become obsessed with, once we moved to the farm?

Chemtrails. Yes. I see a cloud that looks like a chemtrail, streaking across the far corners of the horizon.

"Nothing," Mary says. "Mama sees nothing, and now we should go home." She nudges me. "Right, Mama?"

“Right,” I echo, and smile at the girls. “Nothing.” Together we walk back down the hill toward the house.

—

Six hours later, I beam at my family. I cry out with joy, “Dinner is ready!”

26

OF THE MILLIONS of Angry Women who would eventually come to know and love Yesteryear Ranch, many of them would believe—and argue, and debate, and insist—that they had been there from the very start. That I created the account the day we signed the papers for the ranch, and that *they*—my beloved disciples, my furious little women—had been there for every single moment of the journey.

In a very simple sense, they were correct. I *did* create the account the day we signed for the ranch, and if a very simple person—and it seems many of my followers were very simple people—were to skim along the first pictures of my account, hopping from happy caption to happy caption, they might make the assumption that they were witnessing the foundation-setting of an empire. *The brick-by-brick creation of a true American dream!*

The only problem with that assumption would be the dates. Meaning: I shared a mere six pictures over the course of the first three years. Six images, six *moments,* were captured out of the millions that took place. Which is by design, I suppose. No one wants to learn life lessons or buy pie crusts from a woman who's near-constantly covered in another animal's shit.

—

Picture 1

There I am, rosy-cheeked in overalls, standing in front of the big red barn with Clementine, who is about to turn one year old. Clementine has an

expression of grim determination on her face. I am young and beautiful and smiling ear to ear.

Caption: Surprise! We bought a farm.

—

The day of the inspection, we flew into Sun Valley and drove three hours out to the ranch. Caleb insisted on renting a pickup truck, “just to get used to country life.” I rolled my eyes but said nothing, just stood there in my little closing-day outfit—navy blue prairie dress, heeled boots, a brand-new overcoat, all purchased after Doug’s deposit reached our checking account—and smiled at the parking garage attendants while Caleb pointed at the biggest, most unreasonable truck in the rental parking lot. “But we only have a twenty-minute drive,” I said as cheerily as I could manage—an argument that failed to sway my husband from his selection, and also incidentally turned out not to be true.

Initially, back at the Mills estate, I had looked up the distance from my mother’s house to the driveway entrance of Yesteryear and saw it was twenty miles. Utterly manageable, I thought, except I hadn’t accounted for all the lovely little details of rural life that would stretch those twenty miles into a marathon drive: the cattle pass grates, the winding mountain roads, the industrial-size tractors that motored along at five miles an hour in the middle of the road. Those three hours felt longer than the entirety of our twelve-hour road trip from Idaho to California, because my once-quiet husband was now fully incapable of shutting up. He talked nonstop about soil acidity and tractor options, the benefits of growing garlic versus buying it at the store, why raw milk was so much safer than pasteurized. At one point he glanced out the side of the driver window and said, “See that?”

I gazed out at the mountains. “See what?”

“Nothing,” he said. “No chemtrails overhead.” As he set down the soda, burped, and rolled into a long monologue about how we should file right away for dark sky protections, I reminded myself to set screen limits for my

husband when we got home. He'd been spending too much time on YouTube these days. He was starting to sound like a hick.

Eventually we finally turned off the highway and down the long dirt road that would become *our* long dirt road, and my mood brightened considerably. For another five minutes, we rolled along bumpily beneath the trees in silence. Then we turned the final corner and climbed up and over the hill, and—

Oh.

The truck came to a stop by the barn. Caleb threw the car into park and said, "Damn."

Breathtaking. It was breathtaking. The barn, the mountains, the house. All of it was so much more beautiful in three dimensions than I could've possibly imagined when I saw it online. Dead center in this tableau was one of my mother's real-estate agent friends, who was standing by the porch stairs, nearly hopping with excitement to meet us. This was undoubtedly the biggest commission of her life.

A minute later, Caleb took that infamous first picture of me and Clementine. We'd upgraded our flip phones to smartphones recently; Caleb had downloaded social media apps for both of us. "This is how people share information now," he had said, insisting I should create an account too, but all I saw on my feed once I did were bags and wine bottles and bright white teeth.

The picture would, on that first day, receive four likes in total from the four people who followed me: my sister, my mother, my mother-in-law, and Caleb. I didn't care. In fact it would be several years before I realized that the laws of social media were the same as the laws of physics, equal parts invisible and accumulative in their power. Like the scientists who first discovered the atom: How could they have possibly known that the identification of something so small, so elemental, could one day lead to the nuclear bomb?

—

Picture 2

A landscape portrait of the rolling, snow-covered hills of Yesteryear. Blinding, untouched white, beneath a divinely blue sky.

Caption: there's a season for everything.

—

During our inspection we learned about an infestation of black mold that had taken over one of the bathrooms in the house. I thought of that poor old man, who had been unknowingly breathing in the spores, and his son with the cancer. Very sad. Then I realized that dealing with the mold meant more time at Doug and Amelia's house, so I said, "Can't we just take our chances?"

Caleb gave me a look. "Clementine could develop asthma."

"Plenty of people have asthma and go on to live perfectly full lives!"

Caleb didn't buy that, and so we waited while the house was chemically treated, and they kept finding more mold—"There are so many black clouds, it almost looks like a fairy-tale curse," the contractor said cheerfully—and before we knew it, another set of seasons passed with my in-laws. During that time, the strangest thing happened: my husband began waking up at the same time as me. By five in the morning, as I was moving through my beauty routine, he would already be in front of his computer, scrolling through online chat forums about farming. It was shocking to witness such a sharp onset of ambition in a man previously defined by the lack thereof. Each morning, I thought, *There's no way this will last.* And each new morning, it did.

Other things happened during that time period, too. I finished weaning Clementine from breastmilk, and she started eating solid foods. She took her first steps and said her first word. *Mama.* Then she said it again, more insistently, and then soon it was not so much a word as a chant, a royal demand that rang in my ears even when she was rooms away, fast asleep at naptime. *Mamamamamamamamamamama—*

It seemed that Doug and Amelia were both experiencing changes of their own during that time period, too. At family dinner one night, Doug said he was planning on paying a consulting team to do some hush-hush research on the relative viability of a third presidential campaign. This seemed unremarkable to me—we were *always* talking about the proverbial campaign—but Caleb and Amelia both seemed to stiffen at the news. This meant, apparently, that it was actually happening. Another bid for president was now on the family horizon. “Excuse me,” Amelia said softly, and I watched in surprise as she left the table. Later, Caleb told me the last presidential campaign (which took place when he was in middle school) had been *hard on their marriage*. “She doesn’t like all the cameras and questions,” he said, which made me realize that attention, or too much of it, could become another form of clutter.

After that, I started finding pudding cups hidden in the trash beneath coffee filters and banana peels. I began to suspect Amelia was having her *me time* more than once a day. As for Doug, he was away more frequently, appearing on the news as many times as the networks would have him. He came home one day looking permanently frightened, and when I asked him if he was all right, he paused, then leaned into me and said confidentially, “It’s just a little bit of Botox. The consultants said it would keep me looking youthful.” He hesitated, then asked gruffly, “Is it obvious?”

—

Picture 3

A photo carousel: a cardboard box of yolk-yellow chicks; one chick peering through Clementine’s cupped hands; a single black-and-white cow standing alone in the paddock by the barn, staring at the camera with an almost humanlike expression of confusion; Caleb, grinning and covered in dirt, leaning his arm on a shovel stuck in the dirt.

Caption: #farmlife #happyhubbie #chickens #cows #blessed

—

From the first time Caleb suggested it, I told him it was a stupid idea. There was no reason to get farm animals so soon. But he did it anyway: he ordered a shipment of chicks, a dairy cow, and two packages of exotic vegetable seeds to arrive a day after we moved onto the farm.

Clementine was almost three years old by this point, and still an only child. No longer a baby at all but a toddler. I'd never been around just one child before. There was an intensity to our time together that I found exhausting and unnerving even when it was going well. I was desperate for more children, not just because of my agreement with Doug but also because I was certain the arrival of another child would have an alleviating effect on my relationship with the one I already had. Both of us, I think, were frequently exhausted from being the recipient of so much focus from the other.

The day the chicks arrived, I picked one up and placed it into Clementine's hands. The chick began to squeak wildly, like a little ambulance siren, *PEEP PEEP PEEP PEEP—*

"He's afraid," she said. Just a moment ago, it seemed, she had said *Mama* for the first time, and already she was speaking almost exclusively in short sentences, ones that always felt like declarations of her mother's failure. *I'm hungry. You're mad. He's afraid.*

"Hold on," I commanded. She kept perfectly still as I took the picture, her face frozen in somberness, then she set him down on the floor. The chick waddle-sprinted back to the cluster of other chicks. Clementine stood back up and held out her hand, a small yellow-white dollop of excrement on her palm. She looked at it for a long moment, then she stepped forward and wiped it on the thigh of my jeans.

—

All the chicks died shortly after arrival. Whatever killed them caused their bodies to bloat like little tennis balls. We tossed them. Then the dairy cow's udders grew swollen and infected, and soon she was banging her head

against the barn wall in a terrifying staccato rhythm, *thud*, *thud*, *thud*—out of boredom, Caleb thought. But how to entertain a cow?

“Look it up,” I said.

By that time, though, the online forum filled with experienced farmers was no longer receptive to Caleb’s questions. While the men had been helpful at first, eagerly answering Caleb’s questions, they’d recently grown angry, telling him he shouldn’t have gotten a dairy cow, that he should sell the cow immediately and get some certifications first. What was he thinking, they asked. Did he really think he could do this overnight?

And so he went on another forum, this one titled *DIY Farmers*. The men were much nicer there.

—

“Mastitis!” Caleb said triumphantly, five days into the head-banging issue. “She has all the symptoms of mastitis!”

“Great,” I said. “What’s mastitis?”

—

The cow died a month later. We stood over her body in the barn. I looked at Caleb. “What do farmers do with dead cows?”

—

They burn them. Or bury them in compost. Or call someone to pick up the body and take it to a facility where it can be processed into fertilizer, but only if there are no transmissible diseases, and even then, you should be careful, because too many calls for too many dead cows can lead to a formal investigation.

—

Caleb drove an hour to the Home Depot in town and paid three Mexican men to hop into the bed of his truck and help him drag the body out to a field. I watched from the kitchen window as the flames licked the sky. The bonfire smelled terrible.

—

Later that day, when the men were loitering by the truck, smoking cigarettes and waiting for Caleb to drive them back to town, I said to him, “I think it’s time to hire some workers, don’t you?”

He looked reluctant. “I guess so.”

“*And*,” I added, “I think it’s also time for something else.”

“What? Dinner?”

I raised my eyebrows, which was intended to give the appearance of flirtation, but just made him look further alarmed. “What? What is it? Are you sick or something?”

—

That night we had three minutes of close-lipped missionary sex. The next morning, a new dairy cow arrived at the farm. We would never actually see the wolves, but we heard them howling all the time.

—

Picture 4

The photo: Caleb and Clementine and me, standing alongside his parents and his brothers and their families onstage at an election-night party in Salt Lake City, confetti frozen in the air around our faces.

Caption: Proud to be an American!

—

The night Doug won his eighth Senate reelection campaign, one of Caleb's older brothers, David, found Amelia passed out in Doug's dressing room, her pink pantsuit splattered with chocolate-colored vomit.

"Jesus Christ," George, another brother, said from the doorway, while David checked her wrist for a pulse. He gagged, then said, "Is that shit?"

"It's pudding," I said, and George said, "Thank God," right as David said, "She's breathing!"

—

I stood with Clementine in the hallway between the dressing room and the stage, watching the brothers hand out NDAs to the paramedics before they could step inside.

As they took Amelia away on a stretcher, her gaze drifted foggily toward me and Clementine. She muttered something at us, but it couldn't be heard beneath her oxygen mask. "Say bye-bye to Grammy," I instructed, and Clementine waved bye-bye, right as Doug's voice boomed through the auditorium hallways. "At this very moment, my youngest son is working day and night to revitalize a working meat and dairy farm in southwest Idaho." (*Vegetables*, I thought. *Not meat.* Caleb would be so disappointed.) "He could've been anything, my son, but he chose to get his hands dirty like a real American—and you know what? I couldn't be prouder of him!"

"Do you hear that?" I told Clementine, over the waves of polite applause. "Grandpa's trying to be electable. Can you say *electable*?"

"Electable," she repeated, in a tone I could only describe as bored, and we both fell silent.

—

Picture 5

The photo: Caleb and I in the fields at sunset, kissing, him dipping me low.

The caption: I always wanted my very own cowboy.

—

“Let’s have sex,” I said one night.

Caleb gave my vagina a long, skeptical look. “Is it safe?”

“Of course it is. This is what we’re designed to do.”

“But what about—”

“For the last time: That wasn’t a miscarriage! It was just a heavy period!”

This is what my mother had encouraged me to tell Caleb a month earlier, after he walked into the bathroom to find me sobbing wildly, my hands and thighs covered in blood. We’d been trying to have another baby for more than two years now. The panic I felt about this situation was indescribable.

I tried my best to give a sexy look, but Caleb seemed put off by the expression on my face, so I dropped the put-on and said, like always: “You promised.”

—

I massaged Caleb’s penis for ten minutes, squeezing and twisting slowly at the base of the shaft with one hand and milking the tip with the other. Usually, this worked to get him erect enough for us to have sex. Tonight, though, nothing came of my efforts. Each time I glanced back up at Caleb’s face, his eyes were closed and scrunched up, his mouth in a sort of grimace, so that I couldn’t tell if he was trying hard himself to get into the mood, or waiting for me to give up.

Finally I sat back, letting his penis flop away like a slinky. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing. I’m just exhausted.” He did look exhausted. He *was* working hard. Up at sunrise, outside all day long, then at the computer for hours each night. But wasn’t this, too, an essential part of being a husband? A relentless, almost mechanical drive to repeatedly impregnate your wife?

“But I’m ovulating. If we don’t have sex now, we’ll have to wait another month.”

“Shouldn’t we just leave this up to the Lord?”

He’d said this once before, several months earlier, after someone on one of his forums suggested it was blasphemy for women to track their menstruation in such a fashion. *These things should be left up to the Lord, full stop.* Now I cut him off before he could start on that tangent again. “The Lord wants us to try, Caleb. He wants us to care.”

He didn’t respond. His eyes were closed now. A second later, he was making soft little sleep snuffles. Even his penis seemed to be dead asleep and snoring against the bed of his thigh. Infuriating. I thought of what he said to me on the day of our wedding—*I can’t wait to taste you*—and then I thought of the horrible graphics I’d seen on his computer screen—Intense kissing leads to squirting orgasm!!!!—and I swallowed the urge to crack a lampshade over his head.

Instead, I got out of bed and went to the kitchen, then came back into the bedroom with a cereal bowl and dropped it onto Caleb’s stomach, startling him awake.

“Wha? What’s this?”

“I don’t care how you get it done. Just get it done.”

“But—”

“You promised.”

Caleb was silent for a long time. Then he got out of bed.

—

Five minutes later, he came out of the bathroom and handed me the bowl.

“Thank you,” I said. “Now go to sleep.”

In the kitchen, I set the bowl on the counter then pulled a sauce baster out of the drawer.

—

Picture 6

The picture: Me, five months pregnant, with Clementine on my hip.

The caption: God bless this growing family!

27

IN YESTERYEAR, time passes in a slur of good days and bad days.

On good days, I wake up feeling rested. Determined. Optimistic. Confident I can win over the world. And so I move through the hours as the best possible version of myself, the most obedient wife, the most loving mother. When Maeve appears in my doorway, I'm already wide awake and smiling, arms outstretched. *Good morning, darling.* Together, we pick out my outfit for the day (*The same gray, stained, catastrophe of a dress as yesterday? Fabulous!*), and then I limp outside to retrieve the stupid fucking eggs from the stupid fucking chickens. At this point, I usually need to pause to have a quick, hard sob, before I wipe the tears off my face and say, "Hello, ladies!"

Then I help make breakfast. I crack the eggs into the frying pan and sit by the fire, nudging the pan around the coals so they cook evenly. When I bring the pan to the table and set it down proudly, showcasing my perfectly scrambled eggs, no one is impressed. No one even says thank you. But I don't mind! Of course I don't mind! *A good wife never minds!*

Instead, I think, with the blunt cerebral force of a spaceship hurtling through the atmosphere, *How lucky am I? This life! Such a blessing.*

—

On good days, I amaze myself at my own bravery. I take on each new chore and assignment with the obedient pluck of a picture-book pioneer woman. Ironing and sewing and mopping and wood tending and udder cleaning and

potato peeling, *la di da, what a life!* I ignore the fact that our meals are tasteless and beige and usually consist of two or fewer food groups. I ignore about half the thoughts that pop into my head. Instead, I focus on being a tender mother and a cheerful wife. I never let them see me cry, especially not Maeve, whom I've nicknamed *my little shadow,* a metaphor that works on the visual level but falls flat on the auditory level. Shadows are quiet. Shadows trail behind you and never remind you that they're there. Maeve, on the other hand, never stops talking. She always has some new observation to share, some new reason to tug on my dress and say, "Mama? *Mama,*" with genuine insistence.

Do you see that cloud, Mama?

You missed a spot on that shirt, Mama.

Mama? Are you hungry, Mama? Want a snack?

On good days, Maeve's sweet little voice is a comfort. A soundtrack to my cheer. Together we say hello to all of it, the clouds and the sky and the fields and the trees, Old Caleb and the boys and Mary, the cow and the chickens and the horse and the muck and the grime and the rain and the soot and the shit.

—

On bad days, I don't wake up so much as I lie there, staring wordlessly up at the ceiling, while night bleeds away into morning. On bad days, hope is a four-letter word that floats limply in my thoughts, and life on this ranch feels less like a life and more like a nightmare, a contrived stage performance, a scene that never ends.

On bad days, my thoughts swirl in eddies of relentless panic:

I have to leave.

I cannot leave.

I think he might kill me.

I think I might kill him.

I know someone is watching.

I know no one is watching.

I'm worried I'll die here.

I cannot die here.

I think I would rather be dead.

And then I get up anyway. I drag myself out of bed and limp self-pityingly through those swirling thoughts and into the horror of another day. I grin fiercely at the children, I give a deep curtsy to Old Caleb, and then my face melts into a frigid glare as soon as they've gone past.

A single bad day feels like nine good days packed into one. Time moves so slowly that I often worry the clock in this world might break altogether, leaving me frozen in a single sepia-toned moment. On bad days, I wake up in a panic—*I cannot stay here*—and so to calm myself down, I tell myself that *today* must be the last day; *today* must be the day some celebrity runs up the driveway, interrupting me in the middle of one of my terrible chores, laughing hysterically at my anguish, a man with a massive video camera on his shoulder recording the whole thing. *Tomorrow, I will return to a house that smells of lemon-scented cleaning supplies. Tomorrow, I will wake up to a round pregnant belly and the sound of the nannies making breakfast. Tomorrow, I will not have to shit in a rickety old shed outside.*

And then the day passes in the same dreary rotation as the day before—chicken coop; *hello, ladies;* breakfast boule baked to the opposite of perfection; chores; chores; chores; hemming; ironing; sweeping; dinner prep; dinner; stare exhaustedly into the fire until I'm about to fall asleep on my chair—and then the day is over and I walk slowly back to my bedroom, stunned with exhaustion, my clothing pounds heavier from all the sweat and dirt, and I get into bed before I remember, for the millionth time: *It didn't happen today. Nothing changed.*

Language fails to describe how this feels. Depression, the very concept of it, falls flat in the face of this experience. The best word I can come up with is *purgatory,* and even that feels a bit too tame.

On good nights, Mary brings me tonic to help me sleep. On bad nights, she barely even looks at me, and the darkness of the night, the darkness of *this life,* threatens to swallow me whole.

—

Which brings me to the laundry.

Oh, the laundry.

The laundry!

Even on a good day, the laundry threatens to drown me. If a person had told me, before I ended up here, that the simple act of washing clothes could take you hours, that it could cause your fingers to crack and bleed from the cold, I would've laughed and said they must be doing something wrong. I would've said that *I* would find a way to do it in half the time, and do you know what? I would've been fucking wrong.

Every few days, good or bad, rain or shine or frigid goddamn cold in the early afternoon, Mary positions me outside in front of three large aluminum tins of water. She hands me a broom, one of her homemade bars of soap, and a pile of laundry large enough to defy the senses. The soap is made with lye; my fingers begin to sizzle within minutes of use. First, I drop the laundry into the first tin, and then I scrub, scrub, scrub—sizzle, sizzle, sizzle—and then I use the broom to lift the hulking pile of soaked clothes into the next tin to wash the soap off. If I didn't hate the clothing here enough before, I hate it doubly now. And so I have to sit all afternoon long and scrub, scrub, scrub, until my fingers become so burned and numb that they lose the ability to grip the washboard tightly, or until the clothes are clean. I have yet to finish the chore due to the latter reason; so far, it's always been the former. I am waging a daily battle against the inherent dirtiness of this farm, and I am losing. The worst part (besides the bleeding fingers and the freezing water and the screaming pain in my lower back and the blinding fury I feel within fifteen minutes of getting started) is the location. By which I mean: the spot by the front porch where I do the laundry allows me a perfect view of Caleb and the boys whenever they're working in the nearby fields, which means that I get to watch those fuckers in real time as they grow dirtier and dirtier throughout the day. I sit there and watch—with an outrage that froths and bubbles in all the ways that my sourdough starter now refuses to—as the boys wrestle one another to the

ground, rolling around gleefully in the mud until their father picks them up by the scruffs of their collars and sets them back on their feet.

—

The long dresses I wear are heavy and thick. Poorly sewn and covered in stains. They make me clumsy; I trip and swear each time I step outside. I stub the toe on my bad foot and scream like I've been shot. I find myself caked in dirt by midday. The only remotely nice part of the day is evening time, when dinner is over and I get to sit by the fire with Mary and Maeve. I'm still required to be doing work, to be clear—but stitching up rips in clothing is a walk in the park compared to plunging my fingers into the frigid cold.

While they talk, I focus on the stitching in my lap. The topics they cover are sweetly inane. Maeve will ask Mary about her dreams, for example, and Mary will very obviously fabricate the kind of dream scenario that a child would enjoy. *I fell into an ocean of pancakes and then syrup fell like rain.* When they reach the bounds of their own impossibly limited imaginations, they talk about chores and weather and barnyard animals. I can feel myself getting stupider by the day.

Regardless, I stay silent. I sit in my chair and focus on my stitching and try to take solace in the warmth of the fire. I think, but don't say, *This life is an exercise in insanity.*

—

I'm being watched, I remind myself, on good days and bad days, again and again. Like a mantra: someone, somewhere, *has* to be watching me right now. They have to be. There's no other option I can accept. And whoever's watching me? I want them to see how helpless I am. How beautiful I can be, even in the ugliest-possible situation. It's always the helpless and beautiful ones who are kidnapped, sure—but it's also the helpless and beautiful ones who are saved.

28

"NOW, NATTIE," my mother was saying, "I know you have so much on your plate right now, with the farm and the little ones, so *please* tell me if this is too much to ask—but Abigail was saying she'd love to come visit with the kids for the weekend, and I thought, what a lovely idea!"

"Oh," I said. "What a surprise."

I was holding my two-month-old son in my arms. Samuel. I'd been breastfeeding in the darkness in a barely furnished room when my mother called. It was technically Clementine's room. It was her mattress in the corner of the room, her books arranged in a neat little pile on the opposite wall. We kept forgetting to order the rest of the furniture. The princess bed frame, the matching pink bookshelf. They were floating in my laptop, waiting patiently in an online shopping cart. I just kept forgetting to purchase them.

It was June. Our second summer on the farm. On the other side of this great nation, Reena was living in New York City as a recent graduate. I knew this because I checked on her Instagram account daily. I saw every highly unattractive selfie she shared of herself, raccoon-eyed on the subway at three in the morning, surrounded by young men and women who always looked like they were mid-conversation and trying to ignore her. I knew she hadn't gotten a gig at McKinsey when she announced that she was working at some no-name mid-tier consulting firm that would require her to travel every other weekend. She was flailing, obviously—and I, on the other hand, was thriving.

I just needed to remember to order that furniture.

“So what do you think?” my mother said. “Should we come this weekend? Now’s a good time for Abigail to travel.” Only my mother would describe an hour’s drive as traveling. Abigail was five months pregnant with her fifth child. She’d lapped me several times over with her children. I hated her for it.

“What do I think,” I echoed softly. What *did* I think? Samuel snuffled in my arms, smacking his lips loudly. I stared at his little face in the darkness, smushed up against my breast. He was a sweet little boy, with none of the sharp edges of his older sister. I loved him effortlessly and distantly. When I held him, it felt like I was waving at a relative from very far away. *Hello, there!* Or maybe: *Goodbye!*

I’d opted for the anesthetic this time. I’d been miles away from this child even as he was making his slow exit out of my body.

Here is what I thought first: *If they come for the weekend, they will see the vegetables and the half-tilled fields and the workers, clutching their ribs and laughing breathlessly at Caleb’s mangled attempts at Spanish.*

Here is what I thought next: *If they come for the weekend, Mother can hold the baby.*

I let out a long breath. I kept forgetting to breathe these days. I was so tired. My son was so beautiful. I was so happy. Really, I was. Happy.

—

Two days later, my family and I stood in the driveway as Abigail’s junkyard minivan rolled up the hill. Little Samuel was in my arms in a brand-new blue gingham shirt. Clementine was standing stiffly at my feet, wearing a too-small dress in the same fabric as the baby. I’d gotten the outfits from a local children’s store in town months ago, certain that I could beat the pace of her growth spurt. Caleb was standing next to me, wearing a wide-brimmed hat.

“Well, aren’t you the perfect ranch family,” my sister said when she got out of the car.

Her children poured out of the van like termites. Brady, Brandon, Benjamin, Becky, each of them about fifteen months apart. The children went careening toward the fields, screaming about a game of tag. Clementine hesitated, then dropped my hand and began to walk slowly after them.

My mother got out of the passenger seat. “Goodness,” she said, “would you *look* at those mountains.”

“Welcome, y’all!” Caleb brayed out suddenly.

All of us looked at him. He looked back at us with an expression of terrified confusion, like he’d just woken up and found himself here, mid-conversation. I sighed. It had been a mistake to tell my husband to pretend. He’d internalized it incorrectly and now managed the feat only in fitful spurts, which obviously defeated the whole purpose of performance.

I threw a holly, jolly smile onto my face. “Caleb’s becoming a regular cowboy these days!”

“How *marvelous*,” my mother said quickly, and rushed to hug my husband before he could humiliate himself further.

While Caleb talked my mother’s ear off about his wide-brimmed hat (*Lord, give me strength*), Abigail sidled up to me. “He’s beautiful,” she said softly, looking at Samuel. She touched his bald head with an index finger, and he let out a little squeak in reply.

I nodded at her kids, who were now teaching Clementine how to play tag. “The children seem well.”

“Oh, they’re the best. I don’t know what I would do without them. They’re like my little angels.” I watched her as she watched her children. She’d aged. We hadn’t seen each other almost at all when I was living with Caleb’s parents. When I moved back to Idaho, I had noticed something different about her, something strange in her gaze, but I hadn’t taken a moment to really consider it until now. I’d seen my sister in all manner of moods, happy and sad and tired and overwhelmed, but this, what I was seeing on her face now, was something else entirely. Something altogether new.

Then she looked at me, and her expression shifted. “And how have you been?” she asked. “Better?”

“Oh, yes. I’m perfect.” Then I called to my mother, “Would you like to hold the baby?”

—

While Abigail’s kids chased each other through the rooms, I gave my mother and sister a tour of the house, pointing out everything that was going to get replaced in the renovation: the light fixtures, the granite countertops, the marble-tiled bathroom floors. We’d been meeting with architects, I told them. Only a week ago, we’d found the one we wanted to work with.

(Do you still want indoor toilets, ma’am, or would you prefer an outhouse?)

“We’re just waiting for him to fit us into our schedule,” I said, “and then all this is going to go *bye-bye*.”

“But it’s all brand-new,” my mother said. Samuel was fast asleep in her arms.

“It’s just not our taste,” I said. “I mean, really.” I gestured to the living room. “I mean, it looks like a Pottery Barn outlet got sick and threw up in here.”

My sister stared at a nearby wall sconce, as if trying to understand what a light fixture could’ve done to warrant such violent execution. “Well, don’t throw out all these perfectly good appliances. At least donate them.” Abigail paused delicately. “I could probably take some stuff. If it would help you, I mean.”

It was obvious Christian-speak for *I’d like your leftovers, please.* I played along, feigning interest at the idea of donation. “It would be *so* helpful if you did that for us.”

Still, my mother looked fretful. “Do you really want to get rid of all these perfectly good appliances? It’ll cost you a fortune to replace!”

I gave her an apologetic wince. “Money is not a concern.”

—

Except it was. Oh, it was! A little secret I told no one, that I barely acknowledged even in the quiet of my own thoughts: the money was nearly gone. We hadn't pulled the trigger on the renovation because I wasn't yet clear on how we would be able to afford it. We were just about to hit the three-year anniversary of the farm. We'd eradicated the black mold and restored the structural integrity of the barn and bought brand-new top-of-the-line tractors, we had tilled fields and daily workers and a cow and some chickens, we paid the financial equivalent of the GDP of a small nation in taxes each year, and also, we had yet to turn a profit as small as a penny. Just a few days earlier, Caleb had joked happily that our zucchini and egg earnings from the most recent farmers market pop-up had *almost* covered a full tank of gas for the truck. To which I replied in happy-wife-singsong, "You can't put a price on learning!"

What I wanted to say: *Want to blow through five million dollars so quickly it makes your head spin? Buy a fucking farm.*

—

After the house tour, I took my sister and my mother out to the fields. We stood at the top of the hill and watched my husband, several hundred feet away, chasing the kids in a turbocharged game of tag while our latest batch of men from Home Depot worked the fields, two of them driving tractors that dragged great silver rakes across the dirt, three of them walking around and pulling big rocks out of the soil.

My mother stared out at the scene with a look of abject dismay, her poker face momentarily abandoned. "What are you growing?"

"Beets, I think," I said. "And asparagus? I can't remember. Something to complement the zucchinis. This is Caleb's world. I try to keep out of it and let him run the show."

"Ah!" My mother laughed feebly, ever a good sport. "Divide and conquer. Always a good approach."

“I don’t remember you ever wanting to live on a farm,” Abigail said. She waved at a horsefly.

“It was my idea, actually, to move here,” I said. “I was the one who brought it up to Caleb on our first date, the idea of living on a farm.”

“Did you.”

“I did.”

“Why? You hate animals. And dirt.”

I looked at Abigail. There it was again: that strange expression on her face.

“Well,” my mother said smoothly, before I could reply. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a prettier farm in my life.”

“Pretty as a picture,” Abigail said. Then, blasphemy: she pulled a pack of cigarettes from her bag. My mother and I both gasped.

“Abigail!” I said.

“Abigail,” my mother echoed fiercely. “The *children*.”

“The children, the children!” Abigail said in soprano imitation, a cigarette now held delicately between her teeth. She rolled her eyes and said through a gritted jaw, “They’re specks in the distance, Mother.” She was rattling around in her bag for a lighter now, oblivious to or uninterested in our gaping expressions. “God,” she muttered as she held the flame to her lips. She took a deep drag, exhaled with evident relief, then said again, “*God*, let someone care about me as much as they care about the children.” She stepped back, waved her cigarette in a big circle, highlighting the scene before us: the fields, the workers, the children, my husband. “You’re right, though, Mother: it *is* pretty.” She cocked her head, narrowed her eyes pensively, took another drag. Glanced back at me. “But do you ever get sick of the smell, Nattie? Do you ever get tired of breathing in so much shit?”

I stared at her in shock. “What is *wrong* with you today?”

“Abigail,” my mother said, “why don’t you go back to the house and take a nap?”

Abigail didn’t respond, just took another long drag, frowning at something in the distance. Smoke billowed around her words. “I’m not tired.”

“Well,” I snapped, “you look exhausted to me.”

She turned sharply to me. “You know what? I *am* tired. Mother, can you corral the children to nap when you come back inside?” Before my mother could stutter out a response, she dropped the cigarette and pressed a cowboy boot heel into the grass, then turned and walked quickly back to the house.

As soon as she was out of earshot, I hissed to my mother, “What in the Lord’s name has gotten into her?”

My mother gave me a skittish look. “Let’s just be charitable, shall we? The poor thing has had a hard time at home recently. She hasn’t been sleeping well. She isn’t herself!”

I rolled my eyes, then dropped to a crouch and rooted around in the high grass for Abigail’s cigarette butt.

—

That night we took the kids to a rodeo an hour away, farther into the mountains. It was a cool night, the kind of evening that felt like a postcard vision of the Wild West, all the reds and whites and blues dipped in shades of diesel-grade Americana: cerulean sky, fire-truck clay dirt, divinely bright rodeo lights. The ice cream truck sold popsicles colored like flags. The rodeo clowns wore tasseled vests made of blue-and-white star fabric. We sat in the stands and watched teenage boys face down bulls the size of Abigail’s minivan, their expressions streaked with morbid determination. When they ran and dipped and jabbed, they bared their teeth like little animals, their metal braces catching the stadium lights. Teenage girls sauntered through the bleachers in leggings, holding out Tupperware containers for donations to the troops overseas. Caleb bounced baby Samuel on his lap, pointing at the bull riders, whispering to our drooling, incoherent son, “Someday that’ll be you, pal.” My sister kept glancing around at the men in the crowd, her gaze lingering on the bald spots, the muddy boots, the quiet belches, until finally she realized I was watching her and turned to face pointedly forward.

The crowd roared in unison at the first sight of blood. Caleb bought all the children fried dough. My mother cried at the beginning when a six-year-old sang the national anthem. Clementine cried at the end when she saw what happened to the bulls.

We got dinner on the way home at a famous country-fried steak house on the side of the highway. The waitress handed out plates loaded with sickly-sweet dinner rolls and steak gone spongy with gravy. Abigail pushed butter-soaked veggies around on her plate, completely impervious to my glare. Across the table, Caleb was talking my mother's ear off about the forums. No, not *one* chat room, he explained patiently, but multiple: he used his fingers to tick them off as he went. He had his farming buddies, his homeschooling buddies, his intellectual buddies, and so forth. *The manosphere,* he called it, a phrase he'd mentioned in my presence before, which always sounded to me like an amusement park for grown men. *Welcome to Manosphere: Where the Men Go!*

"Man-o-sphere," my mother repeated, in the same way Doug had done months earlier, when he and Amelia had visited. Like they were both learning to speak Italian. Amelia hadn't said anything at all; they were only stopping by for the night on their way to drop her off at a rehab clinic in Wyoming, and she had accordingly spent the whole dinner looking mournfully at her glass of Sauvignon Blanc, like she was spending a last evening with a lover before the war was on.

"Manosphere," Doug had said a second time, frowning slightly at the thought. Then he tapped Caleb's phone and said, "Show me."

My mother, on the other hand, merely sat back in her chair in contemplation.

—

When we got home, Caleb told us to relax in the living room. "You ladies spend time together," Caleb said, taking the baby from my arms. "I'll give the kids a bath."

I frowned. "All of them? At once?"

It seemed a bit unnatural—Abigail's oldest, Brady, was now seven, and seemed to play a bit rough—but Caleb waved my concern away and began corralling them down the hall.

"Not the baby, though!" I called after him. "Don't put the baby in the bath!"

"Duh," he called back.

Meanwhile, Abigail was already pulling a bottle of urine-yellow Chardonnay out of her bag. "What about a glass of wine? Mama? Natalie?"

"But you're pregnant," I said.

"A thimble won't hurt me," she said, then filled a goblet-size glass to the brim.

I didn't say anything, just exchanged a glance with my mother while Abigail handed us our glasses and guided us over to the couch. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen my mother have a glass of wine on an evening that had not been sanctioned as celebratory by the church. Now she took one without comment.

"So," Abigail said finally, once we were seated. "There's something I want to tell you all."

I sat down on the couch expectantly. The way my sister was sitting, with her hand resting on her pregnant stomach, I couldn't help but think: *She looks so old.* Only two years older than me, not yet thirty, but she could've been forty-five. Her forehead held three deep etchings that gave her a look of constant, parenthetical despair, and too many of her body parts had begun to swing at the smallest movement. Her arms, her breasts, her jowls. Not fat—not yet at least—but deflated. That's what children and poverty do: suck the collagen right out of you.

"I'm leaving Bryce," Abigail said.

My mother sat back and clapped her hand to her chest as if she'd been shot. I, on the other hand, let out a little laugh, because I honestly thought my sister was making a bad joke to lighten the mood from such a tense day. When her severe expression didn't break, though, I said, "You can't be serious."

"Lord," my mother moaned. "Lord, help me."

“I called a divorce lawyer,” Abigail said. “I signed a retainer.”

I shook my head. “But how can you afford a lawyer?”

Abigail frowned. “That’s your first question?”

“You and Bryce have no money. How can you afford to divorce him?”

“I took out a loan, if you really want to know.”

“But how did you qualify for a loan?”

“I tell you I’m getting a divorce, and all you care about is the money? How about ‘I’m so sorry to hear this, Abigail’? How about ‘*Why are you getting divorced, Abigail’?*”

I rolled my eyes. “I know why you’re getting divorced.”

“Why you *might* get divorced,” my mother interjected. “I mean, really, I think we need to pause for a moment and consider the implications of—”

“And why am I getting divorced, Natalie? If you know so much?”

“Because your husband is mean and dumb and drinks too much. He probably calls you names in front of the children. He probably hits you sometimes.” I paused, waiting for Abigail to confirm or deny this hypothesis, but she remained silent, her expression so still, so fathomless in its depth, that it looked like a great body of water at night. And so I went on, ignoring the terrifying stillness of my sister’s face, ignoring, too, the horrified expression on my mother’s. *Lord, save us all.* “He’s lazy, too. He’s never done anything with that shop. The man is and has always been a loser, but now it’s becoming harder for you to bear, and so now you, my poor sister, have somehow gotten it into your head that you will be better off without him, and I’m sorry, Abigail, but you will not.”

My mother’s hand was still pressed against her heart, like she was trying to stanch an arterial bleed. “The children,” she kept saying. “The children. The children.” Less a phrase than a pulse.

“The children will be fine,” Abigail said angrily. “And *I will be*—”

“You will be a single mother of five living on food stamps,” I snapped. “*That* is what you will be. You don’t even have a job history, Abigail. My God. You’d be lucky if they hired you to bag groceries with the teenagers in town.”

Abigail was crying now. My mother was too. It was just possible to hear the faint whistling of my husband down the hall while he shampooed five sets of heads. My fury circled back around, and it felt, suddenly, like I was eating myself alive. “Have you thought about where you’ll live? You can move in with Mother for a while, but not forever. And then what? You’ve never lived on your own before, Abigail. Do you know what it takes to apply for an apartment? Do you even know what a credit score is?”

“Stop it,” Abigail whispered. “Please, Natalie, stop it.”

I couldn’t have stopped if I wanted to, and I didn’t want to. I was angrier than I’d ever been in my life. I felt sick with it. “Do you honestly think the rules don’t apply to you? That you can just waltz away from all your responsibilities, completely unscathed?”

“Of course I don’t, that’s not what I’m saying, that’s not what I—”

“Do you think Bryce won’t file for custody? Of course he will. He’ll be remarried within the year, and then he and his new bride will fight for the children just to spite you. He’ll say you’re a cruel mother, a drunk, and the judge will agree with him, and before long you’ll be seeing your children every other Saturday. They won’t even know you.”

“What do I do?” Abigail said suddenly. “Oh my God, what do I do?”

She looked at my mother and me with such a blankly panicked expression that she seemed inhuman to me, like some animal that had wandered onto a highway. *Stop it*, I nearly hissed, *stop looking like that, so pathetic*, but I was officially out of breath. My mother scooched over to Abigail on the couch. “There, there. Oh, Abigail, honey, just take a deep breath—”

I breathed in sharply, and for a moment I was back in that hospital room, gasping in panic at my own irretrievable mistake. My heart constricted painfully and I stood up. “I’m going to check on the children.”

As I walked down the hallway, a memory surfaced: a stapled set of papers, handed to me a few days before my wedding.

“I can’t do it, Mama,” Abigail sobbed behind me. “I can’t do this for another forty years.”

It's a basic prenuptial agreement, Doug had said. *You're welcome to look it over with your lawyer.*

"Of course you can do it, sweetie," my mother said. "Of course you can."

As if I'd ever spoken to a lawyer in my life.

"How? How can I keep going like this?"

Just sign here, here, and here. That's it, and then you're finished.

"You keep going because you have to."

And then the same paperwork, the same conversation, two years later: *a basic financial agreement.*

"The children will be done with their bath soon. They can't see their mother in such a state, now, can they?"

Caleb's name, and Caleb's name alone, will be on the deed for the ranch. A twinkle in Doug's eye as he explained this small asterisk to our original gentleman's agreement.

"I think I'm going to be sick—"

Of course, I had said calmly. *I was going to suggest the same thing myself.* Though my hand shook uncontrollably when I signed my name on the final paper.

"There, there, darling. There, there."

I reached the bathroom door, opened and shut it quickly behind me. Abigail's children were screeching and laughing, splashing each other in the tub, while Clementine sat naked next to Caleb on the side of the tub, watching her cousins with a quiet smile, her wet hair already washed and conditioned and combed back. The baby was in a bouncer by the toilet, running his fingers along the inside of the porcelain rim. The bathroom floor was slick with water. My husband—to whom every red cent of our fortune and every square inch of this ranch exclusively belonged—turned to me and whooped.

"Well, well, well," he said grandly, in his good ol' boy Western accent. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes, little lady." The children shrieked in delight.

An impossible thing to imagine, what might happen if my husband ever paused and thought about the governing law of his own starry universe: his wife might as well have been a farm dog, for all the rights she had. Even the sweetest, stupidest man can grow cruel and cunning when he learns a thing like that.

29

"COLD FRONT'S COMING through this afternoon."

I look up in surprise. Old Caleb is standing a few feet away from the laundry tub.

"It's a big one," he says. "Might even get some snow."

Behind him, on the porch twenty feet away, Mary is beating the table rug over the railing. She pauses when she sees him standing before me. I'm sure she's thinking the same thing I am: *He never talks to me if he can help it.*

"We'll need to take the animals inside the barn," Old Caleb goes on. "And we should stack some extra wood. We might be snowed in for a day or longer."

I don't know what to say. He hasn't asked me a question, so I return my focus to the laundry. Plunge my hands into the frigid water and watch them work. They're so numb I can't feel them at all, can only watch them move through the water with a sort of amazed wonder. So much work to get these clothes clean, and for what? The boys will stomp around in muddy puddles the next day.

"Nattie," Old Caleb says.

Underwater, my fingers twitch and dance. I swallow the rising bile in my throat. It was a good day, and now it's starting to feel like a bad day. I pull my hands out of the tub, wipe them dry on my apron, and look up at him. In my periphery, I notice the porch is empty. Mary has gone back inside.

"I don't like hitting you," Old Caleb says. "You know that."

I imagine a camera zooming in on my face. I tilt my chin slightly so the sunlight catches my pout.

“I didn’t want to do that,” he says. “You made me do that. You were… hysterical. And the trap—”

As if on cue, my poor bandaged foot begins to throb.

This man. *My husband.* I wonder which of the tools in the barn I’d use if I needed to kill him. The wood-chopping ax would work nicely, I think. No—the scythe. *More personal*, I think, and smile.

“Anyways,” Old Caleb says. “I’ve been keeping my distance. Sleeping in the boys’ room with them. I’ve wanted you to rest. But you seem much better now.”

Poor idiot, I think. *You misunderstand my smile.*

“So,” he says, and casts his glance over my head, toward the mountains. “I’m going to share a bed with you tonight.”

The smile slips off my face.

“I won’t have any complaints about it, either,” he goes on. “You’re my wife, and I’m your husband, and we’re meant to share a bed.”

I just stare at him. Pray against all rationality that I might hear, in the faraway distance, a director shouting *Cut.* There’s nothing but the wind whistling through the valley, a sky the color of frostbitten skin.

Shame. I’d let my guard down. So many weeks of my own bed, I’d actually started to think it could stay that way. But of course that’s not how this works.

Everyone has a role on this farm. Old Caleb tends to the fields, and Noah tends to the horse, and Abel tends to his father, and Mary tends to the kitchen and to Maeve, and Maeve tends to the chickens—and me?

A few days ago, I might have said my role is to take care of the laundry. That is, of course, not correct. The laundry is an addendum, a footnote, a midafternoon side quest for a woman with too much time on her hands. This, right here, is my true role. To spread my legs when my husband demands. To have as many children as I can until my legs give out beneath me, and to feel nothing but gratitude on the hour of my death. To smile while the spirit hemorrhages out of me.

Ha. It really is funny to think of how I all but begged Caleb, in our early years of marriage, to become the kind of man who is standing before me now. The opposite of a kindergarten teacher. A farmer. A cowboy. A patriarch. A man without a single soft edge. I craved it, I prayed for it, and what did the Lord do? He listened. He gave me what I wanted. He gave me a man.

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Old Caleb is looking at me expectantly. I feel like I'm sitting beneath a spotlight, like the whole world is waiting for me to speak. *Can someone tell me my line?*

Yes, master. As you wish, master. Should I lift my skirts and bend over right here by the laundry, master? Would you like to come on my face or my tits, master?

But that last joke doesn't work, does it? This man doesn't want to come anywhere but deep, deep inside me, so that I may have—*Lord save me from this waking nightmare*—a baby. Here. In this world.

I wipe my wet hands against the fabric of my lap, then look up at him. "Who are you, really?"

Old Caleb shakes his head, looks up at the sky, looks back at me. "I don't think I'm interested in playing this game today."

A voice in my head, echoing softly: *America hates angry women. The Lord hates angry women. You hate angry women. Do not be an angry woman.*

Except I am angry. I am very, very angry. So angry that I can't keep myself from saying, "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to behave like a mother and wife," Old Caleb snaps, and suddenly I realize he's angry, too. As angry as I am. It's a terrifying, thrilling realization. You could strike a match through the air between us and watch it catch flame.

"Well," I say. "Maybe I'm not interested in that anymore."

Old Caleb raises a hand swiftly into the sky. I close my eyes. I'm so prepared for the thunderclap of pain that it takes me a moment to realize the

moment has passed. I open my eyes, watch his hand push back his hair in agitation. He didn't hurt me again, he can always hurt me again, he will eventually hurt me again. A sob escapes me. I'm so tired of this place. "*Why am I here?*"

"You're *here* because *this is where you want to be*," he roars.

"Well, now I want to leave," I cry out. "Now I want to go home."

"Go home, then, Natalie. Go walk on home, wherever you think that is. See what good that brings you." He leans over and spits, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Stares past me at the mountains with a tight, working jaw.

"If I try to leave again, will you stop me?"

He's still looking past me when he says, "It won't be me that stops you, no."

A chill runs through me. I am looking at my husband, this stranger, but I am thinking of the woods, and then the world beyond those woods. I can't imagine what they hold.

That's not true, actually.

The truth, the real truth, is that sometimes, out here on this ranch, I have this terrible feeling, like a loose electrical wire in my chest, that if I think hard enough for long enough, I will know exactly what is waiting for me on the other side of those woods, and the horror of this knowledge will eat me alive.

Lord, God, save me, wake me from this dream—

The wind picks up and a chill whips past the house. Old Caleb grabs his hat to keep it from flying away. I tuck my cheek against my shoulder to protect it from the stinging cold. He's right. A storm is coming.

—

The clouds move quickly down the valley. One minute, it's just me and Old Caleb outside, a blue sky overhead, and the next minute the world has gone gray and the wind is blowing my hair out of its braid and the children are pouring out of the house like little weathervanes.

“The snow will be here in a minute,” Old Caleb says to me, raising his voice to be heard over the wind. “Get the clothes inside.”

I look at the tub in indignation. “But they’re sopping wet!”

But he’s already walking toward the pasture. I watch in amazement as the cow and the horse trot over to meet him by the pasture entrance, eager to be guided to the safety of the barn. Does every animal on this property have a better sense of the world’s shifting currents than me?

Then Maeve is by my side, tugging my arm. “Clothes, Mama.”

I plunge my hands back into the freezing water, hauling the soaking pile of fabric out and wringing it as best as I can. Maeve holds her arms out, and I drop some of the clothing into her arms. A few pieces fall to the ground, immediately dirtying themselves, and I let out a cry of frustration. I pick them up and stuff them back into the pile. Together, we run two loads of laundry into the house, setting up the clothing by the fire to dry. Around us, the other children are moving just as quickly, stacking wood and closing the barn up and shutting the kitchen windows and securing them with flimsy wooden latches.

I’ve experienced storms on this land before. I know how powerful they are. In recent years, we even lost power a few times, but the generator always kicked in. Now I stare at the fire and remember that this is the only source of warmth we have. “Get more wood,” I shout at the children. My first true command in who knows how long, and an utterly useless one at that. They’re already doing it.

—

Not an hour later, hail pounds the roof like machine-gun fire. It’s late afternoon, but the sky is so dark it looks like the dead of night. Mary is cutting up chunks of bread and slathering them with butter. That will be our dinner tonight. I am sitting by the fire, Maeve resting in my lap. Across me, the boys sit, their legs splayed out in front of them to warm their feet. Abel mimics holding a rifle, pointing the imaginary trigger toward the roof.

“Pow, pow, pow,” he whispers. “Take that, you savages.” Noah watches with rapture. Through his gaze, Abel’s rifle seems so terribly real.

As the storm pounds away at our little cabin, I close my eyes and imagine it. Cowboys and Indians. A great bloody battle for these rolling hills. Old Caleb scalped by some hardened warrior chief. The boys slain. The girls and I carried off to some faraway teepee with smoke spilling out the top.

Taken hostage. That’s how people would describe the ladies in those Western stories when we were growing up—*those poor beautiful dignified homestead women, taken hostage by the savages.* It used to thrill me. Now I find it funny that no one ever acknowledged how those pioneer women were technically already hostages to begin with.

—

Hours after dinner, the children are in their rooms and the hail has given way to a heavy silent snow when Old Caleb walks into the bedroom, leaving the door open behind him.

I look at the open door. “Aren’t you—don’t you want to—”

He gives me a look. “It’ll be freezing in here in three minutes if we shut this door.”

Well, then. I suppose the children will listen.

I lie in my—*our*—bed, the quilt pulled up to my chin, and watch as he takes off his cowboy hat and sets it on the bureau. He hesitates. Then he gives a little shake of the head, as if ridding himself of some terrible thought, and begins to undress.

My mind skitters nervously left and right. I think of reality shows, of producer vans and scripted conversations, and my spirit tightens in my chest. What a silly fantasy. That little pebble I pulled from the ground and shoved under my mattress—what a shameful game of play-pretend. A desperate act of imagination. This home is no production set. There are no hidden cameras in the kitchen, no microphones tucked away in the collar lines of the children. No one is coming to save me and take me home. If I

needed any more evidence to prove this point, it is here, right now, in this room: maybe a show might soon allow a man to hit a woman, might even allow her to walk right into the steel jaws of a trap—but we're not yet at the point where he could rape her.

Though of course it can't be rape, what's happening here. There's no such thing as a husband raping his wife.

His shirt's off, now. His pants fall to his feet, and he kicks them to the corner. He takes off his underwear. This is my husband's body. There is the mole on his stomach; there is the leftward-leaning hang of his ball sack. I am biblically familiar with this alien body. I close my eyes and send off a quick prayer.

Stay with me, Lord. Do not leave me in my hour of need.

He reaches for my body beneath the blanket. Hand on hip. Turning me over. Climbing across. Opening me up.

You've done this countless times before, Natalie. There's no reason to be afraid.

Except this man's erection is hard, harder than hard. Fully risen. It doesn't help that I'm completely dry. From the deepest part of my body, three words rise to the surface, the greatest and most instinctual act of survival I can offer for myself: "I love you," I say.

Above me, my husband smiles.

—

It hurts. He doesn't ask me what I want. He doesn't ask if I'm all right. It's exactly how I imagined sex to be when I was a young girl: a man who takes without asking, who fills me completely, who assumes control of my body and finger-puppets me from the inside out. Yes. Exactly this. Like Abel's imaginary rifle: terribly real. He grunts, pulls out of me, flips my body over, and reenters from behind. I cry out. I feel like a barnyard animal, a pig rutting in the straw, but it's a relief to let the whites of my eyes travel wildly around the room, searching for some sort of visual comfort. The windows, the wall, this quilt. The pace of this, the steady thudding—my teeth rattle in

my skull. I focus on the stitching beneath my fingers while prayers fly along the corridors of my mind.

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day…For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all…So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal—

A pause, a single tap on my thigh, a manual instruction, like I'm a trusty quarter horse. I lower my thigh. He pushes deeper. I gasp. In an instant the pain tips over into brightness, heavenly warmth, a love I've never known. Instinct takes over. I find myself reaching toward it, arching my body in response, lifting my head in ecstatic prayer—

How long, O LORD? How long will you hide your face from me?… Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes—

And then He does. He answers my prayer, He speaks back to me. The room fills with light. I cry out in shock. Old Caleb keeps pushing, carrying my body closer and closer to His heavenly arms. It feels like choir music is echoing through my limbs, and I say *Thank you,* I say *Oh, God, my God,* I say *yes, yes, yes, YES—*

—

Oh, my God.

My God!

I say yes.

—

We are lying together, husband and wife, in the freezing dark. Old Caleb is snoring. I am wide awake, staring into the darkness, counting my breaths. When I reach one hundred, I sit up, throw back the covers, and get out of bed. I stand by the mattress for a moment, listening to his steady breathing to make sure my movement hasn't woken him up. He lets out a long, nasal snore.

I tiptoe away from the bed, slip through the door, step out in the hallway, and close the door a few inches behind me. Then I walk quickly down the hallway and into the kitchen, where the fire is still working feebly. I add a log to the fire. The children have been sleeping for hours, hopefully. The house is quiet as death.

Now that I'm alone, I'm buffeted by a strange, chilling calm. I've had a revelation—no, not a revelation. That would imply the realization is new, and it doesn't feel new. It feels like a truth I've known all my life; like a childhood memory, resurfacing after so many years of being lost to the annals of my mind.

I'm under surveillance in this house, yes—but only by Him. This, all of this, is a test.

My Maker wants to see what I am capable of.

I sigh and wander wordlessly over to the kitchen sink. Watch the snow falling onto the roof of the barn. It's gathering quickly. We'll get several feet overnight.

Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith, sweetheart.

Sometimes the most obvious truths of our world are the ones that get buried most easily. *Obviously,* the Lord has put me here, on this homestead, with this family—and like all things He does, He brought me here with intention, with a plan. So much of my life was dedicated to broadcasting a vision of nostalgia; a better and more beautiful version of America. A celebration of the days of yore. Now the Lord wants me to feel the truth of my own message. He wants me to learn, and listen, and improve, and submit, and—

Well, I'm not sure exactly what the end goal is, but that's fine. He'll tell me when He's ready.

In the darkness of the kitchen, I pray feverishly, whispering my gratitude, then I bless myself and drop into a crouch. I hike my nightgown up and scrape as much of Old Caleb out of me as I can.

I make two promises to myself. First: I won't forget the Lord's message again. And second: I won't allow myself to get pregnant here.

I'll do anything, Lord. Please. Anything but that.

As I finger myself, my mother’s voice echoes in my head, a gentle loving song: *A man may work from sun to sun, but a woman’s work is never done, never done, never done.*

30

THE MORNING that my sister and mother were set to leave, my mother asked me to take a walk with her in the fields. We left Abigail where she was, lying on the couch, watching cartoons sullenly with the children, and were barely halfway across the driveway when my mother said, “How are you doing, Natalie?”

I tried to match her display of warmth. “I’m fine. How are you?”

She sighed and stopped walking, and I reluctantly stopped too. We were standing by the barn, facing the mountains, while she fiddled nervously with the cross on her necklace. “Lord, bless mothers with daughters,” she muttered.

“You clearly have something to say,” I said brightly. “So spit it out. Please.”

“Well. I’m worried about you.”

“You’re worried about me. *You’re* worried about *me*? When Abigail’s over there threatening to get”—I lowered my voice to a forceful whisper, even though we were alone—“*divorced*?”

She gave a helpless shrug. “It’s my fault. The way I raised you both all alone, no father figure in the house—I thought it would all work out, but maybe it wasn’t…right.”

As my mother launched into her monologue, I felt a combination of humiliation and fury lift me out of my body. My spirit rose until it was hovering by the roof of the barn.

…Worried about the children.…

…not sure why you’re renovating a house that’s already…

…farming is not something to be taken so…

…a very nice man, but I'm worried that he might be…

It was a deeply painful monologue to receive, and I'm sure for my mother to deliver. I was suddenly shocked, nearly bowled over, by how utterly pathetic the situation was. The situation meaning my life. My children, my husband, my home. Yesteryear Ranch. Our stupid fucking farm.

Why had I thought this would work?

She was right, of course. I'd known it all along, in the quietest part of me: we were failing at make-believe. My husband was not a natural John Wayne. I was not an effortless housewife. We could fool our loved ones from afar, but up close, you could smell it. Something rotten in the air.

While my mother went on, I cast my gaze out across the fields. In the far distance, Caleb was tending to his zucchini plants. Worthless vegetables. We might as well have been growing pennies. At that moment, he stood up and waved cheerfully. My mother paused her speech—something about Clementine and her ill-fitting dress, so sad, could I really not take the time to find the poor thing something in her size?—and the two of us, trained in politeness as we were, both waved cheerfully back.

A new thought came to me, the most alarming of all: it wouldn't be easy to get my husband to give this up. He loved the farm. He didn't notice the smell, or if he did, he wasn't bothered by it. He was never going to leave, which meant—

Doug was never going to make him leave. Of course he wasn't.

For months, I'd been eyeing our three-year anniversary nervously, wondering what would happen when we got there, if Doug would cut us off financially. Now I realized that had been a meaningless fear. He didn't care if the farm became profitable, not actually. He'd already gotten what he wanted: a corner of the world to sweep his son into. A little padded jail cell. It was merely a bonus that the jail cell in question sounded quite nice in a speech. No, Doug would never stop giving us money. He would simply give us less, and less, and less. Which meant that I was stuck here. Trapped.

Alone in the middle of nowhere with—*God help me*—my husband and children, in perpetuity, slowly creeping toward poverty.

A crest of panic swelled in me. I gazed tearfully at the sky. *There were no other choices, Lord. You brought me here. You dropped every breadcrumb. You wouldn't leave me alone now, would you?*

"You're doing so much, Natalie," my mother said. "I just think you might have bitten off a little more than you can chew. Your friends are worried about you, you know."

"Friends?" My mother and I both knew I didn't have friends.

"Vanessa. From track? She saw Caleb selling your vegetables at the farmers market, and she was kind enough to point out that you really can't do that, sweetie, if the vegetables aren't organic."

"But they *are* organic."

"She said she saw a pesticide barrel in a corner of one of your photos."

"*She's lying!*" My face was so warm I was practically panting.

"Well. Honey." My mother stared meaningfully behind me, and I turned around to see a pesticide barrel by the barn. A flare of anger whistled through me, so hot and painful I nearly gasped. Those dumb fucking immigrants. Idiot Mexicans. They never cleaned up after themselves, no matter how many times I asked.

Don't tell Caleb, I nearly said to my mother. He thought our produce was organic. It was important to him that our produce was organic—more important, apparently, than turning a profit. After the third season of failed crops, I'd taken matters into my own hands. Told the workers to spray the fields at night. Told them to be very intentional with hiding the barrels.

Doug was right. What a border problem we had!

"It was really nice of Vanessa to mention, you know," my mother went on. "She was worried about you. The fines for that kind of…confusion can send a business into the poorhouse."

"What exactly do you want me to do, Mother?"

What she wanted was exactly what she wanted for my sister, too: to sweep the mess into a closet, shut the door, and lock it. "I just want you to be happy," she said.

There it was again, that pointless word.

“Of course I’m happy,” I said angrily. “Don’t I look happy?”

—

An hour later, Caleb and the kids and I stood in the driveway waving goodbye, the one working brake light on that piece of shit van blinking rapidly at us as it halted its way down the hill. It felt like receiving a message in Morse code. *Pull-your-life-to-geth-er.* I swallowed the urge to pick up a rock and knock out the second brake light, silencing my mother’s last effort at communication.

“Well, that was fun,” Caleb said, right as Samuel started to wail and squirm in my arms. The poor child was hungry, probably, or tired, or constipated. Who knew. Certainly not me!

“Mama,” Clementine said. She tugged on my skirts. “Mama. Mama.”

Samuel wailed louder, a piercing shriek that struck my nervous system and reverberated through my body like a whacked funny bone.

“Mama. Mama. Mama.”

I looked down at Clementine. “*What?*”

She seemed surprised by my attention. She hesitated, then said quietly, “I want to live at Auntie Abigail’s house.”

I could’ve slapped her for that. Really, I could have.

“What’s for dinner, anyways?” Caleb said.

“I want to live with my cousins,” Clementine added. “I want to play tag.”

The world was so small in that moment, the sky so fully sapped of oxygen, that it felt like someone had wrapped my head in plastic wrap and was patiently waiting for me to suffocate to death.

“Mama.”

“Nattie?”

“Mama. *Mama!*”

What would Reena do?

The thought snuck in before I could stop it.

How would someone like Reena respond to such breathtaking humiliation? She'd probably drink a coffee mug's worth of vodka, draw a wobbly lipstick arc around the general area of her lips, and go galloping after a man who didn't want her. Not exactly a useful example. But what about the other, smarter girls in our dorm hall, who rotated through boyfriends seasonally? The girls who Reena tried and failed to be?

The answer came down from on high: they would post a thirst trap.

—

thirst trap (*noun, slang*) : a social media post, especially a selfie or other photo, intended to elicit sexual attention, appreciation of one's attractiveness, or other positive feedback. Example: A photo of a proud, thin, youthful-looking Christian woman standing with her growing litter in front of a five-million-dollar barn. *Cheese!*

—

"I want another baby," I said to Caleb, over Samuel's furious cries. "And I want to take a picture."

I didn't know which request Caleb was addressing, and perhaps he didn't either, when he said confusedly, "Right now?"

"Yes," I snapped. "Right now."

I stood with a cranky Clementine and a wailing Samuel in front of the barn while Caleb took a series of horrible pictures. Each time he handed me the phone, I looked at the photo with shocked dismay. "Forget it," I snapped finally. "Just—forget it. I'll do it myself. Take the baby."

I stood there in the driveway and snapped three hundred selfies of myself, my baby screaming, my husband and daughter standing nervously in the background like hostages waiting to be shot. "What are you doing, Mama?" Clementine said, over and over again. "What are you doing?"

Finally I roared *QUIET*.

Even Samuel was startled into silence. Then it was just the sound of the wind and the creaking trees and an eagle crying in the distance while I pressed the soundless capture button, again and again and again.

Eventually Clementine and Caleb started walking away. The baby was getting cold, he said. That was when I finally got the money shot: a close-up of my face, my cheeks berry-pink, smiling at the lens while my family walked away from me toward the barn. I looked—*yes*, startled by my own life; like I might burst into laughter at the sight of so many blessings behind me, the children and the husband and the big red barn. I looked like another woman entirely, my family like another family, this farm like another farm.

I wrote a caption—sometimes I can't believe this is my ACTUAL, HONEST-TO-GOD LIFE!—and then I pressed post.

It was the most important day of my life. The day I stopped working on my husband, my farm, my family, and returned to work on an old, beloved project: myself.

I walked back inside to make dinner for my family.

After dinner, I knocked myself up again.

31

TODAY MAEVE AND I spent all day long sewing little hats for the chickens, *our ladies.* It's the most fun I've had in who knows how long. Truly a very good day.

The morning started simply enough: Maeve, posing a question to my back while I picked out my outfit for the day. "Do you think the ladies get cold in the winter, Mama?"

Ever since the first snowfall, she's been asking this question. She noticed how the cow and the horse are protected in their stalls at night, insulated by hay, and then she asked why the chickens don't sleep inside their coop. I told her quite plainly that the chickens are stupid, they *should* be keeping warm inside the coop, and if they die, they have no one to blame but themselves. But still, she kept asking and worrying and fretting over their comfort, and so finally I said, "Why don't we ask *them* what they want?"

And so we trudged through the snow to the chicken coop and asked the little brainless animals what *they* thought. Maeve, an adept translator of chicken-speak, confirmed soberly to me that the ladies *were* a bit chilly in the cold weather.

"Well," I said, just as seriously. "It looks like we have a mission to accomplish."

—

Half an hour later, at breakfast, Mary said she would be gone for a few hours collecting saffron in the woods, and I told her about our very important plans for the chickens.

"You'll do this after your chores are done, right?" She looked sternly between the two of us. "Don't take forever on this, and *don't* be wasteful."

And so Maeve and I stood on the porch, her little hand held tightly in mine, while we watched Mary walk down the road and disappear around the bend, leaving behind a clean trail of footsteps in the snow. For a moment my throat felt painfully tight. *Why does she get to walk away from the ranch so easily?* And then I remembered the Lord, and the divine right of His planning, and I bowed my head in apology.

I squeezed Maeve's hand, raised my eyebrows. "What do you say we front-load the fun today, Maevie?"

—

Coats proved too difficult. The birds hated when Maeve tried to extend their wings to measure for the armholes, so hats it was, and now we are here, sitting at the kitchen table in the late afternoon, putting the finishing touches on these winter caps, which look like a drab combination of a fedora and a beret, when Mary walks back in through the front door, kicking snow off her boots, and says, "Oh, *please* tell me you haven't been working on those all day."

"Okay!" I say. "We haven't been working on these all day." I wink at Maeve, and she laughs and laughs.

Mary sighs, seems on the verge of saying something sharp, and then: nothing.

"Almost done with this one, Mama," Maeve says cheerily. She holds up a mess of destroyed fabric.

I glance over my shoulder at Mary, who is standing strangely by the counter. Staring out the kitchen window at nothing. How long has she been gone? Much longer than a few hours. The whole day, practically. "Have you been collecting saffron this whole time, Mary?"

For a moment, it sounds like she doesn't hear me. She just keeps staring out the window, like she's in a trance. "I found mushrooms, too," she says finally. She turns for her bag, then pauses, noticing something by her foot. A scrap of fabric. She picks it up. "Is this one of your sweaters, Maeve?"

"It's one of mine," I say quickly. "One I never wear."

"She *never* wears it!" Maeve echoes. "Really, Mary, we swear!"

Mary nods slowly, then tucks the scrap in with the folded pile of clean rags in the kitchen corner. I know what she wants to say—*This is wasteful, how careless of you to cut it up into scraps for a farm animal*—which is why it's so strange when she says to Maeve, "It's okay, little chicken. I'll get dinner ready, and you can finish your work on these hats. Very important."

Then she turns away from us to busy herself with dinner work. From where I sit, I can see just the shape of her hands. They're shaking. She curls them into fists and presses them hard against the counter.

Something is wrong.

I turn to Maeve. "I'm going to help Mary with the mushrooms for a few minutes." I leave Maeve at the table and approach Mary. "So," I say. "How was your walk?"

"Fine." She's pulling mushrooms out of her bag, sending little clumps of dirt flying.

"Your face, Mary," I say quietly. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"And *you've* been sewing hats for chickens," she spits back. "Looks like we've both had a strange day."

"I'm just trying to—"

"Maeve," she calls over her shoulder, "will you go get a pail of water? We need to scrub these mushrooms clean."

Maeve hops off her chair and trots away on her errand, and soon Mary and I are alone. She turns to face me. She's breathing hard, unable to look me in the face. "I came across an animal, okay? In a trap. A mink, I think. It was—struggling. In pain."

"Did you save it?"

“Of course not,” she mutters. “It was practically dead. If the trap doesn’t kill it, the temperature will.” A tear rolls down her cheek, and she wipes it roughly away. “It was upsetting. That’s all.”

She looks the picture of an overwhelmed, tired, teenage girl. I feel the dim flicker of a maternal urge. I should hold her. I should pull her head beneath my own chin and stroke her hair and say, *There, there.*

Then I remember: Mary is the one who stitched my leg back together. The girl has an iron stomach. Nerves of steel. And I’m to believe she would become a puddle of tears over some mangled woodland creature?

I say carefully, almost experimentally: “I don’t believe you.”

Mary’s breathing grows still.

“You’re lying to me. Aren’t you?”

She says nothing.

“*Mary.* What happened in those woods?”

At that moment, Maeve walks through the door, carrying a full pail of water to us, sloshing a little on the floor in the process. “Thank you, Maevie,” Mary says. She takes the pail and sets it on the counter. Begins to wash the mushrooms.

“Mary,” I try again, but she shrugs me away and snaps, “Can you please get out of my way, Natalie?”

I step back, and then back again. She’s never called me Natalie before. For a moment, we look at each other, a mirror of fear.

Then the boys barrel through the front door and a commotion ensues—Noah shouting about imaginary battles, *pow pow pow,* Abel telling him the grip on his imaginary shotgun is all off, Old Caleb setting his hat onto the hook and asking what’s for dinner—and Mary slips away into the chaos. She doesn’t look at me for the rest of the night.

32

THE SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING COURSE was run by an influencer called Tammy Lane. She was a mother based in Salt Lake City with fifty thousand followers online who promised to teach us how to start making six figures a month on Instagram alone. It was advertised as a six-week intensive course (in smaller font on the sign-up page: one hour-long Zoom call a week!) and cost $1,500. By my estimates of how many women were in the introductory Zoom call, it was safe to say Tammy had made her monthly quota.

In the first Zoom meeting, I expected to see a computer screen filled with women like the ones I'd gone to college with, smart and savvy and violently progressive. Instead, the Zoom opened to reveal a gallery of women who looked like me. This was the first time I realized that the business of influence was not a secular calling. Nearly everyone had a little cross necklace glistening on their chest, except for one curly-haired woman from New Jersey, Rachel Weissman, who looked increasingly distressed in the opening minutes of the call until finally she turned her video off.

We prayed at the opening and the closing of each meeting. In the module, dozens of versions of myself stared back at me, with usernames like JesusMomma and OGOrganic. I couldn't tell if the women were older than me or younger, but I could immediately see what kind of communities they came from. I saw it in their presentation, in the way they laughed and frowned and cried on cue. I saw it in the way they talked about their families in the sixty-second window when they were meant to offer brief introductory bios about themselves. *Hi, everyone, I'm Natalie Heller Mills. Mother of three, with a fourth on the way! My husband, Caleb, runs our*

family farm, which we lovingly call Yesteryear Ranch. We sell milk, cheeses, and organic exotic vegetables. But that's enough about me! What about you?

—

"I want you all to be *so proud of yourselves* for signing up today," Tammy said at the opening of the call. "By showing up for this call today, you've taken the biggest step of your journey: the first one." She paused to let the gravity of the situation really land.

Tammy was the kind of woman who screamed *debutante.* She was taking the call from her immaculate kitchen. Each time she spoke, she shifted the laptop a little bit so that a new part of the room was highlighted. The eight-burner stovetop; the two stainless-steel dishwashers. The sparkling countertops, the rows of mason jars containing neat little piles of powder, ranging in color from terra-cotta brown to cocaine white. At times, she would lean in toward the laptop screen, blocking out the background entirely, her poreless face beaming out at us like a lunar eclipse. "The hardest thing a mother will ever do is to put herself first. Am I right? Raise your hand, ladies, if you haven't put yourself first in *years.*"

A hundred hands shot into the air. I thought, *This is unbearably corny, but I should put my hand up, too, just to play along.* Then I realized my hand was already raised. Tammy was good.

According to Tammy, the most powerful force on the planet was the power of the Divine Christian Feminine (*trademark pending!*). We were limitless resources; the *original* Energizer Bunnies. All we needed to do to achieve our wildest dreams was to *channel* our own infinite store of energy. "If you are your *true,* authentic self, then the sales will happen effortlessly," she said confidently while she clicked through a clearly homemade PowerPoint presentation. The slides sped quickly along and seemed only loosely connected to what Tammy was saying. A stock picture of a blond woman twirling in a field of flowers; a screenshot of a bank account with a

balance of $80,000; a cartoon pyramid rendering of Maslow's hierarchy of needs with a frowny-faced lady stick figure standing at the bottom.

"Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate," Tammy continued, her eyes glowing psychotically from the computer light. "Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." She paused here for effect. "Oprah said that."

Tammy's talking points flowed zippily along from reassurance to damnation to jubilance. I could practically feel the collective psychic weight of a hundred relatively gullible women trying to hold so many contradicting truths in their brain at one time: everything they had to succeed was already inside them, but also they needed to pay this woman in order to succeed, and a truly successful social media sales cycle should happen effortlessly, it should happen in our sleep, and yet we needed to start reclaiming some of our own time from our families so that we could commit ourselves to the effort, and the point of this course was to remind women to sink further into their own Divine Christian Feminine, and also, it was time to develop some hard masculine skills, ladies, it was time to learn some math!

I glanced at my computer screen. We were only eight minutes into the session, and already a few women were crying openly. As Tammy rolled neatly into a thirty-minute monologue about harnessing the power of the Divine Christian Feminine to drive sales online, I tried to mirror the expressions of the other women at all the appropriate times, discomfort and awe and unbridled delight. I was having a hard time organically intuiting the correct response for any given moment. I resisted typing my own questions into the chat: *When are we going to learn about hashtags? Can someone explain the analytics dashboard on Instagram to me? Why do some of my photos get a hundred likes and only one comment? Why do my cheeks itch when I haven't checked my phone in the last hour? Why are you better than me at this, Tammy Lane? Why am I here?*

—

Two years had passed since the disastrous visit with my family. In the time since, I had given birth to Stetson, our new darling little boy. The day of his delivery, I actually leaned forward in the hospital bed and caught him myself, guiding the crown of his head out into the world. With Stetson, there had been no postpartum period, no miserable few months, because I had almost immediately gotten pregnant again. All praise to the Highest! I'd written in the caption of the pregnancy announcement. Our fourth, a little girl, was due in a few months.

As for my family: Abigail's divorce had been finalized a few days after she gave birth to her fifth child: an underweight little girl named Kaitlyn. I thought the metaphorical significance of ending the *B*'s was embarrassingly heavy-handed; my mother was openly relieved about it. Abigail and her four *B*'s and her one *K* were living with my mother now. Two adults, four children, and one infant crammed into a three-bedroom home. What was my sister doing for money? Well. I had been right. She couldn't find a job, and so she was bagging groceries with the teenagers in town.

We weren't speaking at the moment. Which was fine. Arguably ideal. Though it did mean I had to drive fifteen minutes farther to the grocery store on the other side of town to avoid seeing her; it also meant I'd been freed from the obligation to witness my sister slowly destroy her own life. I was too busy for that! Too busy managing Caleb and the children and my burgeoning social media account, which documented the day-to-day events of our sweet little farm. (Per the emailed paragraph of analysis on my page that I would eventually receive from Tammy Lane as one of the deliverables for paying full price for the course, referencing Yesteryear Ranch as *our sweet little farm* was a good decision. Specifically, it was "Approachable, Intimate, and Creative!")

Now the Instagram account for my *sweet little farm* had just over a thousand *sweet little followers.* Only half of them, it seemed, were actually human—and none of them were interested in telling me what they thought of *my sweet little farm.* These followers never commented on my pictures. They never sent me private messages. Only a small handful of them were even willing to take the meager step of pressing like on the photos.

Sometimes it felt like I was standing on my front porch, staring out at a silent army. *What do you want?* I wanted to say. *How do I activate you?*

I had no clue. Before long, the account felt less like an interesting errand and more like a necessary chore, a constant itch I needed to scratch. If Tammy's social media ad had never reached me, I might have given up on the account entirely. I certainly wouldn't have realized on my own that the account could become profitable. But the ad did find me. More importantly, it found me at the perfect time: only an hour or so after I finally had the phone call with Doug that I had been dreading for months. He was pulling back on funds, he said, in advance of his presidential run. Our annual disbursement would be cut in half. "That's the thing about running for president," he said amiably. "It'll bankrupt you if you're not careful!"

—

WANT TO MAKE SIX FIGURES A MONTH OF PASSIVE INCOME FROM YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT???

—

Yes. Yes I did. In fact I needed to.

—

Hence the class. Hence my willingness to give Tammy Lane $1,500 for a course that could've been designed by an eighth grader. Hence my patience as Tammy launched into her fifth monologue about divine inner light. No matter how grating or generic she seemed to me, I had to admit: there was something she was doing right. Something she had figured out that I, for some reason, could not. After all, no one would have paid $1,500 to get Instagram advice from me.

—

After Tammy's big Zoom speech (she promised we would get into *hard numbers* at next week's meeting), we split off into breakout rooms of ten and twelve, where we would give one another *open feedback* on our accounts. In my Zoom breakout room, ten of the twelve women were from Idaho, and everyone lived on a farm. For an hour, our Assigned Mentor, a young woman named Cassidy who had twenty thousand followers and who was, I would learn many months later, Tammy Lane's niece, ran us through a series of spiritual exercises to unlock the Lioness within.

The first thing we did was share, round-robin-style, some details about our social media presence. A woman named Robin went first. "Hiiii, I'm Robiiiin," she said in chirpy singsong. "And I run a cattle ranch."

A chorus of women replied in unison, like the Greek chorus for a play about pyramid schemes. "*Hiiii, Robin!*"

Cassidy pulled Robin's Instagram up onto the shared screen, and we collectively went through her photos, telling her what we liked and didn't like. Like: the spontaneous photos of her children. *Authentic!* Dislike: the captions where she talked (*jokingly!*) about hating the future wives of her twelve- and thirteen-year-old sons. *Cringe!* Like: the picture of a thunderstorm sweeping over the flatlands, combined with a Bible passage about the Lord's power. *Appropriate!* Dislike: the picture of Robin smiling next to her local butcher with a big grin, both of them covered in blood. *Nightmarish!*

"You're *totally* on the right path," Cassidy said passionately. "You just need to *narrow in* on your specific message. Know what I mean?"

The distraught expression on Robin's face indicated that *no*, she did *not* understand what Cassidy meant—but already we were moving along to Ashley Ann, a woman from—you guessed it—Idaho, who helped her husband run—you guessed it—a cattle farm. "I'm just really struggling to *differentiate* myself."

Cassidy, our fearless teenage leader, nodded sagely. "It's the hardest and most important part. You need to dig *deep*, *deep* down and ask yourself: What makes *me* so special? What can I offer that other people can't?"

"Right," Ashley Ann said, nodding fervently.

“I mean *right now*,” Cassidy said kindly. “Tell us right now what makes you special.”

The Zoom call was silent.

“Um,” Ashley Ann said.

It was very apparent that everyone on the call had realized simultaneously that they were interfacing with their direct competitors. Everyone had some kind of farm. Everyone was trying to sell their farm products directly to consumers online.

“I’m…funny?” Ashley Ann said. “And kind?”

“Perfect,” Cassidy gushed. “So now you just have to show those things on your account!”

“But—”

“I have a question, actually,” another woman said nervously. “Does anyone ever call y’all a…breeder?”

Cassidy looked confused. “Like, cattle breeder?”

“No, like, breeding humans?”

There was an undulation of discomfort. I thought of the one comment I had received in the last week, from an anonymous user without a picture: Ur giving off major cult vibes fyi

“Let’s talk about online trolls at the end of the call,” Cassidy said firmly. She gazed across all the little face boxes, clearly trying to restore a sense of authority. “Next! Let’s do…Natalie!”

“Hi, everyone!” I said to fifteen flickering faces. “I’m Natalie. My account is YesteryearRanch. I have just over a thousand followers right now, and I—”

—

Don’t know if they’re real people. Don’t know why they followed me. Don’t know if they like me. Don’t know what to do with them. Don’t know why I’m here.

—

“—would like to drive more engagement on my page.”

Everyone nodded enthusiastically, an audience of bobbing chicken heads.

Cassidy brought my account onto the screen. “Let’s see what we have here.” The room was silent as she scrolled slowly through my feed. There was me, smiling in front of the barn, and then there was Caleb, milking our latest dairy cow, and then there was Clementine, twirling through the fields in black and white.

“All right, gang,” Cassidy said. “What do we think?”

“Your brand identity is a little…stiff,” Ashley Ann said.

I chirped brightly, “How do you mean?”

“You look really tired,” one woman said.

“You don’t come across as very likable,” another woman piped up.

“Let’s use ‘relatable,’ ” Cassidy said quickly. “She doesn’t come across as very *relatable*.” Cassidy stopped scrolling and paused on a photo of me with the kids, Clementine leaning against my legs, toddler Samuel in one arm, baby Stetson in the other. She read my caption aloud. “*A man may work from sun to sun, but a woman’s work is never done*.”

“I like the caption,” Robin said. “I just can’t really put my finger on it, there’s something kind of…off?”

“It’s the smile,” Ashley Ann said.

“That’s it!” Robin exclaimed. “It’s the smile. You don’t actually look happy. You look like you’re grimacing.”

Fifteen heads nodded in unison.

“That’s just my smile, though. That’s just how I smile!”

“Here’s the thing, Natalie.” Cassidy gave me a cloying wince. “I think what Ashley Ann is saying, here, is that it looks like you’re pretending.”

I laughed again, though it sounded more like a cough. “Isn’t everyone?”

Ashley Ann rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah, sort of, but it’s not supposed to be so obvious.” She looked to Cassidy for approval. “Right?”

Cassidy nodded gravely. “Emotions need to come across as *totally authentic*. Why don’t you practice smiling in a mirror? It sounds silly, but it works. You have no clue how you look to others.”

—

“Mama?”

I turned around. Clementine was standing in the doorway. Six years old, gripping her blankie tightly in one fist. Dark watchful eyes. Mouth small and pink as a rosebud. “What are you doing?”

The Zoom call had ended. It was late at night. Caleb was down at his office in the barn, sitting in front of the computer, and I—well. “I’m practicing being likable.”

Clementine walked over to the mirror, peered at her own reflection. “What’s likable?”

I positioned her in front of me so that we were looking at each other in the mirror. For the millionth time, I found myself startled at how similar we looked, down to the scowl. A little minnow of irritation swam through me. *You have no clue how you look to others.* “You’re a big girl now, Clementine. You need to learn how to smile.”

“Why?”

I resisted the very strong urge to press my fingers into the clay of her cheeks and drag the ends of her lips upward. “Because it makes other people feel safe and warm and loved. Don’t you want to make other people feel safe and warm and loved?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

“Then try it. Try to smile.”

She tried. It looked terrible.

“That’s close, but it needs to reach your eyes. Like this.”

Then I showed her what I’d learned.

33

MARY HAS BEEN acting strangely all week, and as a result, the whole farm has tilted on its axis.

One morning, breakfast is an hour late. Old Caleb drums his fingers impatiently on the table while Mary, who slept in, casually makes eggs in a nightgown with her hair unbraided. Another morning, she sleeps straight past breakfast. “I’m tired,” she mumbles, and slaps at my hand when I try to pull her from bed.

The atmosphere is uneasy. Mary’s fuse of patience—usually a mile long for everyone but me—is now tripped up at the smallest indiscretion. She snaps at the boys for dragging mud into the house, even though they do it every day. She snaps at Maeve for humming, even though Maeve hums every day. As for me, she ignores me entirely. She’s barely said a word to me since the day she called me Natalie. And whenever Old Caleb is inside, his gaze floats between Mary and me. He watches her short temper, her angry knife-chopping as she prepares potatoes for dinner, and then his gaze falls on me with an anvil-drop *thud*. I know what he is thinking. *Do something*. But what?

—

We suffer five nights like this. Then one night, after dinner, I’m sitting by the fire with Maeve when I see out of the corner of my eye: Mary, wrapped up in a blanket, walking silently past the kitchen and out the front door.

Abel says, “Where’ya going?”

“Out,” she says. Just like that: *out.* Like she’s a teenager about to hop into the back seat of someone’s car. She shuts the door behind her. Distantly, beyond the wood and glass, I can hear the porch creak beneath her feet.

“Hmmph!” Noah says.

“*Women,*” Abel adds, and the two boys shake their heads.

“Go talk with her,” Old Caleb says to me.

I give him an annoyed look. “Why don’t *you* go talk to her?”

“This is women’s business. Go.”

—

When I step outside, I find Mary sitting on the stairs, her form shrouded in blankets, her face as quiet and pale as the snowy fields, which look almost blue beneath the moonlight.

I sit down next to her. I brought my coat, but it’s patched and threadbare, and already the cold is settling into my bones. It can’t be warmer than ten degrees tonight. “Tell me,” I say.

“Tell you what?”

Little puffs of breath color the air between us.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

She’s quiet for a moment. Then she says quietly, “Has anyone ever lied to you?”

I consider the question, which feels structurally like a thin sheet of ice over a deep body of water. Any movement, and we could both fall through.

I think of my mother, sitting at the edge of the hospital bed when I was twenty years old. *Soon you’ll feel like yourself again.* Young. I was so young then. Young enough to think my mother was telling me the truth. But she was pretending, wasn’t she? Always pretending. Though I don’t blame her for it, or for waiting until just the right moment to let me in on the secret. It’s all some vital game, isn’t it? No—more than a game. It’s the long, golden string of insincerity that threads together the entire human race: a shared agreement between women to insist back and forth in endless

conversation that this thing we spend our whole lives preparing for—this thing we were *born for*—is anywhere close to what we thought it would be. And do you know the truth beneath that secret? The water beneath the ice? It never stops. You never age out of it. Your mother lies to you, and then you lie to your children, and then your children lie to their children, and then you are an old woman, looking back at your own life, lying to yourself. A lifetime of drowning, and then you are dead.

"Everyone lies," I say.

"Why? Why must everyone lie?"

I'm about to reply when I notice the shimmer in the air. Not just breath. Mary's face is glowing, practically fluorescent with moonlight, her hair levitating in the air around her face, and this is when I realize: He's here.

A shiver runs through me. *Hello, Father.*

I feel Him on this porch. I see Him in her, speaking to me. It's happening right now: the test.

Everything comes together. The walk in the woods, and Mary's face, strangely blank, like she was experiencing some ecstatic vision—*like some holy force had entered her*—and that strange moment when she called me Natalie, and how terrified she looked, like she hadn't been in control of what she said.

The Lord has been visiting me through Mary.

I think carefully. *Why is it inevitable that people must lie?* It's technically the Christian thing to do to say people should never lie, but *that* in itself feels like a lie. For example: If my mother hadn't lied to me about motherhood, I might never have had children. And wouldn't that have been a greater sin than the sin she made in lying to me?

The Lord is staring fiercely at me now. There are little pinpricks of pink on His cheeks from the cold, or maybe from His intensity of feeling.

Answer me, Child, He says.

The words slip out of my mouth like someone is pulling a string. "People lie for all kinds of reasons. They lie to hurt people and to help people and sometimes because they can't bear the truth."

The Lord is watching me closely now. I feel the heat of His love on my face.

Go on, Child, He says. Keep talking.

"It's never okay to lie, but we do it anyway. That is the nature of sin. That's why we confess, and the Lord forgives us for our sins. We were made broken, and only in the light of His loving grace can we ever become whole."

And do You, Child, have anything to confess?

A cold, dark fear takes grip of me. I nod. I am trembling as I whisper, "Lord, help me, I have so very much to confess."

Well then. Go forth. Confess.

I open my mouth and a small choking sound comes out.

Try again, Child.

"Shannon," I manage. "Caleb. My father-in-law, bastard man, and *Clementine*—" The words pour out of me in a nauseous rush, and then suddenly I am empty, empty and cold, and the shimmering light around Mary is gone. Her face looks dull and dead, her mouth drawn and sad. She looks less like a girl and more like a clay mold of a girl. "Clementine," she says after a moment. "Did you just say—Clementine?"

The Lord is gone. I'm alone again, sitting on this porch across from Mary, who is staring at me with a strangely urgent expression on her face. I imagine telling the truth. Instead, I say, "No."

"Yes, you did. You said Clementine." She leans forward, expression almost pained. "Who is she? Clementine?"

"I said no one," I snap. Mary leans back like she's been slapped. We stare at each other. She looks like she's deciding whether to push me, to ask me again. Instead, she shivers and stands up, staring out into the black of the woods for a long moment. Then she walks back inside without another word.

I stand up, too, and follow this daughter who is not my daughter, this teenager who is also my mother, my captor, my savior, in this cold, unforgiving world.

34

“HEY, EVERYONE!” Reena sang out. “I’m usually not big on this kind of thing, but I just wanted to share with my community that I was unfortunately involved in the recent round of consulting layoffs and am now looking for a new opportunity.”

I was sitting at the kitchen table when her video popped up on my feed. As she went on about the state of the economy, I wondered vaguely if she’d gotten Botox. She looked like a stereotype of a modern woman: poreless and lip-lined and shrill. She must have layered a filter onto this video. Her skin was too beige, her teeth were too white. Her positivity was so obviously fraudulent that I felt a pinprick of empathy for her. Poor stupid Reena. She was older, but none the wiser. She had no one to blame but herself.

“…so if anyone has any leads, please let me know! I’m based in New York right now, but I would happily relocate to the West Coast for the perfect fit.”

How embarrassing for her. How desperate. Flaunting her failures online like this. Pretending she was totally fine with how her life was turning out, when she so obviously wanted to step into the bathroom, shut the door behind her, and scream into a—

I paused.

Reena and I were not alike.

No. Definitely not.

What *she* was doing, practically begging people for attention and money, was totally debasing, a complete humiliation, and what I was doing

was—

I set the phone down on the counter. Smiled at my children.

In retrospect, it feels like divine coordination that the day Reena announced she had lost the one job she'd always wanted was the day I finally got hired, so to speak, for mine.

—

Reena and I were both twenty-six years old that morning. I had three thousand followers and was nine months pregnant with baby number four. Clementine was sitting quietly at the other end of the kitchen table, drawing. Her brothers were playing on a blanket spread out on the kitchen floor, Samuel holding two plastic building blocks and occasionally clashing them together, baby Stetson lying on his tummy and craning his head up from time to time like an old, wizened lizard.

Then Caleb threw open the door, letting in a rush of spring air. "Come quick!"

I sighed. "What happened this time?"

We were on our fifth and sixth dairy cow. Caleb had recently become convinced they would live longer in pairs.

"It's not that," he huffed. "It's—and *we*—and *you*—"

"Lord, Caleb. Take a breath. You'll terrify the children."

"Just *come to the barn*."

I told Clementine, "Watch your siblings until I come back."

"No, Mama," she said immediately. "I want to come."

"Next time," I assured her as I slipped my shoes on.

—

Caleb walked quickly down the sloping hill, saying occasionally over his shoulder, "Hurry!"

"I'm going as fast as I can," I snapped as I waddle-huffed after him. Our little girl, Jessa, was due any day now.

I hadn’t been to the barn in over a week, and I was happy to see the inside looked clean. At the far end of the stalls, an older Mexican man was sweeping the floors. Another one was brushing a massive brown and white horse. As Caleb marched quickly down the hallway toward his office, which was in a former supply room, I said, “Caleb, whose horse is that?”

“Ours,” he said. “I got him the other day.”

“*You got a horse?*”

“No time! *Hurry!*”

I turned into Caleb’s office and stopped short. “Oh, Caleb—you didn’t.” The room was the size of a supply closet—it probably *had* been a supply closet—but it was now literally covered in the kind of technology I associated with teenage boys. Three big computer monitors were crowded onto a small desk shoved into the corner; Caleb was now sitting in front of the desk, hurriedly clearing off the other chair to make space for me.

“Quick,” he said, “sit, before the segment is over.”

I sat down, still taking in my surroundings with a queasy pit in my stomach. An image popped into my head: Caleb, inviting one of the workers to his office for a “business conversation,” trying to look stern amid all his fancy gadgets.

“This guy has been talking about your account for like ten minutes now,” Caleb said. I followed Caleb’s gaze to the middle computer monitor, where a livestream was taking place. On one half of the screen, a heavyset man with a large beard was sitting in front of an industrial-size microphone. On the other half of the screen was—me. Smiling. Superimposed on his screen.

Caleb pressed the space bar and the volume blared through the speakers.

“—*this* is the kind of woman who is going to get our country back on track. None of that city-woman, equality-of-the-sexes bullshit. No. This is a wholesome, traditional Aryan wife.” He clicked through my Instagram pictures, creating a flipbook effect of me smiling all over this farm. Me in front of the barn, me in front of a cake mixer, me sitting on the front porch, caressing my bump. “Man, if more families in America acted like this family…think about it. Celebrating nuclear families instead of denigrating

them. Cherishing the separate and equally valuable roles of man and wife instead of constantly challenging them. Eating local, working the land, and spreading good Christian values." The bearded man laughed heartily. "I've gotta say, I'm sold! We're going to talk more about this after a quick break from our sponsors…"

I disappeared from the screen, replaced by a stock image of three tubs of protein powder. As the man began to read from a prewritten script —"CardioChocoBoom is clinically guaranteed to increase your muscle mass by six hundred percent"—I turned to Caleb and said, "What's happening?"

"This is one of the most popular daily talk shows online, Natalie. It's a *huge* deal—and he found you thanks to me. You know how I have those internet friends?"

"Of course I do." *Internet buddies*, my mother had repeated faithfully, in summation of his forty-minute rant. *Man-o-sphere.* That woman had the patience of an actual saint.

"Well, *this guy* is in one of them! I had no clue, because all the usernames in the forums are anonymous, but he was there! The whole time! Talking with me and the other guys like a totally regular person! Can you believe it?"

I glanced again at the bearded man, who looked like a totally regular person to me. "And you talked about me in your…forum?"

Caleb nodded vigorously. "I talked all about our ranch, and I shared a picture from your account. The eight-months-pregnant one?"

I nodded. That one had performed relatively well for my account. A few hundred likes, a handful of cheery, generic farming comments from other cheery, generic farming accounts. #pregnantmommalife

Caleb seemed aware that I wasn't processing this information in the way that he would have liked me to, and so he said again, "Natalie, this is a huge deal. This guy has *tens of millions* of subscribers. I bet you're getting hundreds of new followers right now."

I pulled out my phone right as the bearded man returned from his ad break. "Now, like I was saying," he said, but the rest of the sentence was

lost to me, because I had just seen my follower count: ten thousand.

"What every man needs to do *his* job is a wife who can do *her* job. This, right here, this Natalie Heller Mills? That is a wife who does her job. I mean, look at her. Baking her own bread, milking their own cows, keeping their children *healthy* and *safe* and *nurtured*—"

I refreshed my account again: fifteen thousand followers.

"Look at how hard this woman works. Look how exhausted and beautiful she is. *This*, my friends, is the true American dream. Not that hamster wheel nightmare out in the cities. Don't let the media fool you…"

I found my voice. "*Caleb.*"

He looked at me, and I handed him my phone. "Holy shit," he whispered. Twenty thousand followers.

As Caleb refreshed—twenty-two—and refreshed again—twenty-four—and refreshed again—twenty-eight—I was just beginning to process what that man had said. *Exhausted and beautiful:* Did I look exhausted? And why was that a good thing? And had he said I bake all our bread from scratch? I could count on one hand the number of times I'd done so in my life. The picture I'd shared on my account of a sourdough loaf had been a loaf I'd picked up at the store. He was talking, now, about my kitchen, saying I didn't use microwaves because they were radioactive and caused cancer. I thought of the microwave in our pantry, ugly, hidden from view, and said quietly, "I think there might have been a mistake, here."

—

Over the next twenty-four hours, I would gain over three hundred thousand followers. I was so stunned by the number that it took me quite a bit longer to realize how many of them were angry.

This shit is so fake

Lol this woman looks miserable

Religious cult alert, ding ding ding!

This is not real life!

Over coffee the next day, Caleb and I scrolled through the comments silently. “Wow,” he said finally. “That’s a lot of angry women.”

35

TODAY IS ABEL'S THIRTEENTH BIRTHDAY. The day he becomes a man. We sit around the table and sing to him. He doesn't receive any gifts. He looks properly shy from all the attention. "You're a man now," Old Caleb says, but he isn't, not really. His voice has yet to crack. I'm still taller than him by a foot.

Together, we eat our eggs and biscuits, and the children guess what kind of man Abel will be. "Brave!" Noah says.

"Gentle," Mary corrects.

"*HUGE!*" Maeve shouts. We all laugh at that.

After breakfast is over, Old Caleb looks at Abel. "Are you ready?" he says.

Abel looks terrified. He swallows and nods.

—

Mary, Maeve, Noah, and I stand on the porch, watching silently as Abel and Caleb walk slowly down the hill. Abel is old enough, now—for what? Only Old Caleb knows. The rest of the children simply parrot what he has told him. They're off to *the far woods.* They're going *everywhere.*

What I am thinking: *It's easy to go everywhere when you're the one who sets the traps.*

"Good luck," Noah shouts to his brother when they're almost out of sight. Abel turns halfway to shout something back, but then Old Caleb puts

his arm around Abel's shoulders, steering him forward, and soon the two of them are away, out of sight, off to a place only men can go.

Trust in the Lord, I remind myself. Outwardly, I am smiling. Inwardly, I feel like how Noah looks right now: desperately sad for having been left behind.

"Well," Mary says. "What an exciting morning." She turns to Noah and says softly, "It'll be your turn before you know it."

"No it won't," he says. "It'll be years and years."

"When will it be *my* turn?" Maeve asks.

"Never," Noah mutters irritably, and now Maeve's face has fallen, too.

I turn to the children. "Say, why don't we have some fun today? We could go pick some flowers, or play cowboys and Indians, or—" I look around for inspiration. What do pioneer children do for fun? My gaze lands on the horse, standing in the far shadows of the paddock. "What about the horse? Why don't you take turns riding the horse?"

"Flower picking is for little girls, and horses aren't meant to be ridden," Noah says exasperatedly. "Do you understand anything?"

I laugh confusedly. "What do you mean, horses aren't meant to be—"

He bellows in return. "You don't understand anything!"

"Noah," Mary says sharply before I can respond. "You don't speak to your mother like that."

"But she's useless," he cries. His face is all red now. He looks despondent. "She's so bad at being a mother!"

"Noah. Enough!" Mary looks like she's on the verge of slapping him.

I touch her shoulder and say, "Really, it's fine. I'm fine." To Noah, I say gently, "Do you want to help me bake some bread?"

"No!" he cries. "That's women's work!"

Mary steps toward Noah, either to reproach him or offer comfort, but he backs away from her reach. He's even more upset now. Tears are falling down his face. "You're all *stupid women*!" he shouts, and then he runs down the porch stairs and down to the barn.

"Let him be," Mary says.

—

Hours later, when dinner is ready, Mary walks down to the barn. She reemerges with Noah in her arms, curled up so that he looks much smaller than he actually is. He’s covered in hay and fast asleep. I stand by the kitchen sink, watching through the window as she slowly carries him up to the house.

The sun is setting. The men have not come home yet.

36

THE iPHONE STAND I'd bought from Amazon was crap. It was meant to stand firm on any surface, a collapsible tripod with a wiry neck like an octopus leg, designed to twist and swirl so you could take a picture from any angle. An ideal accessory for any serious influencer, the brand packaging informed me, except the plastic nubs keeping the tripod stable were too nubby, and the octopus leg wasn't grippy enough to hold my phone in place, and so each time I finally positioned it perfectly, my phone would clatter loudly to the floor when I started to chop the first carrot. If I wanted it to stay put, I had to wedge it into place with two cookbooks on either side. Usually that did the trick.

It was five-thirty in the morning. I'd been up for two hours already. I'd blown out my hair and then plaited it into a carefully messy, obscenely voluminous braid. I'd spent twenty-five minutes putting on my makeup; I'd recently mastered a YouTube tutorial on how to achieve a Nakedly Gorgeous complexion. As I chopped the vegetables, I kept my expression blankly pleasant, reminded myself not to turn my body toward the cutting board, and focused all my energy on breathing. These were hard-won lessons. In my first attempt at a cooking video, weeks earlier, I'd recorded about seven hours' worth of bread content before realizing my face looked pinched and sour. I could practically hear Ashley Ann's cloying whine: *Not very likable, Natalie! Try again!*

It had been just over three months since that bearded man featured my account on his show. We now had a million followers. *Whoosh.* The shift in growth had been so steep that it actually felt like the air at Yesteryear Ranch

was now thinner than it was before. Like we physically rose in elevation from all the eyeballs on our *little corner of the universe.*

Why me?

This was the question that rang through my mind each morning when I woke up and prepared to face down an audience the size of a small nation; when I realized they wanted video content in addition to images; when I learned that my video content was nowhere near up to snuff; when I put the children to bed and then stayed up until three in the morning reading tutorials about how to get it right; when I spent hours scrolling through the internet, looking for a recipe to crib; when I reminded myself again and again that failure was not an option. *Why me?*

Well. It was like Doug said: a good politician doesn't change his policies, just the messaging.

A good influencer doesn't change herself, just the packaging. And while Tammy Lane and Cassidy and Ashley Ann and Robin and all those other idiot women hadn't understood the key to perfect packaging, the bearded man certainly had. The day he did that livestream, he offered a crash course in marketing that was literally priceless: he taught me how to market myself, and as a double whammy, he taught the audience how to love me.

Which made me think of something I'd read long ago, back in college, the night after my date with Caleb at the Italian restaurant. The cold glasses of water, that truffle pasta. The strangest flavor I'd ever encountered. Terrible yet mouthwatering. "Trust me," Caleb had said, when I noted my confusion aloud. "You'll develop a taste for it, and then you'll be obsessed." Back in my dorm room that night, I went online and learned about the pigs who were trained to seek out those delicacies in the wild. The smell was so intoxicating to them, it nearly drove them mad.

People aren't so different from pigs, apparently. Once they learn a rotten thing can be eaten, they will eat it, and then they will become addicted to it. They will let it drive them mad.

That bearded man? He was the first person to smell the rot of our farm and label it a delicacy. Those homesteading folks over at Yesteryear Ranch, with the tired young mother and the grinning doltish cowboy? They were,

as it turned out, not rotten at all, but a perfectly fermented vision of America.

Delicious, the bearded man announced, and everyone else rushed toward me with their forks.

Why does she talk like that?

seriously tho when does this woman sleeeppppp

i am so obsessed with you

i can't believe so many people are buying the crap this woman is selling

I wish my life was half as perfect as hers!!!!!!

—

The goal of an influencer is not to be lovable, and it is not to be unbearable. The goal is to be both at once. In other words: addicting.

—

That was just the first of many lessons I'd learned since the day I went viral. Another lesson? The Angry Women, as Caleb had dubbed them, were overworked and underpaid. This, I had learned after many nights of sleepless demographic research, in which I would click through hundreds of accounts that followed me, noting where they lived, what they posted about, who they claimed to be. What I had learned: nearly all these women had crappy jobs and snotty kids and loser husbands. Alternatively, they were single and whiny and depressed. Either way: these women wanted their content to be every bit as mindless and pleasurable as their lives were not. These women wanted—no, they *needed*—perfection from me. After all, the tighter the stitching, the more soothing it is to pick apart at the seams.

At the same time, the Angry Woman claimed to want *honesty,* or at least a working illusion of it. Which meant, in practice: a perfect woman making a perfect meal and occasionally spilling a little flour along the way, *oopsie!;* a doting mother approaching a baker's dozen of children smiling with blissful exhaustion as her daughter dragged a finger through a bowl of

frosting, *so darling;* a patient wife rolling her eyes with bottomless adoration for the man who tracked dirt onto the freshly washed floors, who beat her or chastised her or spoke over her until she trailed off into silence. *Me-ow! Hubby!*

> seriously do her kids ever complain
>
> @YesteryearRanch where did you get that dress from????
>
> I can't decide if her husband is a psycho or not lol
>
> 💀💀💀

—

A third lesson: the less a woman speaks, the better. That one, I'll admit I already knew.

—

On cue, I glanced at the camera and offered the lens a private, tired smile. I finished chopping the vegetables, swept them into a big ceramic bowl, and let out an exaggerated sigh of accomplishment. I paused in that position for three long seconds. *Mississippi, Mississippi, Mississippi.* This made for easy video splicing. It also allowed for a brief relaxation of the face, a moment for the expression to drop and the eyes to go dark. Like walking off the lactic acid in between sprints.

I consulted the recipe for the twelfth time, then closed my eyes, running through a series of quick math equations, the cup of flour times the iPhone recording me divided by the moment my children were set to wake up. My brain whined happily beneath the pressure. What a relief, to feel the galloping strain of my own intelligence again. I felt like I was back in high school—no, I felt like I was a child again, a baby, doubling my inventory of instincts on a near-daily basis. Developing a computerlike knowledge of cooking and baking and producing. Each sleepless night brought me closer to a full mastery of—myself, I supposed. The performance of me. Of her.

After the vegetables came the beef shank. First, the twine. I pulled open the silverware drawer, then the cooking utensil drawer. No twine. Where the hell was it? I slammed the door shut.

—

"Caleb. Wake up."

Caleb rolled over on his side, squinted up at me in the darkness. "W'time is it?"

"It's six," I whispered. I was sitting on the side of our bed, shrugging on a new sweater. It was a soft lilac cashmere and had cost six hundred dollars, the most I'd ever spent on a single piece of clothing. The color expert I'd met virtually a month earlier had sworn by this brand; she'd said their style was *so on-brand* for me. "I need to go get twine," I said, cuffing the sleeves like she'd taught me to. "I'll take Jessa with me, but you need to get Clementine, Samuel, and Stetson up and dressed and fed. I'll be back in thirty minutes. Forty, tops."

"Twine," he mumble-repeated. "Get 'em up. Forty minutes. Why?"

But I was already out the door.

—

Inside the car, I set the camera mount up on the dash, checked my hair, and then pressed record. "Morning, y'all! Another busy day at the ranch. I thought I got twine yesterday, but I can't find it anywhere, so now I need to go to the grocery store and get some—which means today is going to be another *very* busy day. But luckily I have my favorite coworker with me for the ride." I shifted the phone to capture Jessa, six months old and fast asleep in her car seat. Then I pressed the end recording button, turned the car on, and hit the gas.

—

My phone went off as I pulled onto the highway. Doug was calling. “How’s my most famous daughter-in-law?”

“I’m fine, Doug—how’s the campaign trail coming along?”

Doug was practicing a few new campaign strategies in advance of the *big* run. A presidential push in eighteen months.

“Oh, fine,” Doug said, echoing me. “Busy. You know.” He cleared his throat, and I sighed. I knew what was coming next. It was the only reason Doug ever called me, though he liked to pretend otherwise. “So listen,” he began casually. “I know we’ve discussed this before, but I was thinking you might take some time in the next few weeks to—”

“You know I can’t get political on my page, Doug.”

“I’m not asking for anything crazy! Just, hell, I don’t know…” He trailed off theatrically, as if he was really trying to think of examples off the top of his head. As if he wasn’t looking at a list written by an intern at that very moment. “Maybe you repost a video of me from that Senate Judiciary hearing. Or—how about this, your latest grocery bill. Read through it, line by line. And you can’t *believe* how expensive things are getting, and you’re worried about your kids staying afloat twenty years from now—”

Doug was desperate to reach the youth.

“I’ve told you what I’m comfortable with,” I said firmly. “And that is showing up at your campaign stops, sharing photos of myself and the kids at your rallies. Making it a family affair. That’s where it starts, and that’s where it ends.”

Doug laughed tightly. “You know we’re rapidly approaching a crossroads in this country, Natalie. The next election is going to be big.”

“Why? Because it’s going to be yours?”

Doug laughed. This is what my social media account had provided me: I could challenge Doug now, and when I did so, he had to laugh. “I’m just reminding you how important all of this is. It’s not just, or rather it’s not *only*…” He trailed off here, so suddenly frustrated by my refusal to play ball that he seemed perplexed. “Listen. We’re making this complicated. I’m just asking you to write a simple little post saying that I’m a great leader. That’s it. This isn’t complicated, Natalie. It doesn’t have to be complicated.”

“I didn’t say it was complicated,” I said, my tone still lemon-bright. “I said I wasn’t doing it.”

“You know, Natalie: I don’t like to talk about money.”

Bullshit. Doug loved to talk about money.

“We gave you a lot of money. We helped you build that ranch.”

“I’m aware. I’m very grateful for your support of me, and your son, and your grandkids.”

“Well, what if the world found out just how much money I gave you?”

I paused. Doug had never tried this tack before. “Are you threatening me, Doug?”

“Of course I’m not! I’m just—” He exhaled slowly and loudly into the phone. “Listen. A war is coming, Natalie. *A major war.* And it won’t be *me* who has to live through the consequences of it.”

“So I’ve been told.” Civil war was all the rage in the forums, these days. Caleb had talked about it nonstop for a while, waxing on each evening about the inevitability of a national schism, the imminent need for local militias and homemade weapons, until finally I turned to him and said, “Well, at least now you’ll get to be a soldier *and* a blacksmith, just like you always wanted!” That shut him up quick.

“Listen, Doug,” I said. “I’m pulling into the Whole Foods parking lot. Let’s discuss this later.”

He went on, speaking more quickly now, like a game show candidate chasing the clock. “Civil war, Natalie, do you hear me? Whether you acknowledge it or not, it’s coming. Lines will be drawn. It *will not be pretty.* We have to get our act together as a nation, and *quickly*, unless you want a, a, a *civil war* for your children, and your children’s children—”

“Mhmm, I know. Civil war. Very scary. Listen, I’m at the grocery store. Can we pick this up at another time?” I hung up before he could respond, then checked my notifications quickly.

My brain is breaking like how does she do all of this

Hey everyone, local farmer here, just want to say their farming practices are totally unethical

dude mark my words this woman is miserable

The first week after I went viral, comments like these had destabilized me to the point that I could barely walk in a straight line. Now I could practically write them myself.

And then I scrolled past a name I recognized. I paused, then clicked on the message request.

Hey Natalie! It's Reena Magliotti from college. Random, but I'm an intern at America News now and I didn't know if you would ever do a Q&A with me? I know you haven't done any interviews yet, but it could be a fun reunion! LMK.

I let out a little huff of amusement. Poor thing. She must have really swallowed her pride to write that message. And to be an intern at twenty-seven—yikes!

—

Inside the grocery store, I moved quickly, grabbing two balls of twine and then adding a few more necessities to the cart. Brussels sprouts, green juice, active yeast. As I was checking out, the woman behind me tapped my shoulder. "Excuse me, I'm so sorry, but: Are you Natalie Heller Mills?"

I paused.

I hadn't thought it would happen today. Which was silly. It could happen any time I left the ranch, but still—

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and counted to three.

—

This, right here, is the strangest part about becoming famous online: you can have millions of followers and still not have a single in-person interaction with a fan for months.

—

"Hi!" I said. "Yes, I am. Do we know each other?"

This is the response I had decided to have. Friendly, yet relatable. *Stars: they're just like us!*

"Oh my gosh, I am a huge fan of your account!" She seemed delighted at how on-brand the ingredients in my cart were. So organic. Such vibes. *Go ahead and take a picture,* I nearly said. "I'm sorry," she said, and laughed. "I can't believe how pretty you are in real life."

"You're so pretty too!" I said immediately. This was going well, actually. What had I been so afraid of? This was fun!

"No, no, no." She was blushing now. "I just ran out the door this morning to get some eggs. I'm sure my hair is whackadoo."

"Well," I said lovingly, "I'm sure you'll do it better next time."

The woman frowned. *Bad, Natalie. Awkward.* I swallowed a sudden rush of fury at myself, a fury which only doubled in power when the woman glanced back at me, her expression now colored with uncertainty.

"So you—you live in the area?"

"Not really. I mean, technically yes, but not in town or anything."

There was a stirring in the air between us. My response had been all wrong, not just in content but in the style of my delivery: heavy when it should have been light, condescending when it should have been grateful. Had I mistakenly implied that living in town was low-status? I couldn't tell. Now a familiar discomfort filled my chest, a bodily awareness of the uncanny horror filling this woman's mind: I was not the same Natalie she loved so much. At best, I was close. Nearly there. A clone, or a robot. The twin sister no one knew about. Natalie-adjacent. Sharper in tone. Not as tall as she'd imagined.

In short: I was still me. Which meant I was nothing like *her:* the Natalie who lived online.

—

This was, truthfully, why I hadn't accepted a single interview request yet, even though I'd received dozens: I simply wasn't ready.

—

“Well,” the woman said. “It was so nice meeting you.”

“You too,” I said, a bit too warmly, as I handed the cashier my card. “Thank you so much for following.”

—

I walked quickly across the parking lot, my grocery cart rattle-clacking loudly over the pavement, my gaze trained firmly on the brake lights of my own car. I was putting the grocery bag into my trunk when I heard that woman again. “Hey! Natalie! Just a sec.”

A tremor ran through me. I considered pretending not to hear her, then decided against it. By the time I turned around, the woman was standing there, smiling expectantly.

“I just realized I never thanked you.” She gave a nervous laugh. “That was why I wanted to talk to you: to thank you. I gave birth recently, and it was—” She paused, glanced up quickly at the sky, blinking rapidly. Oh, God: she was trying not to cry. “It was really hard.”

I wondered what my expression looked like right now. If I was conveying the correct measure of understanding and concern.

“It’s been a really long few months,” she went on. “Just—really dark. I haven’t been myself. But when I came across your account, I just—I was so inspired. You seem like an amazing mother.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, that’s—that’s so kind of you to say.” At that moment, a squeal came from the back seat, and the woman nearly jumped out of her skin. “Oh,” I said, “don’t worry! That’s just my little girl, Jessa.”

She looked at the car, then at me. “Did you leave your baby in the car while you were shopping?”

Oh.

Oh no.

No no no no no no no no no no no—

My body flooded with cortisol. My vision blurred. I could barely hear what I said next. Something about being a very quick shopper (wrong answer). Something about raising our kids like they did in the olden days (worse answer). Through the fog of my panic, I could just see the shape of this woman's expression.

Disturbed. She looked disturbed.

Somehow the conversation ended. Somehow I was driving home. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. I could feel them, but I wasn't crying. I was smiling. Wasn't I? Smiling?

—

What I wished I had said to that woman: I was disturbed, too. In fact *disturbing* was the only word to describe the vast chasm of space between who I needed to be and who I currently was. *I'm working on it,* I wanted to say. *I am working day and night on this issue. Customer service is aware of the reported blackout. We are working to get service back online and running shortly!*

—

As I drove through the winding mountain roads back to the ranch, humming softly to keep Jessa's hunger snuffles at bay, I tried to visually map out the rest of my day. By the time I got home, the children would all be awake, the two boys smashing wooden blocks over each other's skulls while Caleb had his daily thirty-minute-long homeschooling lesson with Clementine. *God made dinosaurs! Skyscrapers give you cancer!* Clementine's shirt would probably be inside out; Stetson's diaper would probably need to be changed. Caleb, meanwhile, would be itching to head out to the barn; most of his favorite livestreams got going around midmorning. And so he would leave me with the kids, and I would ask Clementine to watch Samuel while I took care of Stetson and Jessa, swapping out both diapers, applying rash creams, breastfeeding Jessa, giving Stetson a warm bottle of milk. By this point all the children would be desperate to go outside, to have *outdoors*

time, and so I would stand in the grass watching them roll and play and laugh. That would be a good moment for me to be able to plan out the recipe. And then we would have lunchtime, and then nap time, and everyone but Clementine would sleep for two hours, at which point I could set her up with a book on the couch and tell her *it's Mama's quiet time.* Two hours, plenty of time to film. And then the children would wake up and need to be fed and diapered and entertained all over again, but yes, as long as I took advantage of nap time and didn't make any mistakes with the recipe, I could be finished with filming by four, maybe five at the latest—

—

"Natalie?"

I turned around. It was nighttime. Caleb was in the doorway, holding a bucket and an ice pick. At the same time, we said, "What are you doing?"

A long silence unfolded.

"Clementine came to the barn," Caleb said. "She said she hasn't eaten."

As if on cue, Clementine stepped forward from behind Caleb. *Bitch,* I thought before I could stop myself, followed immediately by: *No, of course not, just a child, just your child.* I was so tired.

"You forgot to make them dinner again, didn't you?"

"I didn't forget." I gestured at the roast in front of me. "It's right here. It's almost ready."

Caleb looked genuinely concerned. "It's nine at night."

I blinked. The floorboards slanted. I rested a hand on the countertop to keep from falling forward. I gazed helplessly around the room. Stetson and Samuel were asleep in the playpen, stretched out on their bellies. One look at the baby monitor showed Jessa in her crib. *Thank God,* I thought, before I could censor my own thoughts. *Thank God I put her in the crib.* "I must have lost track of time."

He looked incredulously at me. "That's all you have to say?"

"I," I said. "I—I—"

"Natalie," Caleb said fiercely. How rarely he said my name aloud.

I paused. Then I said something awful, something I'd been thinking for weeks: "I think we maybe need…a nanny."

"Our children don't need a nanny," he replied immediately. "They need a mother."

Checkmate. No acceptable counter to that. I nodded, properly chastened. He was right, of course. What kind of mother couldn't take care of her own children?

"No nanny," Caleb repeated. Then my husband's expression softened, and he also placed a hand on the counter, as if to steady himself, and I realized he was exhausted too. Giving himself a moment to recover from his own constant performance—not of the role I had thought he would take on (*hello, cowboy!*), but of something much subtler and therefore more demanding: that of a hardened Christian man. He didn't play with the children anymore, not in the same way he used to. Sometimes I caught him looking at them wistfully, especially toddler Stetson or baby Jessa, but he never actually acted on his longing anymore. He couldn't. Real men didn't do things like that. "We can have a full-time babysitter, I think," he said tiredly, rubbing one eye. "Babysitters are fine."

Clementine was standing by the baking dish now, quietly eating a roasted carrot. I crossed the room toward my husband and wrapped my arms around him. Our first hug in years. Then I began to cry.

—

The woman in the videos, with her flipbook of smiles? That was Online Natalie, and she was designed to be good at being alive. Nothing was hard for her: not motherhood, nor marriage, nor building a business, nor serving Him. All of it appeared to her as a series of tasks to be accomplished each day, at the right time, in the correct chronological order.

Online Natalie started each morning by giving thanks for all the Lord had given her. She greeted her children lovingly each morning. She had sex with her husband every night. She was tired all the time, but it never made her ugly or angry or bitter. It only ever made her more beautiful.

And she was right there, wasn’t she? Standing, smiling, beckoning. Any day now, I would wrap my fingers around her neck and pull her forward. Let her topple into me.

37

THE LAST FEW DAYS have been very peaceful on the ranch. Mary's mood has improved. Abel seemed to enjoy his trip with Old Caleb, and has left with him several times since then. On the first day, he came back grinning and told Noah, *I'll tell you when you're old enough.* Now Noah walks around all day with a dazed, slightly ecstatic look in his eye, like he knows the day of his own death.

And me? I think the Lord is happy with me. I can feel Him all around me, stronger than I ever have in my life. Sometimes, when I'm doing laundry or getting eggs from the coop, I tilt my expression to catch the cold winter sunlight, and I swear I can feel His breath on my cheek.

When I was a girl, I thought of the Lord the way other girls in my class thought of crushes. I imagined the lines of His face each night when I fell asleep. I doodled His name in my notebook in cursive, swirling hearts in glitter gel pen pink. I wondered if He thought of me as frequently as I thought of Him. And sometimes—as a reward, I think, for such pure thoughts—He would enter my body, filling me with an unbearable pleasure, a sense of communion so deep and animal and satiating that it left me slick and panting upon its departure.

I stopped experiencing those moments the day I was married. But now, miracle of miracles: the feeling has returned. I feel Him everywhere. In the air. In the ground beneath my feet. I feel Him, too, on the evenings Old Caleb reaches for my hips beneath the quilt. Pleasure beyond imagining. Like I am in a constant state of ascending.

For the first time in my life, I am being properly satisfied by a man.

I’m not alone. I’m not stuck, not lost, not forgotten, not punished. I am here, a chosen one, with Him, and I will remain here, wherever *here* is, until He decides to take me elsewhere.

Sometimes, when I have a moment to myself, I drop to my knees and let the gratitude hum out of me in waves. I cry hysterically, overcome by the magnitude of His power and His glory.

Imagine how you would feel if the Lord created a whole universe just for you. A customized parable; a new biblical story in the making. Maybe one day, even, they’ll talk about me in Sunday School. Saint Natalie. I like the ring of that.

—

The days slip away from me. A blur of divine exhaustion. Another week passes, and then another. The temperature drops further. Dinner comes earlier. We are crowded around the fire by midevening each night. Mary takes Old Caleb’s most worn-out pairs of socks, the ones that have become so thin at the toes that no amount of restitching will save them, and she turns them into a new pair of sock puppets for Maeve, with mismatched button eyes. Maeve has two puppets already. She’s been begging Mary for a third pair of puppets. Mary tells her to be patient, and Maeve, a good little girl, usually manages to quiet herself for a good thirty minutes before she comes sidling back up to the table, eyeing Mary’s handiwork with an interest verging on desperation. Finally Mary finishes and gives Maeve the third pair, and Maeve is so excited by the gift that she becomes overwhelmed and cries fat little-girl tears. It’s such a startlingly adorable scene that I begin to laugh, and amid all the joy I think to myself, *Yes, I can bear this life. I can even sometimes enjoy it.*

And then, just as quickly, I’m thinking of my other children—the ones who are out there, somewhere, in this life, in another life—and the laughter dies in my chest. The girls notice the change in temperature and back away immediately. The boys eye me warily from across the room, and I spend the rest of the night staring moodily at nothing.

—

Then one morning, I wake up and realize two things simultaneously: it’s been almost two months since Old Caleb slapped me that cold dark morning, and I haven’t gotten my period.

38

LOUISE CRENSHAW ARRIVED at the farm on a blustery spring morning wearing a peacoat, holding an old-fashioned suitcase in one hand. I was thrilled with how perfectly she fit the aesthetic of the role she needed to fill. *Our very own Mary Poppins!* "Hello there," she said to Clementine, and stuck out her hand.

We were standing in the corner of the living room where the children kept their toys. "Hello there," Clementine echoed, and shook Louise's hand. She gestured formally at her doll set. "Would you like to have tea with me?"

Nanny Louise nodded. "Absolutely I would."

She dropped down to a crouch, letting the children gather around her like townspeople encountering a stranger from a foreign land.

"So," she said, while Samuel surveyed her, nose to nose, with an appraising look. *Hard to believe my oldest boy is nearly four!* "My agency says you're an influencer?"

I laughed brightly. "Sort of. I don't *think* of myself like one, but I guess it's technically true."

She poked Samuel in the tummy, and he burst into hysterics. Stetson now toddled over and presented *his* tummy to her. *Hard to believe my youngest boy is nearly*—wait, no, I had used that line already. Well: Stetson was two. She poked his tummy, and both boys screamed with terrified delight. Over their laughter, she said, "What do you sell?"

"Well, up until now it's just been paid advertisements, but I'm planning a cookware line. Mixing bowls, cutting boards, preserved foods. That kind

of thing. Direct to consumer. *So* much work to plan."

I gave a self-deprecating grimace and held the expression in place, patiently, until she turned around and looked at me. Then my face morphed into bright laughter again, and she laughed politely too.

It was working. My first extended interaction with a stranger since that awful day with the woman in the parking lot—and this time I was actually doing it. Being Online Natalie in real life. Nanny Louise didn't exactly seem *thrilled* by me, but that was irrelevant. I didn't care if she liked me. I just cared if she believed I was real.

"Well," I said. "I'll just let you get to it, then!" Best to leave when ahead. "Oh, and what's your Instagram handle? I'd love to follow you!"

"Oh. I don't have Instagram, actually."

"Ah," I said. "Well. Never mind."

This was the strangeness of becoming famous online. I had a million followers, I could access more people in a single moment than any European king of the last thousand years, and then someone could effortlessly wipe my entire kingdom away with a single sentence: *I don't have Instagram.*

"And if you don't mind," Nanny Louise added, "I'd love to stay out of any content you share online."

"Of course. I totally understand those boundaries." I wondered if she had seen the email I sent to the agency—nannies will NEVER be visible on account, and they will sign a contract stipulating so—or if this was genuinely just a perfect coincidence.

Clementine was pouring Louise an imaginary cup of tea now. Louise took it, sipped politely, then said over her shoulder, "Who has been doing the homeschooling for the children up until this point?"

"Ah! That would be my husband."

"And you're aware of the curriculum he chose for the children?"

"Of course I am." This was vaguely correct. It would be a stretch to call what Caleb did with the children a curriculum, but from time to time I did see him on the couch with Clementine and a laptop, the screen open to some online website with poor HTML formatting. From what I understood,

the endeavor had something to do with learning math through the moral framework of the Ten Commandments. Thou Shalt Not Divide by Zero, et cetera.

“It’s very ideologically driven,” Louise said. “I just want to make sure you’re aware, and comfortable with that?”

“Oh yes. Perfectly comfortable!” I grinned at my daughter, who stared soberly back at me. “Well, Clementine, what do you think? Would you like to play with Nanny Louise for a while—”

“Actually,” Louise said, “Louise is just fine.”

“Excuse me?”

“You said Nanny Louise. Louise is fine.”

Well. That wouldn’t do. I’d been really looking forward to calling her Nanny Louise. It sounded more magical, like we were living in a storybook. *It doesn’t matter,* I told myself, *she’ll never be online, the Angry Women will never meet her*—but it did matter. It mattered to me.

These moments happened frequently now. Spending so much time online, I sometimes found myself actively uncomfortable, almost revolted, by the discombobulation of my offline life. The piles of dishes in the sink. The silent watchful eye of my daughter, no musical overlay to soften our interactions. And now: *Louise is just fine.* Terrible. Like rubbing velvet the wrong way.

I gathered myself, then said firmly, “I’d really like to call you Nanny Louise.”

There was the slightest pause. Then she shrugged. “Okay. And your littlest one? Where is she?”

“Jessa!” I said. “Our little firecracker. She’s sleeping. I’ll bring her to you at three.”

Jessa was barely a year old, not so much a firecracker as a mushy puddle of need and want—but I’d needed a way to differentiate her online, a way for the Angry Women to know and remember her, and she *had* been very fussy lately, and so the moniker had stuck.

“Great,” Louise said, and her attention turned back to the children.

I walked away from the living room, through the kitchen, and into the pantry. The tension in my chest fell away, so suddenly and powerfully that I lowered myself to the ground, letting the pleasure roll through me in waves.

I would never be alone with my children again.

—

What a beautiful time to be alive. It was springtime. The ranch was bursting at the seams with life. The fields were freckled with bluebonnets. On a quiet day, sapped of wind, you could tilt your ear and hear the river, rushing and foaming with all the snow runoff from the mountains. But it was the kind of beauty that felt impossible to grasp in person. It wasn't just an option to organize this moment in the walled structure of a phone screen—it was essential. The best way to experience it.

If only my mother agreed.

—

"It just seems very…ostentatious," she had said when we met a week earlier for coffee. "Do you really want so many people seeing Jessa in a diaper?"

I shrugged mildly. I already felt quite certain that my children were far safer online—their best selves preserved inside the four walls of my phone like little bugs in amber—than they could ever be in the real world. I thought of the woman at the grocery store, her disturbed expression. Even the cruelest comment I received online was no match for the memory of her face. "I think you just don't understand how social media works."

"But what if someone develops a fascination with them? Or with you?"

"You mean like a kidnapper or something?"

She nodded nervously.

"Mother. I highly doubt I'm important enough for someone to kidnap. Do you know how many accounts online have *tens* of millions of followers, let alone *hundreds of millions*?"

She looked stricken at the thought. "I don't know," she said, giving me a wobbly, disoriented look. "Maybe…five?"

It was also at this coffee date my mother told me Abigail was seeing someone. “A pastor, actually. He’s helping her study for her GED!”

“A pastor,” I said, and laughed. “What kind of pastor would date a single mother?”

“Well.” She sipped her coffee. “We’ve been going to a new church, actually.”

“A new church?” My mother had gone to the same church for my whole life. “What do you mean, a new church?”

“It’s very…hip. This pastor, his name is Ben—he doesn’t believe divorce is a sin. And he thinks—well.” She leaned forward and said quietly, “He feels very strongly that the gays should feel welcome, just like anyone else.”

I said nothing. Just looked at her, waiting for her to add her *own* opinion. Which was surely different than Pastor Ben’s opinion. This, after all, was the woman who had grabbed my hand and dragged me across the street in town whenever we passed the local bookshop, which was, in her words, owned by a man with *a little too much spring in his step.*

Instead, she shrugged and said innocently, “His arguments are compelling.”

—

Each person in my inner circle was responding to my sudden fame differently. Doug was obsessed with the newfound access I had to the minds of American women. My mother was worried about the children. My mother-in-law hadn’t offered her opinion yet; ever since she finished drying out in Wyoming, her conversational endeavors had been cut in half. In the handful of times I’d seen her since, she’d spoken only in short, raspy bursts and was constantly licking her lips, like she was dying of thirst.

And my sister?

I realized at coffee with my mother that I didn’t know what my sister thought of my virality. We barely spoke beyond occasional small talk on the

family group chat. I logged onto Instagram to her account and let out a little gasp: Abigail wasn't following me anymore.

I called her on the drive back from town. She answered on the eighth ring. "Natalie," she said, "what a surprise." She was outside; I could hear birds and children shouting and the distant, punctuated shriek of a referee whistle. "What can I do for you?"

"Do I need a specific reason to call my sister?"

"*You* do, yes." They were the three sharpest words she'd ever said to me, and yet her voice was strangely cheery. I wondered if people were standing all around her right now, maybe even Pastor Ben. If so, then my mother's voice was surely ringing in her head: *Never cause a scene!*

"Well," I said. "That hardly seems fair."

"Okay." I could hear her shrug through the phone. "My mistake, then. What's up? How are you?"

"I'm good." I was caught, now. I didn't want to prove her theory correct, and yet I needed to know, and the words came tumbling out of me before I could stop them. "Why don't you follow me on Instagram?"

There was a pause on the line. "That's why you're calling?"

"It's not a big deal. I'm just curious."

"Oh, you know I don't spend much time on Instagram." This was true. Her own account had four pictures, all of staged family photos. She had less than a hundred followers. "I'm so busy right now, with the kids and nursing school and Ben—I don't have time for all *that*."

"That's not really an answer to the question, though, is it?"

"It's just—" She sighed. I heard her say to someone, "One minute." Then she was walking, and the sound of other voices was falling away as she said quietly into the receiver, "Look, I don't want to fight. I know we've had arguments over the years, but I'm really just trying to…simplify my life. You know?"

"Of course I know." I had no clue what she was talking about.

"But—it's just confusing, okay? The way you act on that account, it makes me feel like I'm having a stroke. Like someone body-snatched my only sister."

“That’s a little bit dramatic, Abigail.”

“Okay. Maybe it is. But it’s how I feel. I’ve been going to therapy, you know, and—”

“Therapy?”

“Yes. Therapy. I told Mama she should go too, and she said she would consider it.”

“Who’s paying for this therapy? Is it that man you’ve been seeing? Ben?”

“Natalie—”

“You’re confessing all your secrets to some random man, and you think what *I’m* doing is strange?”

“It’s a woman.”

“What?”

“The therapist I’m confessing all my secrets to,” she replied flatly. “She’s a woman. And she says it’s fine for me not to follow you online. Anyways, I have to go, Natalie. Give hugs to the kids and Caleb for me, okay?” And then she hung up.

Infuriating. I’d been straining for a fight, but she was like water. I couldn’t get a grip on anything.

—

And then of course there was Caleb. “Turns out we made a lot of money last month,” he said one day. We were in the kitchen. It was late afternoon. Nanny Louise had been living with us for a week.

I was sitting at the table with my notebook, mapping out the plans for a rhubarb pie tutorial when he spoke. I paused and looked at him. “Did we?”

“Yeah, some sort of buyer called QuickCash paid us eighty thousand. Can you believe that? Need to call the accountants, though, ’cause I’m not sure they actually *bought* any of our vegetables. Must be some kind of processing mistake.”

Caleb was looking at me closely now. Scrutinizing me. It was a kind of look that hadn’t existed in his inventory of looks when we got married. But

like my closet of smiles, Caleb had grown his own garden of expressions: a thousand variations of suspicion. That was what they taught you in the forums: to be suspicious of everything. I'd watched Caleb grow suspicious of schools, and then of the skies, and then of the world—and now, I realized with surprise, he was becoming suspicious of me. "Do you know what QuickCash is, Nattie?"

I feigned uncertainty. "I *think* that's the name of the payment-processing system for Instagram."

"Are we making that much money on Instagram?"

There it was: that one single word I'd been dreading. *We.*

"I guess we did this month!" I said, with as much stupid housewife energy as I could muster. "Wow!"

"What about the month before?"

"Oh." My gaze cast across the kitchen, as if the correct answer might present itself to me. "I'm not sure. I guess I'd have to go online and check."

"Well. I spoke to our accountants and they said the money, that eighty thousand, was scheduled to go into some random banking account they didn't have access to, which must have been some sort of mistake. Right?"

He was looking hard at me now. Like he didn't believe I was real.

—

Stupid. What a stupid idea. So reckless and immoral. What had I been thinking? What kind of woman tries to hide money from her husband?

There were only two possible answers to that question, and neither was acceptable:

1) She is a woman who doesn't trust her husband.

2) She is a woman who doesn't want to share.

—

"Right," I said finally. "Silly me. Pregnancy brain!"

Pregnancy brain. The latest phrase I'd been trying out, which—if the fury it elicited from the Angry Women was any indication—appeared to be

perfectly fermented.

“That’s what I thought,” Caleb said, and chuckled. “Pregnancy brain. So anyways, I asked them to see if any other payments had been forwarded to that bank account, and what do you know: they had! Every payment from QuickCash for the last four months has gone into that account. Two hundred and twenty thousand in total.” He laughed. “That’s a whole lot of pregnancy brain!”

I was feeling very cold now.

“Anyways. They fixed it, so the money will go straight into our official LLC account from now on.”

“Thank you so much for—clearing that up. Do you know—I’m just going to go to the bathroom for a moment—”

I didn’t turn around, but I felt his gaze on me until I turned the corner.

Once I was safely inside the bathroom, I turned the faucet on and looked at myself in the mirror. I felt incredibly nauseous and a little bit lightheaded. “Stop it,” I said quietly. “Stop feeling this way.” But the nausea wouldn’t go away, and the pressure in my chest was unbearable. I was finding it hard to breathe.

Maybe it’s just sickening, how perfect my life is.

I paused. The pressure in my chest lightened a bit. My Online Natalie sensors flickered green, and I pushed dizzyingly forward.

Sometimes it actually makes me nauseous, how satisfying—no, how perfect *my life is, and how good I am at living it.*

That would do.

—

The problem was that Caleb couldn’t be trusted with money. Really, he couldn’t. He spent it on all manner of stupid things for the farm. Which is why I called Instagram support that night, waiting forty-five minutes on hold to speak with a human to ask them if they could split the incoming payments before they even hit my checking account.

Yes, I told them in a whisper. That's right: I wanted to split the payments between the checking account and another one I'd just opened.

For Caleb, of course. I was doing it for him.

39

REMEMBER HOW I SAID I wouldn't get pregnant? Remember how I begged the Lord, *anything but that*?

Yeah. Me too.

What's that insipid little idiom that insipid little women love to say to one another when their lives take a turn for the unexpected?

If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans!

—

Ha! Hahahaha! Hahahahahahahahahahaha!!!

—

Except I'm not laughing. I'm not smiling. I'm having a hard time even finding a way to formulate a prayer to the Lord that makes any coherent sense.

I try to stay calm. I walk around each day like a good little homesteader and I do my good little homesteader chores and bake my inedible little homesteader bread, and I swallow the rising panic that threatens to choke me out with each waking breath.

Do you hear me Lord? Do you see me standing here, terrified? Not laughing?

Hello, Lord? Could you explain what I'm supposed to learn, right now?

Hey, Lord! Just wanted to bother you for a quick sec. See, I'm having some trouble with my assignment? And I was wondering if you could give me something else to do instead?

—

The Lord does not reply.

—

There are no good days anymore, it seems. Only bad ones. When I tilt my face to catch the sunlight, I don't feel His breath on my face. I don't feel anything at all. I'm starting to feel like a woman who has been knocked up by a man who will no longer answer her calls.

It's a test, I remind myself. For days, my mind has been nervously circling a single question: *What happens if I fail the test?* Except now, when I ask the question, I hear an echo of another one: *What happens if I pass?*

40

ON A WARM DAY IN JUNE, I met Producer Shannon at a coffee shop in town. Our interview was scheduled for the early afternoon. She was already there when I arrived, sitting at a corner table with two coffees. Her hair was colored a bright candy pink, pulled back into two messy pigtail braids. Her nose ring was a stud in the shape of a peace sign.

"I kept it black," she said, pushing my coffee across the table. "I know you only use cream if it's from your own cows."

"Oh," I said, surprised. "Thank you."

It was true, I didn't use factory-farm dairy, but I'd mentioned this preference only once on my Instagram account, and it was over a year ago.

> don't u realize how many people don't have access to this???
>
> Ew is she drinking milk straight outta the udder
>
> Yikes i get that u live on a farm but this is honestly so out of touch
>
> Omg YUM if only I could drink thru the screen!

So Shannon had been paying close attention to me for a while now. She was young, this girl, but she was not a child.

And me? I was thirty years old. *Practically an old maid!* Newly pregnant with our fifth child. *Junebug.* The account had just passed two million followers on Instagram. I'd just begun considering expanding to other platforms. Weeks earlier, I'd issued a callout for a producer position via my Instagram page. I received hundreds of applications. Nearly all of them came from women who looked like me. And then there was Shannon.

When I clicked on her Instagram handle, I was certain there'd been some kind of error. That she'd linked the wrong account in her application or something. But no, there she was, ripped jeans and John Lennon sunglasses, smiling bitchily at the camera, the Brooklyn Bridge stretching wide behind her. The last kind of woman I would expect to want to work with a woman like me.

"So," she said now. "Let's talk about your account." She cupped her coffee in both hands. Leaned forward, a glimmer in her hipster eye. "I think there's something really radical about what you do, Natalie."

I resisted the urge, as instinctual as a spasm, to tell her to call me Mrs. Heller Mills. "Oh?"

"Absolutely. Everyone at my school loves you, you know. They think you're a feminist icon."

For a moment my guard dropped. I leaned back and snorted. "*Really?*"

She laughed. "Hell yeah! I mean, no one I know wants to go spend their one wild and magical life being a shill for some billionaire tech asshole, just so they can get access to shitty healthcare and put away like five dollars a month for their retirement."

"Just so they can breastfeed in a broom closet someday," I added quickly. I was familiar with this game.

Shannon pointed a finger at my chest, dead-on, like a pistol. "Exactly. What they want is what you have, Natalie."

"Which is what?"

She smiled and said softly, "Freedom, of course."

Well then. This was new information. All this time, I'd been under the impression that there were only two kinds of women who followed me: liberal women who hated me and good Christian women who loved me. But now I watched with surprise as a third woman opened the door to my brain and sauntered in: young, radical, educated.

"So I'm—what?" I said. "Some kind of catharsis for girls your age?"

"It's not catharsis," Shannon said. "It's more like a road map." She was speaking with the kind of urgent self-seriousness that only a twenty-year-old can have. "What you're doing on your farm, with the homesteading and

the farm-to-table and the keeping your kids away from technology? Building a business with your husband, and owning *all* the means of production, and running it from the comfort of your house? That's the future, Natalie. That's the way out."

"The way out of what?"

"Oh," she said, like it was obvious. "The maze."

—

That was what Shannon and her friends at school called it. The maze. When they went to a job fair and walked past the consulting booth, the military recruitment booth, the law school booth, they would elbow one another and whisper: *Step right up, one-way ticket into the heart of the maze.* When they sent articles to one another in their group chats, the latest op-ed about the impossibility of affording children as a working mother: *This chick is stuck way deep in the maze.*

Do you know what young women wanted these days?

Not to be a mother or a worker, at least not in any traditional sense. Certainly not to be both.

What they wanted was to do what I had seemingly done: take one step back, and then another. They wanted to backpedal slowly until they were back at the entrance of the maze, and then to turn around and walk away. To say, *I want no part in this*, and then to disappear.

What I didn't say to Shannon: disappearing is an expensive magic trick. Did these girls have the funds to pull it off?

What I said instead was much simpler: "Go on."

—

When I got home to the ranch that day, I turned off the car and sat in silence, looking up at my own house, trying to see it through Shannon's eyes. What had she said about mazes, again? The delivery had been so intoxicating, so impossible to believe—already I was having trouble

repeating it to myself. I considered calling Shannon and having her say it to me again, word by word, so I could remember. Instead, I texted her.

You're hired

—

A week after her interview, Shannon showed up at the farm with two big suitcases. "I can't believe I'm here," she kept saying, after I hugged her in the driveway. "I can't believe this place is *actually real*."

I spread my arms out wide, gave a big twirl, then curtsied. I'd been working, lately, on being *whimsical.* From what I understood, this required saying things like *whoopsie daisies,* twirling around in prairie dresses, and throwing my head back and laughing hysterically at things that really weren't that funny. "On behalf of the mountains and the chickens and cows and the kale and the kids," I said grandly, "welcome to Yesteryear Ranch."

"Holy shit," Shannon said, and laughed. "You literally just gave me goose bumps."

I shrugged, gave another half curtsy. "Shall we give you a tour?"

—

The children were still in their homeschooling lesson with Nanny Louise, so the house was quiet as I guided Shannon around. One of the first videos I wanted to tackle with Shannon was an official house tour, and this felt like perfect practice. "It's not that fancy," I said over my shoulder as we walked down the hallway and turned in to the living room, "but it's perfect for our growing family."

Shannon didn't say anything. Her head moved on a swivel as she took in all the angles she'd witnessed through a phone, now fully dimensional in front of her. *Objects in the mirror are closer than they may appear.* "It's so much smaller in real life." She paused, seemed to realize what she said. "I didn't mean in a bad way, I just meant—"

“It’s fine! It *is* a small house.” Deep inside me, buried beneath layers and layers of Online Natalie, my inner voice snarled up at her. *Could you afford something this “small,” Shannon?*

Shannon nodded, her gaze still roving. “We should highlight this more in your content. Consumerism is such a problem, and this is a great message: you don’t need a McMansion to have a big, happy family.”

I nodded sagely. “I hate waste.”

She made a noise of agreement, and my Online Natalie monitors flashed green. I had planned on showing her the nursery next, but it didn’t feel like the right time for Shannon to see the piles of boxes of Yesteryear Ranch merchandise piled up along the walls, the sweatshirts and snow globes and bread-making kits, the traitorous gold stickers that stamped each box: MADE IN CHINA. We’d only just launched the online store, and already we were sold out of every product, receiving angry messages about purchases every day.

> Hi i ordered a snow globe ten days ago and it says it still hasn’t shipped???

I just needed someone—Shannon, perhaps—to do the packaging and mailing. Later, though. Definitely later. For now: “Let’s drop your bags off!”

—

I showed Shannon the apartment above the barn, where she would be living. “The homeschooling room is on one side of the hallway, and your bedroom is on the other side.” We reached the top of the stairs and turned into the bedroom. “Here we are!” I opened the door, and Nanny Aimee looked up at me from the lower bunk bed. “Nanny Aimee,” I said, “this is Shannon.”

“Hi,” Nanny Aimee said.

I paused. A strange little girl was standing by the bed, playing with Nanny Aimee’s shoes. “Mama,” she said when she saw me.

Right. Of course. That was my little girl, Jessa. *Growing so quickly these days!* I just didn't recognize her because of the location—and her hair, it was braided differently—and well—

Pregnancy brain!

I dropped to a crouch and spread my arms wide. "Hello, darling girl!"

She performed perfectly, crashing into my arms in an explosion of giggles. I gave her a big hug and a kiss, ignoring the smell—she needed a diaper change, or maybe a bath—and then sent her toddling back to Nanny Aimee. I stepped inside the room and gestured at the empty set of bunk beds opposite the nannies. My smile fell another fraction; the nannies were supposed to have made the bed already, but a pile of linens was still bundled on the mattress.

"Sorry," Nanny Aimee said, reading my thoughts. "I was just about to do that. I was just busy with Jessa. She took a huge poo, and then I got her all changed, and then she did it again! Didn't you, Jessy? Do we have to clean you again? Yes we do!"

Nanny Aimee was a resounding disappointment of a worker. She'd shown up at the house months earlier, wearing a tube top and jean shorts, all gum-snapping and vocal fry. When I called the agency to complain, they told me they were running short on options. No one wanted to work these days.

"I didn't know you have two nannies." Shannon gave a nervous laugh. "I didn't even know you had *one*."

Nanny Aimee was looking up at us with a cool, unblinking stare, like a cat blinking lazily out from their sunlit perch. "We cleared out the bottom three drawers for you," she said and pointed at the bureau. Jessa copied her, grinning and pointing. There was, I was noticing now, a smear of dried poop on her chubby little thigh.

Shannon didn't say anything. She was staring at the bunk.

"Can you clean Jessa up?" I said to Nanny Aimee. "We'll be right back." Then I shut the door so Shannon and I were alone in the hallway. "Is everything okay?"

“It’s just.” She gestured helplessly at the closed door. “It’s a really small room. I don’t even know if my bags will fit.”

“Well,” I said. A thin smile spread wide across my face. Not a choice so much as a reflex. A drawing and quartering of the face. “The thing is, Shannon: I’m paying you a great salary.” I wasn’t, but what does a nineteen-year-old know about wages? “I’m not even charging you for room and board. You’re saving everything you make.”

“Right,” Shannon said, after a moment.

“You’re going to love the nannies, anyways. You probably just made two future best friends.”

Forward, Online Natalie roared.

“Let’s go see the fields!”

—

It was midday, the sun blazing overhead, as Shannon and I marched up to the far paddocks, where Caleb was working. “You’ll want to wear bug spray all the time,” I said to Shannon, my voice nearly drowned out by the drone of cicadas. “This place is tick city in the summertime. We keep canisters of deet in the barn that you can use.”

“I thought you’re against chemicals?”

“Caleb,” I called, when we reached the top of the hillside. He was motoring along in our new tractor. He killed the engine when he saw us. As he hopped out and began to cross the field to us, I turned to Shannon, smiling wide. “Well? What do you think?”

What Shannon was supposed to say next was some version of *I can’t believe how much land you own*, or *I can’t believe how beautiful this place is.* Instead, she stared with a distracted expression at the far end of the field, where the Home Depot workers were standing by a John Deere trailer, taking their lunch break.

Too much time passed. My smile hung on my face like a hangnail.

“It’s quite an operation,” she said finally.

Then Caleb was there, saying hello with a big cowboy grin. “Nice to meet you, Brooklyn,” he drawled. I swallowed the urge to punch him in the mouth.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s actually Shannon?”

Caleb’s expression faltered. He dropped the accent. “I know that, I just—it’s a nickname. Like, big-city girl? You’re from Brooklyn, aren’t you?”

“Oh,” Shannon said. “Ha. Yeah. I get it now.” She kicked the dust, squinted up at the sun.

“Bet you’re happy to be out of New York, anyways,” Caleb said. “What with all those rats.”

“Excuse me?”

“There are more rats in New York than there are people. That’s why everyone’s sick all the time. The rats.”

“I’m not sure I—”

“Well, I’m sure you know that New Yorkers have historically had terrible oxygen flow to their brains. That’s why the population is so dumb. For years, scientists couldn’t figure out *why,* until finally they realized what it was.” Caleb paused meaningfully.

Shannon ventured weakly, “The rats?”

“Exactly. The rats.”

Shannon looked helplessly to me, and I gave her my best we’re-all-God’s-creatures smile. “Caleb has a lot of fascinating little theories about the world! I’m sure he’ll tell you all about them at another time. Now that you’ve met, we should get back to—”

“Can I actually ask a question?”

“Oh.” Absolutely not. “Of course!”

Please, Lord, don’t let her ask about the rats.

“How many people work here?”

Caleb and I looked at each other. “I’d say we’re at about twenty part-time heads,” he said, “give or take, but that changes quite a bit on a seasonal basis.” Good man.

“Wow,” Shannon said. “Interesting.”

Here it was, another moment that should have gone one way—Shannon smiling brightly: *I can't wait to dig in!*—and instead swerved sharply in the opposite direction: she pulled a camera from her bag and pointed the lens at the workers across the field. The metallic sound that followed was deafening: *cla-chink.*

This was when I realized I'd made a mistake.

41

IT'S MID-DECEMBER, I think. A frigid, cloudy, very bad day. I'm at the chicken coop, adding insulation for the ladies. Then I turn around and forget to breathe.

Old Caleb and Abel are walking up the driveway with two other men.

The two men have thick beards, like Old Caleb, and are dressed similarly to him, but are much younger. There it is: a flicker of recognition, followed by a clicking in my mind, a terrible flooding warmth.

I turn back to the thatched roof, heart pounding. My mind feels like an overheating hard drive. A computer with a broken fan. I stuff more hay into the gaps of the rafters, sneaking glances each time I reach down to grab another fistful from the bale.

Glimpse: they're reaching the top of the hill.

Glimpse: they're standing by the house, Old Caleb pointing at the stacks of freshly chopped wood.

Glimpse: they're walking toward me.

I turn around and don't look back. I feel, deep in my gut, the urge to let out a bloodcurdling scream. I want to run from them, and also to throw myself at them.

I bite down on my lip until my mouth tastes like a penny. The men walk past the coop without addressing me. Only one of them, the taller one, looks at me. His eyes linger on my face, his expression completely blank.

It feels like my brain is splitting in two.

If this was a test from the Lord: the tests are getting harder to withstand. If it wasn't a test: I might have just missed my only chance at freedom.

I lean over and vomit the morning’s breakfast.

42

THE MORNING AFTER Shannon's arrival, I woke up and knew I had to fire her.

I'd barely slept the night before. I couldn't stop replaying all the expressions that had flashed across her face throughout our tour: the disappointment when she muttered, *It's smaller than it looks online;* the confusion when she said, *How many people work here?* That damning, double-stutter click of the camera as she captured the workers on film. Like the sound of a prison gate locking shut: *cla-chink.*

—

By the time I made it downstairs, I was running through the goodbye speech in my head. *Unfortunately it isn't a good fit. Of course, we'll pay for your ticket home. Oh, and can you give me that roll of film before you go?*

Then I turned the corner into the kitchen and stopped short. Shannon was eating breakfast with the children and the nannies.

"Good morning," I said.

The chorus swelled lazily in response. *Morning, Mama.*

I walked around the table, my hand carrying across the heads of my children. Usually it comforted me, moving through my morning routine, settling into the shape of Online Natalie—but today the shape felt wrong, too tight, like a sweater put through the wrong wash cycle. I rolled my shoulders back instinctually, as if I might shrug the shape of myself into proper place, but still, I felt like I had my neck through an armhole.

“Shannon,” I said, “you don’t have to wake up this early! You aren’t meant to start work until nine.”

Too sharp. Too high. Lower your voice.

Shannon pointed to the kitchen sink, where the camera equipment was already set up. “I was thinking that we should try to film earlier in the mornings, if we can. Better light.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t think I’ll be ready in time for that today.”

“No worries! We can just do a run-through. Very informal.”

She smiled at me. I smiled at her.

“Okay!” I said finally. “And your accommodations were all right?”

“Oh! You were actually totally right. Aimee and Louise are amazing. We stayed up all night talking about everything.” She exchanged a flirty little look with the nannies, who both suddenly seemed to be swallowing laughter. “Truly,” Shannon added, giving Nanny Louise a cat-ate-the-canary look, “I feel like I’ve been living here for years.”

—

I got dressed and came back downstairs, by which point the children were off to their homeschooling lesson and Shannon was standing in the kitchen, alone. “Why don’t we try some bread content?”

I reached for the sourdough starter.

“Turn your chin ten degrees toward me.”

I paused. It hadn’t occurred to me until now that hiring a producer would mean taking orders from them, too. I rotated my chin ten degrees, like a marionette doll, expression frozen in concentrated delight.

“That’s good,” Shannon murmured. “Now glance out the window when you can, like you’re looking for the kids. Just a quick little look—yes, that’s perfect. Soft smile, then maybe a small frown, because it’s *hard*, what you’re doing, it takes *effort*…”

I looked out the window at nothing. Smiled at the invisible children. Returned my gaze to the mixing bowl and sighed happily.

“Keep going,” Shannon whispered. “Just like that.”

—

Shannon showed me a rough cut of the footage a few hours later. The video was exactly like the other ones I'd done in recent months, only 20 percent better. Somehow, the light in the room looked rarefied, almost grainy; you could see flecks of dust floating through a stripe of sunbeam, my fingers moving in and out of the light. It looked like how piano sounded; soft, natural, meticulous.

"What do you think?"

"It's really good," I admitted.

"I thought you'd say that," she said coolly.

There was that strange sensation again: the feeling of sitting on a seesaw with this young woman. Up, down, up.

—

I didn't fire her that day, obviously. The next morning, I woke up certain again that she needed to leave, and again, she was armed with an idea by the time I arrived downstairs.

"Want to film some content by the chicken coop?"

We went out to the chicken coop. I muttered my usual *Hello, ladies,* and she said, "Why don't you say that on camera?"

I looked at her. "Say what?"

"What you just said. *Hello, ladies.*"

"You don't think that's a bit…kitsch?"

Shannon shrugged. "I think it would perform well."

It did. It performed very well.

—

The next day, Shannon said we should try to incorporate the children into content more often. "Your baking tutorials are so good, but I think we could add a more organic, homey element if the children were actually involved, rather than floating around in the periphery."

“It’s not going to work,” I said. “I’ve tried.”

I explained to Shannon how ungovernable the children were whenever I tried to film them, how quickly Clementine’s mood would shift from interested to bored to infuriated, how she had once thrown an entire bowl of flour across the kitchen, causing the ceramic to shatter.

“Let’s try it,” Shannon said. “Humor me. Just once.”

“All right,” I said. “Just once.”

And so we recorded a mother-daughter blueberry-pie-from-scratch tutorial, and I did my best to keep a smile pushpinned on my face while Clementine and Jessa cawed and cackled and screeched around me like a pair of crows.

“Do you see?” I said desperately over the sound of Jessa’s sudden wails. (*She* wanted to crack the egg, but Clementine had already cracked it.) “This has been a disaster.”

“Actually, I think we’re getting great footage,” Shannon said. “Keep going.”

—

Again, she was right: the next morning, a twenty-second edit of peaceful motherhood arrived in my inbox. It was almost infuriating, how much better Shannon’s videos were than mine. I’d thought my photo and video content was well-done, but now I could see how amateur it really was. A conundrum, indeed: I wanted the world to see Yesteryear Ranch through my eyes, but everything looked better through Shannon’s gaze than my own.

—

At the end of the week, we pulled Clementine out of her homeschooling lesson after lunch so that we could use her in a picnic video on the hillside, a perfect mother-daughter moment right as the afternoon light went drippy and golden. At first, Shannon had hesitated at the thought of taking Clementine from class. “Doesn’t she need to…learn, or whatever?”

Three months from now, I would twitch at a comment like this. I would physically struggle to resist the urge to laugh and say lightly, *Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black, little miss dropout?*

But on that day I didn't think twice. "It's totally fine," I said breezily. "Really, the children get so much one-on-one attention that all of them are testing years ahead. If Clementine ever went to public school, she'd be several grades beyond her peers."

—

It would be wrong to say Clementine was a disobedient little girl. She was very obedient, she did her chores and helped her younger siblings and rarely complained, except for the one request she refused to ever accommodate for me: a smile. But with Shannon that afternoon, Clementine smiled nonstop. She even laughed at some of Shannon's jokes. The footage from that day would become some of our most evergreen content, repurposed again and again: somehow, Shannon filmed us at an angle to make it look like Clementine was smiling and laughing with me.

—

After filming was done we sat on the hillside and ate cheese and crackers, watching the sun go down. At one point Clementine stood up to go collect wildflowers; she wanted to make a crown. While she plucked stems nearby, I turned to Shannon and said, "You thought we did all this alone, didn't you?"

She turned to look at me. "Yeah, I did."

I tried to give her a reasonable look. A you-couldn't-understand-because-you're-not-yet-a mother look. "No one can do all of this alone."

"But," she said, then stopped.

"Go ahead. You can say it."

"*But,*" she said again, "you intentionally make it look like you do all this alone."

I'd been waiting for this moment.

Lights, camera—

"I've never said that we don't have help. Really, I don't think that what I do on the ranch, which is to show the best parts of it, is any different than what anyone else does on social media. It's a highlight reel, Shannon. I never said it wasn't."

Again, she was silent. My sensors flashed green. I continued. "There are millions of women out there who rely on me now, and I take that responsibility very seriously."

"But you're lying to them."

"It's not a lie. It's just also not the full truth."

"And why don't you give them the full truth?"

"Because they don't want it. And anyways, I give them other things they need even more."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"A temporary escape."

The girls Shannon went to school with, the ones who loved me? They would never be able to do what I did. They would never be able to leave the maze. I knew it, and now Shannon did, too. But what I, what *we*, offered them, was the next-best thing: little moments of vicarious living. Brief bursts of imagining. *This is what it would be like if you were as rich and beautiful and hardworking as me. This is what it will never be like for you.* I knew that this was the true offering, deep in my bones, because it was my relationship to the account, too. Vicarious. Imagined. Unattainable.

Attain it, Online Natalie purred.

We were quiet for several minutes. Shannon didn't say anything else, but it was obvious she was thinking about what I'd said, deciding if she agreed. Clementine came back with a handful of flowers and plopped down between us, shifting her butt until she was leaning against Shannon's chest. "I'm going to make you a flower crown, Shannon."

"That sounds fab," Shannon said.

"Should we film it?" I said hopefully, but Shannon just shrugged. "We've got plenty of footage. This can just be for fun."

"When are you going to have children, Shannon?" Clementine asked.

“Hm. I don’t know if I’ll have them, but if I do, it probably won’t be for a very long time.”

Clementine and I both frowned. “That’s really silly,” Clementine said. “All women become mothers when they grow up.”

“Actually, Clem, they don’t.”

When had Shannon started calling my daughter Clem? And what was this crap about childless women?

If she noticed my discomfort, she didn’t react to it. “There are just so many things that I want more, right now. Like travel. I’ve never seen the Pacific Ocean. I want to visit California and drive Highway One, maybe live in one of the towns along the coast.”

“Ocean,” Clementine said suddenly, looking at the two of us. “What’s that?”

The conversation stilled to silence.

“Clem,” I said lightly, trying on Shannon’s nickname, “I’m sure Nanny Louise has told you about oceans. They’re big bodies of water.”

“No,” Clementine corrected. “That’s a river.”

“But there’s more than one kind. You know what we’re talking about. Of course you do! Atlantic, Pacific, Indian…” I trailed off. I couldn’t remember the names of the other ones. There were other ones, weren’t there? Seven? Or was that the continents?

My eleven-year-old daughter gave me a look of blank distrust. Then she looked back up at Shannon. “What’s an ocean, Shannon?”

“Well,” Shannon began awkwardly, “I suppose it’s where all this land ends, and the water begins…”

As she went on, I found my gaze spinning upward to the sky, the madly blazing sun as it fell behind the mountains, and in the far distance, a pair of eagles circling lazily over something dead.

—

It was like that for a year. Up, down, up. On more mornings than I could count, I woke up and thought immediately, before anything else, *I should*

fire her. And on just as many evenings, I lay in the darkness while my husband snored beside me and thought, *Why hasn't she quit?*

The only conclusion I could come to was this: that despite all our differences and little tensions—in spite of the little white lies that ran through my farm like intersecting waterways—she genuinely liked me. Or wanted to like me.

And why didn't I fire her?

Lord.

I wanted her to like me, too.

—

Our fifth child, Junebug, entered the world on a cool autumn day. It was my first homebirth. I felt unbelievably calm. I was on all fours in an inflatable pool, warm water sloshing around my knees while I swayed and groaned, the children watching me silently from across the room. I reached a hand out, and both the midwife and Caleb rushed toward me. "No," I moaned lowly, slapping their hands away. "Not you. Shannon. I need Shannon."

Caleb ran to get Shannon from the barn. She arrived looking terrified. "What? What is it? How can I help?"

Another contraction rolled through me. What did the Bible say on childbirth? Something about women needing to suffer. Something about earning your pain.

"Get the camera," I said through gritted teeth. "Film it."

43

IT SHOULDN'T MATTER that there are other people in Yesteryear. I know that. I know I shouldn't care; that I should stay focused on my own chores, on being a dutiful mother and wife and servant of the Lord.

But the thing is: I can't. They've come around another two times since I first saw them, that pair of young men. They're helping Old Caleb replace some areas of rotting fence.

I wish more than anything that they'd leave. I remind myself that I was sent to this place by the Lord Himself and therefore it's only the Lord Himself who will retrieve me.

Still. I can't help but look.

44

THE DAY DOUG ANNOUNCED his presidential run, the atmosphere at the rally felt less like an official political event and more like a carnival, or maybe one of those costumed Elizabethan fairs. There were vendors walking around shouting their offers of popcorn and hot dogs and crushed ice. A long line of pop-up souvenir shops bisected the parking lot and the event space. Every shop offered a different collectible version of my father-in-law: Christmas ornament Doug, T-shirt Doug, dinner plate Doug, bumper sticker Doug. By the look of it, all the shops had copyrighted the same official photo of Doug, which featured him looking much tanner and younger than he did in real life. Just beyond the souvenir stands, a long line of women and men were waiting for the porta-potties. One woman was wearing plastic sunglasses fashioned to spell out *DOUG,* her eyes behind the *O* and the *U*; another man wore a shirt with a message in big block letters: CIVIL WAR IS COMING.

The man's arms were folded. He was making jovial small talk with the DOUG-sunglasses woman in front of him in line. They both looked across the road at something, and I followed their gaze to see a man with a long beard standing on an overturned plastic milk crate, unfurling a poster with a message in all-caps Sharpie: VOTE MILLS TO SAVE THE SOUL OF AMERICA. "*Repent!*" he shouted to the people who walked past. "For He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed—and that man, ladies and gentleman, is Doug Mills!"

The woman in the DOUG sunglasses whooped. A group of nearby men in matching motorcycle jackets gave a round of cheers, one man adding,

“Hell yeah, brother!”

The man on the milk crate began to shout about the coming plague. “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed! Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom…All these are the beginning of birth pains!”

There was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see Shannon. “Hey,” she said. “That bathroom line was *crazy.* The kids are almost done.” She followed my gaze to the man with the poster, who was now shouting about heroin in the drinking water. “Are Doug’s rallies usually like this?”

“No,” I murmured. “This is new.”

At that moment, a young mother walked past with her teenage daughter, and I caught half of their conversation. “—well, and if you think about what it means to be living in a city overrun with infected rodents…”

Oh.

I cast my gaze across the crowd with renewed awareness. It felt like I was stepping carefully through the small portal of Caleb’s computer screen and into the strange, alternate universe of his chat rooms. So this was who my husband was talking about when he mentioned his online buddies. So these were the things they spoke about: locusts and frogs and rats. A great cleansing plague.

It looked like Doug had finally found messaging that resonated.

Shannon said, “Did you hear what that woman just said about rats?”

—

I breastfed Junebug in the VIP bathroom, then handed her off to Nanny Louise. The nannies left with the children to mill around outside, and Shannon and I returned to the VIP room, which was filled to capacity. Each of Doug’s sons was here, along with their families. Doug had his arms opened to me, and I glided into his embrace. He gave me a tight hug, then clapped me hard on the back, enough to make me cough. I stepped back and

looked at him curiously. He'd gotten a facelift, it seemed, and his teeth—had Doug gotten veneers?

"Great to have you," he said strangely. "All of you, really." He spun in a low circle. "Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful." He pointed at Amelia. "You hungry, sweetheart? Need a water?"

Amelia was sitting in a folding chair in a tangerine-colored pantsuit that looked two sizes too big. She looked like a shriveled-up piece of fruit. Puckered and collapsing inward. "I'm fine," she rasped. For a moment I saw not a face but a skull, a pile of bones beneath a worn canvas of skin. She looked like she was starving to death; like she was weeks into a hunger strike, but her warden had yet to notice.

"Jonathan," Doug called to one of the security guards by the door. "Get Amelia some water."

I'd never seen Doug like this. So nervous. So—anticipatory. Not that I didn't understand. After years of preparation, Doug was about to step into the skin of another person, and he was going to have to hold that costume together—not just for the rest of the night, but for the next year. The next five years, if he won. The next nine, if you factored in a second term. It occurred to me that I might be the only person in the room who understood that feeling as acutely as Doug did. I wondered if he would survive the ordeal or die of exhaustion from the effort.

"It's a big day, Dad," one of the brothers said. "An exciting day."

"The beginning of a great adventure," one of the wives added.

Doug nodded slowly at his boys, his face frozen in a joyless grin. "Big day," he repeated. "Absolutely. And you know: we've done it all, the testing and the surveys and the studies, and we know it's the right time." His lips stretched wider. "And if it isn't—"

"Don't say that, Dad," two brothers said at once.

But Doug seemed not to have heard them. He sat down with a groan. He looked suddenly like he might throw up.

The room was still.

"Really," Doug said suddenly, "it doesn't matter if I win or I lose. Same organizations funding everyone. Creeps. I told them, if you want to see me

win, give me all the money, but that's not how they work. They hedge their bets." He sniffed. "I'll get what I want, either way. The only difference is if I win, I'll get the credit."

"Dad, you're going to win," Caleb said.

Doug looked up, about to say something, and then he froze. He was looking at me. No—he was looking at Shannon. "Are you—are you filming me right now?"

She was standing there with her arms folded, her phone tucked flat against her chest in a decidedly strange way. Her face went white. "Of course not."

"You are," Doug said incredulously. "You're filming me."

In the next moment, half a dozen bodies lunged toward Shannon, toward me. In a flash of instinct, or maybe possession, I stepped forward too, so that I was standing directly in front of Shannon, blocking the path. "She works for me," I hissed. "She films all the time. The footage isn't going anywhere."

At that moment, a young man in a suit stepped into the room. "Sir? They're announcing you in five."

Doug stood up. His face was set in an expression of grimly terrified determination. "All righty," he said quietly. He looked like he was preparing for the electric chair.

As the final round of *good lucks* to Doug ensued, I flashed a look at Shannon. She mouthed to me, *It's fine*.

Right as Doug was leaving the room, Amelia said from the corner, "Knock 'em dead, sweetheart!" Doug threw up a hand in response, and then he was gone, and all of us were standing there, like a storage room of puppets, eyes blinking wide at one another while we waited for the sudden crush of dark.

—

"America!" Doug roared a minute later, his voice echoing through a thousand speakers. "How long have we waited for a new dawn?"

—

Later that night, news panels and editorial boards alike would agree: it was the kind of flawless moment that reinvigorates a dying campaign. Doug was a roaring triumph. Exactly the kind of man to put this country back on track. And his family—weren't they lovely?

> Natalie I just saw u at your dad's campaign rally and youare so pretty in person!
>
> OBSESSED WITHTHE MILLS FAMILY OMG
>
> Do u have anything to say about ur father-in-law's speech tonight???
>
> Wait is she a nazi lol
>
> It seems like anyone can be called a nazi these days for anything!!!! No one can just celebrate traditional femininity anymore without being called a nazi!!!! You cannot acknowldege the basic facts of the invazion of our borders with out sum fucking whore saying youre a—

—

Two hours later, we were walking back to the car, moving in a slow march along with the crowd, people with folding chairs and soup thermoses and rolled-up Confederate flags tucked under their armpits. "That was terrifying," Shannon said quietly next to me.

I laughed crisply. "You're telling me. Try being legally bound to him."

"No. Natalie, that *speech* was terrifying. I mean, I know your father-in-law is…intense, I always knew he was intense, but that was—don't you think that was different?"

I looked behind me. Caleb was walking with his brothers, the excitement of the night having afforded a brief moment of shared camaraderie with them. The nannies were about a hundred feet away from us with the kids. Clementine was getting a piggyback ride from Aimee. Louise had Junebug strapped to her chest and was saying something to one of the littles—I couldn't see through the crowd—and from her expression, I could tell that the child was crying.

"Natalie."

I turned back to face Shannon. “What?”

“Tell me what you’re thinking! About”—she gestured wildly here—“all of this!”

I sighed. Tried to think back on the speech. Something something coastal cities. The world, so clearly losing its way. Nuclear families disintegrating, and the children—*the children,* my mother gasped in memory, *the children, the children!*—and the women, and certainly the men, but Doug had spoken so quickly, and the speaker system, echoing and reverberating in on itself, had warped everything so quickly. *America,* Doug roared in my head still. *America, America—how long have we—how long till we—America—oh, where are You?*

It was a combination of a thousand conversations I’d heard throughout my life. The only difference, in my mind, was that it had been dumbed down a bit, and maybe sharpened at the tip.

“He’s going to win, Natalie,” Shannon said, when I didn’t say anything. “You do realize that, right? That he’s going to win?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a performance, Shannon. It’s political theater. Not real.”

“How is a political election not real?”

“I don’t mean *that,* I just mean”—I gestured at the crowd around us—“all of this. The showmanship. The bravado.”

“Do you honestly think there are no consequences to performance?”

“Listen. You’ve known from the very start who my father-in-law is—”

“Right,” she snapped, “but the person I haven’t known is you.”

I paused. Looked at her.

“These people are talking about the same bullshit Caleb talks about,” Shannon said. “All that crap about rats. And then what Doug said onstage, about returning to the ‘days of Yesteryear.’ He was practically quoting your Instagram captions word for word.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said immediately, and I didn’t. I’d noticed how Doug was changing his messaging to fit the atmosphere of Caleb’s forums, of course I’d noticed that—but I hadn’t

noticed, hadn’t even considered, that he would ever be plagiarizing from me.

He couldn’t possibly.

“I’ve never been more certain in my life about anything,” Shannon said. She was frustrated now, speaking more loudly. A few people nearby were starting to whisper and point in our direction as she added, “This is *bad*, Natalie. This is *wrong*.”

Calm her down, Online Natalie intoned, *de-escalate*, right as a teenage girl said behind me, “Ohmigod, that’s freaking Yesteryear Ranch!”

My stomach turned. I was exhausted. This had already happened twenty or so times tonight. Still, I rearranged my expression, then turned around to face another fan, my sensors flashing red. *Battery low.*

Hello! Yes—oh, you’re too kind—thank you so much for—no, thank you *for—*

When I turned back around, Shannon was gone. I was alone in the crowd, more and more people recognizing me, saying my name—*It’s Yesteryear Ranch!*—asking for a picture, touching my hands and my arms and my waist, closing in—

“Excuse me,” I said brightly, my throat closing with fear, “if I could just —I really just need to find my children—”

—

A lesson it had taken me much longer to learn: sometimes the love of strangers is much more terrifying than the hate.

—

I hadn’t realized how many parking lots there were at the rally, and I got lost for fifteen minutes. By the time I saw the van parked halfway across the correct parking lot, I was teary-eyed from so much attention, so many grabbing hands. My body felt sore to the touch. I was half-panicked and half-relieved about Shannon’s disappearance. Maybe it was for the best, the relieved half of my brain suggested. I’d been wanting to fire her since she

arrived, and surely we could find another producer of her skill level. But the panicked half of me railed back: she had complete control over our content by then, not just password access to the account itself, but access to all our scheduling software, our business email, our photo-creation files. She was capable of locking me out of my own account. She could post a message, or a video. She could ruin my life in five seconds. A handful of clicks.

She would never do that.

But technically speaking, she could.

Then I saw Shannon seated in the middle row, already buckled, arms folded while the nannies buckled the kids in all around her.

"Shannon," I said quietly, leaning against the open car door. "Can we talk?"

She unbuckled herself and crouch-walked past me. "Excuse me," she muttered. "I'm feeling carsick." She crawled over the median and into the passenger seat, where I usually sat. Caleb gave her a surprised look but didn't say anything.

"All right," Nanny Louise said from the back seat. "We're good to go."

I hesitated. Should I tell Shannon to get out of my seat? No. Too confrontational. I crawled into the front row of seats, next to the nannies. As Caleb started the engine, Shannon turned to look at him, her face silhouetted by the cheap yellow light of the parking lamps overhead. "Caleb, will you tell me more about the forums?"

His face brightened in the darkness. It was the first moment all night that anyone had asked him for anything. "What do you want to know?"

45

"I THINK WE SHOULD INVITE the neighbors for dinner," Mary says. "We never offer them a meal, do we? It's not very polite."

It's evening. I'm folding clothing by the fire. Mary is chopping potatoes for dinner. Or rather, she's supposed to be chopping potatoes for dinner. What she's actually doing, when I look up, is staring out the kitchen window. Watching the men work on the fence. Her eyes follow the taller of the two neighbors as he hammers away. Her hands are frozen mid-chop on the cutting board, index finger paused along the slender edge of the knife. The expression on her face is not the expression of a tired, hardened houseworker, like I'm used to seeing. It's the expression, I realize slowly, of a girl with a crush.

Such open longing on her face. And from Mary, who runs this household with the cold discipline of a nun. A giddy little thread runs through me. *Mary has a crush!*

In another life, I would tease her. *Mary and Mr. Bearded Homesteader, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G.* In another life, she would blush and laugh. She would say, *You're* so *embarrassing*, *Mom.*

In this life, I hear myself say gently, "You're far too young for marriage, Mary," and she whips her head around and looks fiercely at me. "Did I say marriage, or did I say dinner?"

She storms out the door before I can respond. I watch through the window as she walks halfway to the field, then stops, calling to them from fifty feet away. The men all hesitate. Old Caleb says something to Mary.

She points to the distant dark clouds by the mountains. She's making a case for bad weather.

Mary has a crush. A gradual warmth fills my heart. Mary would make an excellent mother and wife.

I'm enjoying this rare rush of organic happiness, when one safe thought —*Mary is a very good woman*—leads to a dangerous one: a good woman eventually marries and has a family of her own.

Which means Mary might leave one day.

No—Mary *will* leave one day. One day soon. After all, good Christian women tend to marry young.

We are two women living under the same roof, and yet we find ourselves in completely different labyrinthine structures. In order to please the Lord, Mary must leave this place to become the wife and mother of another household. Maeve, too. And in order to please the Lord, I must always stay.

Except I cannot imagine surviving a single day at this ranch without the girls.

The door slaps open. "It's decided," Mary says. "The neighbors will stay for dinner."

—

The men are young and quiet, disturbingly polite. They eat bent over their bowls, slurping stew quickly, not letting a drop onto the table. While they eat, I watch them closely. Most of their faces are covered by large, bushy beards, but their eyes are familiar. There's that buzzing feeling in my head; the creaking whine of an overheating engine.

I would really like for this dinner to be over.

The problem is that Mary, clearly, would really like for this dinner to last forever. She has orchestrated it such that we are eating our food across multiple courses—first the biscuits, then the soup, then the pie—and seems intent on learning every detail of the ins and outs of woodworking. It is, in theory, a beautiful thing to witness: a teenage girl unfurling herself like a

flower, desperate to feel the warmth of a man's attention on her face. But this is not theoretical, and so I stare at my stew with a decomposing sensation in my stomach. At one point, I glance up and see Old Caleb, watching Mary with an expression that mirrors how I feel. Disturbed.

A crescendo of fear rises in me.

I set my fork down and look at the taller one. "How's the soup?"

I feel Mary look at me. I don't look at her. Nor do I look at Old Caleb, though I can feel him looking at me, too. This is the first thing I've said at dinner in a long time, besides *please, thank you, no, thank you, yes.*

"It's delicious," the taller neighbor says. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Where is your farm, anyways?"

The taller neighbor's eyes flash with something. "Down the hill."

"Which hill?"

The table is dead quiet now. Maeve is using her spoon to push a single pea around in her bowl. The boys are staring at their empty plates. I can't see Mary's expression, but in my periphery I can feel her energy, a furious vibrating.

"About an hour's walk," the taller neighbor says finally.

"And what comes after that?"

"Rest of the world, I s'pose." He gives a nervous laugh. The shorter one joins in, and I direct my gaze at him. "What's so funny?"

The shorter one stops laughing. "Ma'am?"

"Who are you, really?" The question comes out before I can stop it. And suddenly it's there, floating over the table, for all of us to see. That's all it takes: four words, a single question, for a lifetime of faith to snap.

"Ma'am—"

"I'm being held here against my will. This man isn't my real husband. These children aren't my real children. I was kidnapped. Taken from my home. *Stolen.*"

Silence.

I look wildly around the table, though no one will meet my gaze. "Are you going to help me? Or are you part of the group who are keeping me here?"

There it is, the crescendo of my life. Gone in an instant.

I expect Old Caleb to stand up and drag me, kicking and screaming, to the bedroom, and methodically beat me to death. When that doesn't happen, I expect him to slam his fists on the table and say, "That's enough." But he does neither. He doesn't do anything. He just stares at me with a strange expression on his face.

The taller neighbor looks to Old Caleb. "That chicken coop is coming along nicely, don't you think?"

"It is," Old Caleb says. "It's coming along real nice." He lets out a long, slow sigh. "Mary, would you pass the peas?"

46

AT FIRST, I told myself I was seeing things. I saw Shannon whispering something to Nanny Aimee in the living room, the two of them exchanging a conspiratorial look, and I said to myself: *It's nothing.* I watched her go on long walks with Clementine through the fields and the woods on her weekly day off, and I thought, *How nice!* I clocked her having lunch alone with Caleb on the front porch—first every once in a while, and soon practically daily—and I thought, *Don't think about it.* I saw the way Caleb looked at her when she rolled her eyes and laughed at some dumb thing he said, and I noticed how their fingers sometimes touched when they had lunch, and then I looked the other way.

I ignored all this and more because I needed to, because I was four months pregnant with my sixth child and gaining thirty thousand followers a week; because Shannon was less of an employee, if I was honest, and more like my own two hands; because she could lock me out of my own account if she wanted to; because of the most basic rule of social media, as grounding and essential as the laws of gravity: you cannot fall backward in terms of quality.

For all those reasons and more, it was not a consideration I felt particularly eager to interrogate: why Shannon would suddenly be working so hard to seduce everyone on the ranch but me.

—

It went like this for months. Clementine started talking about oceans and cities. She wanted to go to California. She wanted to see the Pacific. As a form of compromise, I started taking her to Target once a month. Then the nannies came to me one day and asked for a raise, and even though I wanted to slap the lip gloss off their ungrateful little faces, I said yes immediately. *All you had to do was ask!*

And then one day, Caleb walked up to me and said, “Do we really need two nannies?” and I knew another woman had taken full control of Yesteryear Ranch.

—

Still—*mercy*—I didn’t let her go. And then Caleb walked into our bedroom late one night after the final milking of the day (*ha*, I would think later: a milking indeed) and said, “We need to talk.”

47

“WE NEED TO TALK,” Mary says.

She’s standing by my bedside. I groan and pull the quilt higher over my shoulders. You would think the benefit of being stuck on a ranch in the middle of nowhere would be a little bit of peace and quiet, but no. A child is a child is a child. In every world, in every possible scenario, they are programmed to drain you.

Unfortunately for Mary, I’m not in the mood to be drained today. Yesterday was terrible, one of the worst days in recent memory: something got into the chicken coop and killed all but one of the chickens. Abel thinks it was a fox. Noah thinks it was a wolf. Regardless: Captain Eggerton was the lone survivor. When Maeve and I arrived in the morning to collect eggs, the sad little chicken squawk-waddled straight into Maeve’s arms. Poor terrified thing. And Maeve—the way she looked around the mangy coop, the shivering bird in her arms, all the blood and the feathers and bits of guts and muscle reflected in the whites of her eyes—and the scraps of fabric from the custom hats—

I don’t think I’ll forget that look for the rest of my life. Little girls should not be required to be so brave.

Between that, and the dinner with the neighbors, and the realization that Mary is on the precipice of departure: I’ve decided I’m going on strike. Forming a one-woman union with myself. Not leaving bed until prospects improve. I think I have a very good chance of getting my demands met—the demands in question: to be left alone—and I think I can do so without

getting the shit kicked out of me, since Old Caleb is so busy rebuilding the chicken coop right now.

"Maeve is sick," Mary says now.

"She's not sick," I say patiently. "She's mourning. All her friends are dead, Mary. Have a little respect."

"She's been coughing nonstop!"

"Give her one of your strange little tonics, then."

"They're not working. What if she got some sort of infection from the chickens? From all that…blood?"

"That's not a thing," I say, though I have no clue if it is or is not a thing. This bed is fundamentally incompatible with the notion of coziness, but I find if I keep myself warm enough and still enough, I can imagine I'm somewhere else. Buried beneath down comforters at a five-star glamping resort. Yes, that's where I am. Dozing away at some Ritz-Carlton in Montana, not engaging in a conversation about the relative infection rate of poultry blood on a decrepit homestead.

Mary's voice takes on a note of suspicion. "What's wrong with you? Are you sick, too?"

"I'm fine," is all I say. What I am not going to say to Mary: In a few weeks, it will be deep winter, and I will be stuck here. Stuck on this ranch while my belly grows, and grows, and grows, until it's impossible to hide anymore. Which means it's time to go.

—

Sorry, Lord, I tried my best, but I can't do it any longer.

—

Yes. Instead of Mary leaving and me staying, I will jump the gun. It will be me who leaves, and she who will stay.

That's the real goal of my little bed strike, if you want to know the truth: I'm shoring up energy. Thinking through my strategy. Gearing up for one

last great magnificent escape. My ankle is stronger now. The skin is mostly healed. The scarring has marbled into soft, raised veins of pink.

"She's going to be fine," I say. "You take excellent care of her. You don't need my help one bit. You'll do just fine without me."

I roll onto my side and close my eyes, waiting for her to leave.

All of you will do just fine without me when I'm gone.

48

THE NIGHT CALEB TOLD ME what happened with Shannon, I was six months pregnant with our sixth child, and I didn't sleep a wink. I lay there in the darkness, staring at the ceiling while my husband snored peacefully next to me. The sound made smoke pour out of my ears. But of course he slept peacefully. As soon as Caleb told me what was going on, *what was happening under my nose,* he had effectively handed the problem over to me. That was, after all, how all good marriages worked. My husband moved instinctually through the world, he did the things he wanted to do and didn't do the things he didn't want to do, and I—*happy wife, happy life*—trailed beatifically in front of and behind him, sweeping the ground clean for him to walk forward, and then just as quickly sweeping his messy footprints away.

That's what they'd told me to do, right? All those women who came before me? *Be a mother, be a wife, and keep the household clean.*

Liars. Every Christian woman I ever met had been a big fat lying bastard. Lord have mercy on their big fat lying bastard souls.

—

At five, Caleb got up and left to milk the cows. At six, I got out of bed and went to the kitchen, ignoring the children and the nannies at the table. I made an espresso and walked out to the front porch and sat on a rocking chair while the dark sky slowly lightened. The espresso went cold while I sat there, rocking away, a wool blanket draped around my shoulders.

Wondered where my family might have ended up, if not here on this ranch. Those options weren't satisfying, though, not even for a daydream, and so I moved farther back and wondered where I might have ended up, if not with Caleb. A series of silent films played out in front of me. I watched them with vague disappointment. If I didn't marry Caleb, I would've married someone else.

—

Caleb was in love with Shannon. That's what he had told me the night before. He was in love, *truly in love*, for the first time in his life. At that moment in his little monologue, I did flinch, I'll admit that. Not like he noticed. He was too busy landing the final blow. "I'm moving to New York," he said in the darkness, practically breathless with excitement. "I'm starting a new life. She really *challenges* me, you know? She pushes me on my ideas. Our conversations are incredible. Did you know, Natalie, that the rat thing isn't true?"

"Yes," I said softly. "I know that the rat thing isn't true."

He paused. "Why didn't you say anything, then?"

I didn't answer.

"I'm sorry," Caleb said. "I know this will be hard. But it's for the best, Natalie. I really believe that. You and me—we were never meant to be together. You know that, right? I think you've always known that."

Moving to New York. Starting a new life. With Shannon.

I didn't believe it. No way. Not a chance. Caleb wouldn't get more than three miles away from this ranch before a girl like Shannon got sick of him. My husband was like a farm animal, or a very expensive suede couch. Constant work. Diminishing returns. It required relentless sacrifice and impeccable discipline to give your life over to the care and management of a man like that. Shannon was not that kind of woman.

I said, "Is she pregnant?"

Caleb was silent. It was too dark to see his expression, but I could imagine it perfectly, his brow furrowed in contemplation. "I don't know,"

he said finally. “But if she is, I’d like to keep it.”

My husband, everyone! What a prince.

—

At seven on the dot, I knocked on Shannon’s bedroom door and heard a muffled *Come in.* I opened the door to find Shannon standing by her closet in a T-shirt and underwear, hanging a dress in the shared closet. “Oh,” she said. “Sorry, I thought you were one of the nannies.”

I waited, my eyes averted, while she rooted around the clothes in her hamper, found a pair of jeans, and quickly put them on. “What’s up? Is everything okay?”

I stepped inside and shut the door behind me. I smiled softly. “I’m sure you can imagine why I came up here.”

There it was: a whole world spinning in her expression. A long moment passed, and then she sat down on her bed. “Yeah,” she said. “I guess I can.”

“He said you’re moving to New York together.”

“*Christ,*” Shannon muttered. “That is—yikes.”

“My husband is,” I said, and paused. Took a moment to collect myself. Smooth the wrinkles of my fury into place. “He can be gullible. So if there was, at any point—” I paused again. I needed to be careful. Maybe she was recording the conversation. Not likely, but not impossible. “I’m aware that it’s inappropriate. He’s your employer, and so if there was any pressure on your part, or if he promised you any money—”

“He didn’t pressure me.” Her pants were still unbuttoned, a pink bud on the lace of her underwear staring out at me like an evil eye. “Look. It’s…” She exhaled slowly. Tried again. “Okay. Here’s the thing. I was angry after that day at the rally. I just felt so—helpless. And so I kind of made this bet with myself to see if I could make some tiny difference in my own life. Something practical. Something small. And I realized I could try to debunk some of the insanely stupid shit Caleb believes.” Pause. “And then, I don’t know. Things—” Longer pause. “They developed.”

“Developed,” I echoed. “Is that how you would describe it?”

She looked at me. “He said you wouldn’t care.”

I felt sick. I hoped it didn’t show. “And you believed him.”

“Yes,” she said simply. Just: *yes.*

There was a distortion to the scene that wasn’t making sense to me, a great black spot in the center of the lens. From some objective standpoint, it was obvious that I was driving this conversation, but it didn’t feel that way, not at all. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I just can’t believe this is happening right now. I can’t believe I’m talking to a woman who admitted to seducing my husband, and who refuses to show a drop of remorse for it.”

“Seduced.” Shannon looked genuinely surprised. “You think I seduced him?”

“You think you didn’t?”

Shannon brought a hand to her face. She seemed to be having a lot of trouble composing herself. When she spoke, her voice was shaking. “You know, Natalie, I watch the way you treat Caleb. You act like he’s dumb. Like he’s a little kid who needs to be protected or something.” She looked at me. “He’s not as dumb as you think. In fact, I think he’s pretty smart. Look at this.” She made an impatient gesture around the room, but I knew she was referencing the range in its entirety, the barn and the chickens and the cows and the rivers and the mountains and the fences. “He figured out a way for you to create a wet dream for him to live inside, and he found a way for you to do it so that you thought it was your idea. And now he just gets to…*exist,* in this psychotic little snow globe you built just for him. And in spite of all that, you somehow go on thinking that this was your idea. That you’re the one who’s in control.”

“This *was* my idea.”

“Do you know why Caleb likes me so much? It’s because I’m the only person on this farm who treats him like a person, not a project. I listen when he speaks. I ask questions. I call him on his bullshit. I talk to him like I’m a real person. Like *he* is a real person—and if he takes that experience and assumes it to mean we’re in love, then all that proves to me is how bad his understanding of relationships really is.”

I felt a firm awareness that I was standing in the most wondrous moment of my own life. “You don’t feel bad at all. You’re a whore. A homewrecker. And you don’t even care.”

Shannon raised her eyebrows. It was the only part of her expression that moved. “Actually,” she said quietly, “I’m not. This is what I’m trying to say to you, Natalie. In order for me to be a homewrecker, you would have to have a home for me to wreck, and you don’t. You don’t even have a family. What you have is a business. Your nannies know it. Your farmhands know it. Your husband knows it. And someday your kids will know it, too. And do you know what? I think they’re going to hate you for it. I think they’ll never forgive you.”

Lord, God, help me.

“Bitch,” I whispered, almost worshipfully. I felt wild. I didn’t know what to do, how to act, what to say. Online, offline. Neither version of myself was prepared for this moment. My head felt dizzy, out of control, like a spinning top. I heard myself say, like some terrible impersonation of a woman I didn’t know, “Was it fun, Shannon? Was it fun getting fucked by a man who can’t even maintain an erection?”

She was supposed to look horrified, or maybe ashamed. Instead, she looked concerned. “Oh God, Natalie—is he not hard when he has sex with you?”

Whoosh.

—

What’s a lady to do when the floor falls out from under her?

Easy answer: She closes her eyes. Imagines a floor where there isn’t one. Pretends that the twitch in her eye is from lack of sleep.

Worry. Women worry.

Up all night worrying, I suppose!

Good Christian women were great at worrying. They were not, however, good at confrontation. But good Christian men? Born for it.

A good Christian husband and father would have no problem silencing a liar, a cheat, a filthy little whore. A good Christian man would stand up, cross the room in a single swift movement, and slap Shannon with an open palm. *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*…He would wrap his hands around that selfish bitch's neck and manually squeeze the air right out of her selfish bitch throat, and meanwhile, back home, his wife would be cleaning the countertops. Thinking about her husband. Worrying.

—

I really did feel like I was falling. I stared at my hands, trying to make sense of their purchase on Shannon's neck. I was straddling her on the bed, and she was squirming desperately beneath me. Feet kicking. Her skin was hot beneath my sweaty palms. Rosebud underwear fully exposed, now. Jeans halfway down her thighs. From all the movement, I supposed. She was making an awful whining sound, her fingers fluttering frantically around my grip.

My grip.

My grip?

No. That can't be right.

But it was. I was squeezing her throat so hard that my knuckles had gone white. It was the recognition of this fact more than anything that caused me to let go. Shannon gasped. I sat back as her hands went where mine had just been, as if to feel for the grooves my grip had left behind.

—

Morning, y'all! You'll never believe the morning I've had…

—

I got off the bed, readjusting my blouse, folding back the collar, and smoothing the wrinkles away. One of the buttons on my shirt was missing. It must have popped off when I was—or rather when she was—

No matter. It was a misplaced button. A wrinkled blouse. These were small things. The button, the blouse. Each could be replaced.

"You're upset," I said, over Shannon's panicked sobs. "I should give you some space. You mean so much to us, Shannon. Really."

She was saying something, but I couldn't entirely make it out. *This ranch is* something.

"What is it, Shannon?" I said patiently. "What are you trying to say?"

This ranch, this ranch.

"Spit it out!" I said merrily. "I don't have all day."

Shannon looked at me with a terrified, tear-streaked face. "This ranch," she said, with willful slowness, "is cursed."

I allowed myself to think, for one long second: *I should have strangled you to death.* Then I smiled wide, and the thought fell away, like a scrap of paper fluttering over the side of a cliff. "I'm sorry you feel that way. Why don't you take a half day to yourself? Relax. Take a nap. You can meet me in the kitchen at one." I cocked my head like a good boss, a generous boss. *You're welcome.*

I turned to leave, then remembered something. "Oh, I meant to ask: Are you pregnant?"

If she was, then of course we would get rid of it. Take her to another state. Bring her to a doctor we trusted. Doug would know how to find one. It was a shame. *It broke my heart to even think about!* But the Lord would certainly understand.

"No," Shannon said, still rubbing her neck. "I'm not pregnant." She wiped the tears from her cheek, glaring at me like—like—

Like my own daughter, I realized, right as she added softly, "I would never be stupid enough to have a child with that man."

—

By the time I stepped outside and into the sunlight, I was grinning so fiercely my cheeks hurt. A sudden nausea overtook me.

Sometimes it makes me sick, how perfect my—and how good I—

I stepped back, and back again, until I was leaning against the barn wall.

"Mama, what's wrong?"

The world was so bright it felt broken, like a lamp without a shade. I frowned, trying to see straight. Squinted down to see two boys looking up at me. I looked up and past them to find two barns, two houses, two sets of two nannies playing with two sets of children. I blinked rapidly, lifted my head back, and stared up into a pair of snake-eyed suns, which blazed madly from a double-helix sky.

"Mama."

He's not as dumb as you think.

Mama?

They'll never forgive you.

Mamamamamamamamamama—

I would never be stupid enough to have a child with that man.

My gaze spun across the landscape, circling the mountains and the paddocks and the barns and landing back again on my little boys. No, just one boy. My son. Samuel. *The future man of the house!* I tried to smile, swallowed a scream.

—

Mama?

A man may work from sun to sun—

Get up, Natalie.

In the name of the father, son, and homewrecker cunt—

—

Doug answered my call on the seventh ring.

I was sitting in the pantry in the dark, just a sliver of light visible through the crack in the tightly shut door. My back was pressed

uncomfortably against the large plastic containers that held our baking materials. “It’s time for Caleb to run for office.”

“Pardon?”

“He needs to run for office. Immediately.” The thought had occurred to me as I was power walking back to the house. What had Doug said to me nearly a decade earlier, that strange night at the Mill Estate? *He could be pretty perfect for politics some day…one of the few positions of power where it benefits you to underthink.* “He threatened to leave me last night, Doug. He said he’s in love with Shannon.”

“I see,” Doug said, after a long moment. “And what is her status at the present moment?”

It was easy to imagine Doug, standing still in the middle of a bustling office, a big campaign poster behind him (CIVIL WAR IS COMING), a half dozen interns crowded around him in a semicircle, all holding up sticky notes to convey their own deeply urgent messages. Mine, of course, was the most urgent of all the messages, and so his hand was probably lifted to them, a single finger of pause.

“I confronted her this morning,” I said. “It was—it didn’t go well.” A sob escaped me.

“What do you mean exactly?”

“She doesn’t want to run away with him. But there was…there was an altercation.”

“Ah!” he said brightly. “I see what you mean now. That *is* very interesting. Let me just get somewhere more quiet—”

I sat there in the darkness of the pantry, listening as Doug walked impatiently through the office, saying *not now* and *give me five* to the faceless interns still chasing after him. And then there was the click shut of a door, and the white noise of the campaign office was gone, and Doug’s voice was close and shallow in my ear, each word hitting my eardrums with the exaggerated echo of water droplets in a cave. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

“It’s hard to describe.”

“*Find a way to describe it.*”

Through the darkness, I could just see the shadows of the containers on the wall opposite me, lined up in neat little rows. Like jury members. Watching closely.

I'm always being watched, I thought calmly. *I will never get away.* And the Lord—the pressure of His attention was so heavy on the crown of my head, it felt like the earth's gravity had doubled in weight.

"I sort of…hit her," I told the jars, and Him, and Doug. "Or threatened her. Physically. But it wasn't—" I paused, held the phone away from my face, sobbing quietly into the fabric of my sweater. "I tried to—I didn't *mean to*—I put my hands on her, Doug. I put my hands on her neck."

The phone was silent. The jar of brown sugar leaned over to the flour: *You believe the nerve of this bitch?*

The Lord was silent. So was my father-in-law.

"Doug: Are you listening? Are you still there?"

The flour shrugged. *These women have so much free time, they lose their minds.*

"I'm just thinking," Doug snapped. "Let me think."

We, the members of the pantry-jar jury, have come to a unanimous verdict…

I covered my eyes with a cool palm.

Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.

Finally Doug spoke. "Does she come from money?"

I considered what I knew. "She's definitely not poor."

"All right. We'll give her a promotion and a bonus. A new contract."

"I don't think she'll sign it."

"Of course she will," Doug said impatiently. "It usually takes a few of these instances before someone actually decides to leave."

Of course Doug had dealt with this before.

"Listen," he went on. "There's a special election in California right now. A state senator died of cancer, and his wife is running uncontested to fill his seat. We can beat her, easy, but we need to be prepared for the consequences of success. Which brings me to a very important question: Do you think Caleb is ready to win?"

Of course I didn’t. Of course he wasn’t. But I would rather give my idiot husband clearance to our nation’s nuclear codes than find myself a single, homeless, divorced mother of five with a sixth on the way. My reputation destroyed. Barely a dollar to my name.

Well, maybe a few dollars. The last time I’d checked that private account, I had seventy thousand dollars. It was growing so slowly, I could leach only the smallest percentage each month, and I had thought—well, of course the account was for Caleb, I hadn’t ever planned on actually using it, and—

Anyways. There wasn’t enough.

“Yes,” I said. “Caleb is ready to win.”

“Okay. If we do this, we have to move quickly. Head Shannon off. Give her some money and a revised agreement. The nicer we are to her, the more of a headache a lawsuit will seem. In the meantime we have to get Caleb to announce his candidacy in a week or less. We’re walking on thin ice now. We need to listen for the cracks. Speaking of: Do you currently have a PR firm on retainer? Or do we need to get one?”

“I don’t need a PR firm. I know how to represent myself.”

Doug barked out a laugh. “Damn straight you need a PR firm. Do you have any idea how likable you have to be to pull a situation like this off?”

Who the fuck are you to say I’m not likable enough? You horrible man, imbecile, asshole, if it weren’t for me your son would be dead in a ditch somewhere!

There was a long silence on the phone.

It took about ten seconds for me to even realize what had happened. “I’m sorry, Doug. I didn’t mean to say that. It was”—*never meant to be uttered aloud, I don’t know how the wires got so crossed*—“I’m sorry. I’m —I’m just very upset.”

Another long silence. “Well,” he said. “Like I said: you definitely need some help on the PR side.”

I was staring, terrified, into the darkness. That had never happened before—but now that it had, I felt a horrifying awareness of the thin

membrane between what I thought and what I said. Had I broken some irreplaceable seal?

“Talk soon,” Doug said.

“I’m sorry,” I rushed to say again, but my father-in-law had already hung up.

49

MAEVE SITS LIMPLY in my lap as Mary spoons the cherry syrup into her mouth, making sure not to spill a drop on the little girl's clothing. She's so warm in my arms that I've started to sweat from her body heat. She really is quite sick. It takes her a while to swallow that mouthful, and then she rests her head back, clearly exhausted from the effort. Clutched tight in her sweaty grip is a single iridescent feather. The only memory she has of her favorite chicken, Missus Princess Sweater, whose guts were recently strewn across the coop like confetti. I've promised that we will hold a proper funeral when she's feeling better.

May the ladies, every one of them, rest in peace.

Mary sits across from me, watching intently, the fire's reflection flickering in her gaze. "Look at her chest," she says quietly. "Look how labored her breathing is."

Old Caleb and Abel come inside at that moment, Old Caleb looking around at the kitchen with a frown. "Is dinner not ready?"

"Maeve is sick," Mary says. She's on the verge of tears. "She can barely breathe."

"Come here, Maevie," Old Caleb says. "Let me feel your forehead."

Can't you come to her? I nearly snap. But I bite my tongue, and so Maeve slips off my lap and walks slowly over to Old Caleb, who picks her up and sets her on his lap at the table. She rests her head against his chest, staring blankly at me in a way that makes it clear she isn't seeing me at all. There's a sickening feeling in my chest.

Is it possible to die on this ranch?

I can’t imagine it: anyone in this family dying. Would the family have a funeral? Would Old Caleb nail a pile of wood slats together to make a tiny coffin, himself? Then my gaze drops to my own hand, resting softly on my stomach. The image jolts me. If birth is possible in this world, then surely so is death.

What if death is the only way out?

Old Caleb presses the back of his hand to her forehead, the way I did minutes earlier. “She’s got a fever,” he says, as if this is revelatory information. “She’ll sweat it out.” He rustles her hair fondly, then sets her back down on the floor. She sits there by his feet, pink-faced and blank-eyed, like a little rag doll. “She’ll feel better in a few days.”

“It’s already *been* a few days,” Mary and I say simultaneously. She looks at me in surprise.

—

Here’s the thing: If anyone in this family should be able to leave this ranch, it should be me. I cannot abide by any other outcome. Mary cannot leave before I do, and neither can Maeve.

I need to go, and soon. But I can’t stop thinking about Maeve, with her labored breathing, and Mary, with her terrified eyes. I can’t leave them alone right now. It’s not right.

When Old Caleb steps outside to get more firewood, I look to Mary. I glance over at the boys, who are now sitting at the table, trying to comfort Maeve with made-up stories about the monsters they battled today, giants and Indians and evil spirits, *pow pow!* I lower my voice so they can’t hear me. “If I were to say I wanted to find a doctor for Maeve. Would you know where I could find one?”

It’s a question, but it’s also a test.

Trust me.

She hesitates. Glances at the door. Whispers, “Yes.”

50

ON THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself, I woke up and begged the Lord not to take away everything He had given.

The distant mooing of Sassafras. *That man was good.* Bockbockbockbock. White noise. *Thank you for the Inheritance.* A wave of nausea—a reminder to go over the questions Doug's PR firm had sent over. *Why don't you show all the help you have behind the scenes?* Homemade orange juice. A chorus of angels: *Morning, Mama.* Shannon in the corner, dark-eyed and twitchy. Dreaming of monsters. Pregnancy brain. *What does tradwife mean?* Big gummy smile. Caleb—half-man cowboy monster child—dipping me low, kissing me while the children cheered. *You don't understand women at all.* Natural Dinner. Stupid nannies. Trip to Target. Vanessa, that pinched-mouth hypocrite. Gossiping about the pesticides at my barn while she shopped for pesticides to feed her own fucking children. *Cunt.* Another apology to the Lord. Another Angry Woman. Another forced pleasantry, *so good to see you.* Another day of wondering why it was so much easier to slap a smile onto my face than it was to peel that smile back off. Another long drive back home, through the mountains and past the farms and down the long dirt road to the nightmare—I mean dream—of my own making, the world I molded with my own bare hands. Playdough husband, playdough children, playdough life. *Cheese!*

Final question, Mrs. Heller Mills: Would you like to comment on these horrific allegations?

Homewrecker.

For what it's worth: I don't think you're a bad person. I think you're just confused.

Selfish little twat.

"It's time to run."

My husband, sweet and sour peach-brained cave idiot, staring at me with unabashed pride. Genuinely thinking his father believed in him.

"Let's pray on it."

Desperate for the day to end. Desperate for that feeling in my head to go away, that soft whining, the sound of a rotting house on stilts over rushing surf. I clasped my hands, bowed my head, pressed my thumbs hard against my forehead. Tried to ignore the anger, bubbling and foaming in my stomach. Tried to swallow the fear floating up my throat like mustard gas. *We're walking on thin ice now.* Tried to breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Clementine's voice in my head. Ringing, ringing: *What does tradwife mean?*

An hour later, Caleb was snoring and I was staring into the darkness, my thoughts running wild. *Please, Lord, show me the way.*

I couldn't shake the feeling there was something that I'd missed.

51

THE NEXT MORNING, Mary packs quickly. I watch as her hands fly in and out of the little sack I'll take with me on my journey. Two canteens of water, a chunk of my own shitty homemade bread. Four strips of salted fish. A big can of preserved peaches.

"Aren't the peaches a bit heavy?"

"You'll be happy for the sweetness," she says, and though I'd rather not carry that weight, I can tell it matters to her that I take them, and so I say nothing. While she moves around the kitchen, I sit at the table, trying to memorize her face.

—

Something I've realized, in the moments since I began to pack: I will never step foot in this house again. I'll do my best to help Maeve, I'll try to find the doctor—really, I will—but I'll kill myself before I ever return to this place. Which means I'm saying goodbye.

—

"You'll stick to the woods," Mary says. "Do you hear me? Stay out of sight."

"But what about the traps?"

She doesn't look at me when she says, quietly, "There's—well, there's only just that one."

I breathe in quickly. "*Mary.*"

She gives me an agonized look. "If you'd known that, Mama, you would have run away again, you were in such a *mood*, those were *such bad days*, and I just—" She lets out a frustrated groan. "I was just trying to keep you safe! Is that really so terrible?"

I could have escaped months ago. Before the weather turned cold. Before I was pregnant. All this time, while I've been staring out at the woods, imagining dozens or maybe hundreds of booby traps—there was nothing. Just leaves. I want to slap Mary, I want to *kill her,* but also, I feel a rushing tenderness for her, too.

Look at how soft I've become. A pile of jelly. I think it's because I'm leaving, and because I will never see her face again, that I'm able to feel so much love for her. *Silly, stupid girl,* I think fondly. *You trapped me here so easily, you clever child, you unbelievable bitch.*

There it is, on the tip of my tongue: an instinct to say *I love you.*

It's true. I love her. I love her very much, this strange young woman. Maeve, too, and the boys. I've never said that to any of them. I consider saying it now.

Instead, I say, "Tell me where to go."

—

This is what Mary has been keeping from me.

There are trails all around us. Well-trodden and marked and maintained by Old Caleb and the neighbors. The markings I should look for are triangles, carved into the bark of the birch trees. Those will lead me straight to the neighbors' house. (Amazing: in a single sudden stream of language, Mary has turned the labyrinth of this world into a neatly organized map.) It will take several hours, she warns me, maybe much longer. The last time she went, she was younger, and it seemed to take forever to get there. She doesn't trust her own concept of time, and anyways, I still walk very slowly. I should plan to be gone for the rest of the day, at least. "I'll shut the

bedroom door and tell Pa you have a fever, too. He won't want to catch it—he's terrified of illness. That'll give you at least a day, maybe longer."

"So you've been there before? The neighbor's house?"

"Once," she says. "Or I think I have." She pauses, frowning. "I remember a house like this one, only different. It was nicer. It must have been theirs."

—

On the porch, Mary says, "You're going to come back, right?"

I turn to look at her. Her eyes are bright and wet. So she knows, or at least suspects, what I'm thinking. I wonder what will happen to her once I'm gone. What will happen to all of them. What will happen to the chicken, and the cow, and the horse. The sock puppets. The kitchen knives. "Of course," I say. "Of course I'll come back."

"Good." She's suddenly busy tying the straps of my pack. "Because Maeve would miss you terribly if you went away."

I close my eyes. A tear falls down my cheek. *I hope these girls are not hallucinations.* And also, just as fiercely: *I hope they are.*

A finger brushes the tear from my cheek.

"Go," Mary says.

I open my eyes. I do as she says: I go. Down the steps, past the chicken coop, then the barn, and suddenly the entire ranch is behind me. I'm past the patch of dirt where Old Caleb slapped me, and then I'm past the base of the hill where Noah ran screaming from me, and then I'm farther than I've ever been. I don't turn around, but I feel Mary watching me. Willing me forward with her gaze.

52

THE NEXT MORNING, I opened my eyes and said, “It was Shannon.”

Next to me, Caleb made a piggish snuffle. Rolled over onto his side, dead asleep. It was well before dawn. The room was pitch-black.

“It was Shannon who told Clementine what a tradwife is, because she needed Clementine’s help.”

Snore.

“She’s been gathering evidence, Caleb. All this time, that’s what she’s been doing. That’s why she stayed.”

“Three more minutes,” Caleb mumbled.

“She gave our daughter *a fucking phone.*”

Nothing. Always nothing.

I lay in the darkness and fumed.

—

Overnight, the final puzzle piece clicked together. I was staring wildly into the black, my brain tick-tick-ticking away, when I remembered it: Shannon asking for a new phone. Saying hers broke.

Liar.

The phone didn’t fall into a puddle. Weren’t the latest phones water-resistant, anyways? No: Shannon got a new one so she could give her old one to Clementine. *Want to know about oceans, Clemmie? Want to know why Mama spends so much time on her phone? Want to know what other kids call their mothers? It’s Mom. Want to call her Mom?*

I thought back on every moment I had stood there like an idiot, smiling, while Shannon filmed the horrors unfolding around me. The workers in the fields: *cla-chink.* The pesticide barrels, hidden beneath a wool blanket behind the barn: *cla-chink.* The children screaming and crying: *cla-chink.* The MADE IN CHINA stickers: *cla-chink.*

I'd been watching Shannon closely for months now. But my daughter? I hadn't so much as glanced at her, and she had access to every room. She had been watching me closely, logging my every move, for twelve years. It wasn't Shannon, but Clementine, who knew exactly how to capture me.

—

A few minutes after six, I knocked on Clementine's door.

"Come in," she called.

The lights were on when I stepped inside. Clementine was sitting on her bed, already dressed for the day, the covers already made up beneath her. There was a book in her lap, but she had set it down when I entered, and I couldn't see the title.

She was thirteen years old. *A little Natalie,* Amelia liked to say. But now, for the first time, I found a strangely appraising expression in my daughter's gaze, and I saw my father-in-law in her face, too.

"What is it?" she said, instead of *Good morning.* "What do you need?"

She had always spoken like an adult.

"I have to talk to you about something important." I took a step inside, turned to shut the door behind me, then paused. A wave of nausea passed through me. I left the door slightly open. "Shannon told me she gave you something before she left."

Clementine looked perfectly, authentically, adolescently bored. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. She gave you a phone. And you know that phones are against the rules."

"Why would Shannon give me a phone?"

“Because,” I said, then stopped. “Well, how am I supposed to know why she does things?”

“So she told you that she gave me a phone, but she didn’t say why?” Clementine gave me a look. “How weird.”

A gust of panicked desperation blew through me. She knew. She knew what I was doing. If I wanted to find the phone, I would have to cause a scene, and there was nothing I resisted more than causing a scene, and Clementine. Knew. That.

“Clementine,” I said lightly. “Come on. Hand it over.”

“Hand *what* over?”

“The phone.”

“You’re starting to scare me, Mom.”

“Enough. I’m your mother. *Give me the phone.*”

Clementine gave me a look of practiced confusion. “Do you know what I don’t get? You spend all day long staring at your phone. So why are you so freaked out at the idea of me having one?”

“You’re grounded,” I said, because I had no idea what else to say.

I expected her to whine, *What for?* But instead she leaned forward and said quickly, with a voice that snapped like a rubber band, “Does being grounded mean I don’t have to be in your stupid videos anymore? Or does it mean I have to be in them twice as much?”

At that moment, Caleb called my name from down the hallway.

“One minute,” I shouted.

“No. Right now!”

—

My bedroom was in full disarray when I walked back in. All the lights were on, and the bedding and pillows were all over the floor, and Caleb was standing at the foot of the bed, face as white as our sheets. As if he had woken to a tarantula in bed with him. No spider, though—just his phone, which he shoved quickly into my hands and stepped back. The tarantula was now shivering in my grip. I barely had time to read the preview for the

first email—I hope this email finds you well—I'm reaching out from Pop Weekly Magazine for comment on the assault allegations that have recently—before another email *dinged* onto the notification screen—looking for comment—and then another—press inquiry!

"Natalie," Caleb said, "you have to believe me. I didn't hurt Shannon. I didn't do anything to her, I *swear*—"

"Shut up," I snarled. There was no time to explain to Caleb what had happened. *While Mama was cleaning up your mess, darling, she made a little oopsie herself!* I threw the phone at Caleb's chest. It hit him and he let out a squeak of fear.

"Call your father," I hissed, then stalked into the bathroom and slammed the door.

—

By the end of the week, we had a full legal team on retainer. Specifically, we had *Doug's* legal team on retainer, which meant we were paying thousands of dollars an hour for five sleek-looking New Yorkers to hover in the kitchen in expensive-looking charcoal suits and alternate between staring at their phones and glancing nervously at me out of the corner of their eyes, like a pack of greyhounds waiting for the bell to go off.

When Doug arrived at the ranch, the lawyers looked relieved that their owner was here. They pawed and whined at him excitedly while he took his coat off, all five of them speaking over one another to tell him how prepared they were, how much work they'd been doing while he was away. I resisted the urge to chuck a handful of kibble at their faces.

That night, we sat around the dinner table, the lawyers and Doug and Caleb and me, and devised a plan of attack.

"She's going to come out swinging," the lead lawyer said. A bald man named Paul who tended to talk with his hands. "Sources are telling us it's more likely to be televised than a magazine feature."

"That means she presents well," Doug said to Caleb and me. "They think she can win in the court of public opinion. Not all television

interviews are created equal, though: she might just get a little two-minute scene in between war updates and the weather."

Caleb gave his father a guilty, worried look. "Are you worried about the campaign?"

Paul was typing away on his laptop now. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"No?"

"No. Doug's base will rally around him. Middle America is deeply sympathetic to successful parents who have disappointing children. It fits perfectly with Doug's message, really: kids are spoiled these days, no one knows how to work hard, the American dream is dead. That sort of thing." Paul frowned at something on his laptop, then typed a little bit more, oblivious to or unconcerned with the sudden reddening of Caleb's face. "In fact," he went on, "it would *really* help us if it turned out that either of you has a drug problem." He looked hopefully at Caleb, then at me. "Do either of you? Have a drug problem?"

"No," Caleb muttered.

"No," I echoed through gritted teeth.

"Ah." Paul shrugged. "Don't worry about it."

"It should be fine," Doug added, "as long as we handle it correctly."

"Okay, so have we learned anything relevant about Shannon?" I asked the lawyers.

"I think it would be a stretch to paint her as *deeply* unreliable, but medium-level unreliable, absolutely." Paul began to tick off on his fingers. "Didn't graduate from college. Has a sister who's a lesbian. One of her parents got a DUI over the summer."

"That's what you have?" I looked fiercely at the lawyers. "I'm paying you two thousand dollars an hour, and the best you can come up with is that her sister is a lesbian?"

—

Two days after that meeting, Shannon's prime-time interview was announced during a nighttime news segment for Doug's favorite channel.

“Up next, an assault allegation from America’s favorite family farm,” a redheaded anchorman said. He glanced expectantly at his coanchor, a blond woman with eye shadow up to her eyebrows.

“That’s right, Sean. If you’re one of the millions of people who follow Yesteryear Ranch online, then you’ve probably come to know and love Natalie Heller Mills and her ever-growing family for the beautiful life they live out in the mountains of Idaho. If you don’t follow Yesteryear Ranch, you might know the last name anyways. Yes, that’s right: this is the same Mills family as presidential candidate and current front-runner Doug Mills. Natalie Heller Mills is married to *Caleb* Mills, the youngest son of the Mills family dynasty—which, between the big red barn and the family farm operation, makes their Instagram account about as American as it could possibly get.”

I sat on the couch, frozen, while a series of video montages grabbed from my account played. Me milking Sassafras. Me standing in the chicken coop with Jessa and Junebug grinning by my feet. Me and Caleb kissing in the fields, backlit by the falling sun.

“Heller Mills has millions of dedicated followers with whom she shares pictures and videos of her daily life. At the same time, a bit ironically, she’s also extremely private, and has famously never given an interview. Now a producer who lived at Yesteryear Ranch for just over two years has shocked the Yesteryear fan community with an accusation of assault—and the accusation has been leveled not at Natalie’s husband, Caleb, but against Natalie herself.”

The anchorwoman paused, giving room for the gasps in living rooms all over the nation. Next to me, Caleb was sitting on the couch. As far as I understood, Doug had told him the bare minimum details about my *altercation* with Shannon. Caleb hadn’t said anything to me about it yet.

“Next week, our culture correspondent will sit down with this producer to talk about her time at Yesteryear Ranch. The conversation will revolve around her story of assault, but I hear it’s also going to feature some incredible behind-the-scenes footage on how Yesteryear Ranch is actually run—and from what I hear, things are *not* entirely as they seem. That’s an

interview you won’t want to miss.” The male anchor organized his papers and said in the chummy, about-to-transition-to-a-lighter-topic voice, “I didn’t know they had people working for them on that farm, did you, Sarah?”

“Sure didn’t!” she said cheerily back, and then the television screen went black.

Doug set down the clicker. “They gave her the full prime-time slot,” he said, a look of grudging admiration on his face. “That’s hard to get.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means that she’s going to be good.”

Natalie we totally believe u!!!

Holy shit lol u are totally fucked

Tradmommy and traddaddy behaving poorly? Color me shocked

THIWS ISA OBVIOUS MONEY GRAB THAT PRODUCER SHUD BE ASHAMED

—

The days leading up to Shannon’s interview were a blur of preparation. Doug and the lawyers were staying at a hotel in town; each morning, at nine on the dot, I watched their large black Escalade roll slowly up the hill, and I steeled myself for another day of tense planning. It felt like we were fortifying ourselves for a physical disaster: each time I walked into the kitchen, another twelve-pack of Gatorade had been stacked into the pantry, and the curtains in all the downstairs rooms were drawn shut, giving the house a boarded-up effect. I don’t know why Doug insisted we keep the curtains that way. Maybe he was afraid of photographers with the kind of zoom lenses that allowed them to see stars in outer space. Maybe he, too, was acting on some animal instinct to disappear. I understood the sentiment: whenever I had a free moment in the day, I walked into my bedroom and crawled under the covers until someone called my name.

Mama!

During those days, I found myself constantly stumbling upon new and unusual pairings of people congregating in new and unusual settings with each other. This, too, felt storm-like, the way a zoo flamingo might be found floating in a swimming pool after a hurricane. For example: Amelia sitting on Clementine's bed with her, whispering quietly. *Grandma never spends time in the children's bedrooms with them.* Or: two of the younger lawyers playing patty-cake on the floor with Jessa and Junebug. *Is this time going to be billed?* Perhaps most concerningly: Doug talking quietly with Caleb by the pantry one evening, the two of them facing the wall and speaking in sideways murmurs, the way one might do facing a painting at a museum.

I got only a few phrases from their whispered conversation—*Need to take care of things…think outside the box*—and then Doug clapped his hand on Caleb's shoulder and said, "I believe in you, son."

—

"I think everyone is turning on me, Mama."

I was in the pantry in the dark again. My new home office, these days. It was late evening. The house was still. Through the phone, I could hear the steady *click, click, click* of my mother's sewing needles as she knitted. I'd been relieved when she answered the phone, but not surprised. She rarely went to sleep before one in the morning. "What do you mean, turning on you?"

"I—it's hard to explain. But some—some stuff has happened. Some stuff you need to prepare for."

The jars tittered from the shelf across from me. *What an understatement!*

My mother was only half listening. There was commotion behind her. "It's Natalie," I heard her say. "I'm talking to Natalie." Then she was back with me, saying, "Sorry, dear: Brandon was just looking for the peanut butter. These preteens with their hunger pangs! Now tell me again what's going on?"

I stared at the wall. “People are lying to me, Mama. Family members. I can feel it. I can—I can *see* it.”

There was silence.

“Well,” my mother said softly. “I certainly didn’t want you to find out this way.”

I paused. “What?”

“I’m not surprised you sensed this, Nattie. I’m sure I’ve been acting… different.”

She hadn’t been, not at all—or if she had, I hadn’t noticed.

She went on. “I’ve been seeing a therapist, and she encouraged me to tell you girls…” She let out a fluttery, nervous breath. “Well. Listen. I only told Abigail first because she was in the house, we see each other so much!”

“Just tell me!” I said too loudly. My voice echoed in the pantry.

“It’s about your father.”

My heart rate quickened. I whispered, “What do you mean, my father?”

“Well, you know how he’s”—and here she lowered her voice to a whisper that matched mine—“*not dead*.”

I stared tensely at nothing. “Yes, Mother. I know how he’s not dead.”

“The thing is, Natalie,” she said, and paused again. Breathed in sharply through the phone, then spoke through a rushing exhale: “He didn’t leave because he cheated. He left because I cheated.”

I didn’t understand. She wasn’t making sense. “What are you saying?”

“I was bored, all right? That’s the God’s honest truth: I was bored. I wish I had a better reason, but I don’t. One of the lawyers in the office—his name was Dan, you wouldn’t ever have met him, he transferred to the Boise office after all the…the mess—well, he knew how to salsa dance. Salsa! You should’ve seen the way his feet moved, and his hands…”

She was breathing heavily now, either from the effort of confession or the memory of Dan’s salsa hands. “I cheated on your father,” she said again, “and when he found out, he wanted to stay, to work it out, and I told him to leave. And once he was gone, I realized I liked it better. Being alone. And so I figured if I told you girls I was technically still married, then you wouldn’t ever pressure me to get remarried.”

I was speechless.

“I’ve held a lot of guilt over this,” she went on firmly, “and I’m terribly, terribly sorry for deceiving you girls. It wasn’t right. But”—and here she took another deep swell of breath, as if shoring herself up for what was next—“I also don’t regret it. Not at all. And I know how you’re probably feeling. But I spoke to Ben about it—”

“Ben, like Abigail’s *boyfriend*? Why?”

“Well, honey. He’s a pastor. He has the ear of God. And do you know what he did when I told him?”

“No.” It was becoming quite clear to me that I would hate Pastor Ben if I met him.

“He took my hands firmly in his, and he said God loves me anyways. And he thanked me for raising Abigail to be such a strong, loving woman. And I thought—well, I thought that was very nice of him to say.” She paused to clear her throat. When she spoke again, her voice was lighter, more conversational. “They’re going to Sun Valley next weekend, just the two of them. A skiing weekend! How fun. Ben planned the whole thing. I think he’s just about the nicest man I’ve ever met. You should see Abigail when they’re together. She’s smitten.”

My eyes were unseeing in the darkness. As if my life could get any worse at this moment, it was now abundantly clear to me that a consortium of liars and scammers had conspired to brainwash my sister and mother. A woman therapist, a modern pastor. Snake oil salesmen, both of them: encouraging divorce, sanewashing infidelity.

“These people are taking advantage of you, Mother,” I said quietly. “They’re mining your weaknesses. It’s so obvious. You’ve always been too nice.”

There was a long silence here.

I expected my mother to hem and haw, to say, *Oh, Nattie, it’s nothing like that.* But then she did something altogether different. She said slowly, and with obvious discomfort, “Do you know what, Natalie? I—I don’t think I am too nice. In fact, I’m very proud of how nice I am. I think it’s a good

thing. And if I'm being honest, I'm very disappointed with how *not nice* you are."

"Mother! You have no idea how hard things are right now, and if you would just *listen to me*—"

And here is where the strangest moment of my entire life happened: my mother, that good Christian woman, snapped.

"No!" she shouted, so loudly that I held the phone away from my ear. "You listen to me, young lady. This is your problem! This has always been your problem! You think kindness is some silly frivolous side virtue, when it is in fact the whole damn thing!"

I'd never heard her say a curse word in my life. "Mother," I sputtered again, "I just—"

She roared in return, her anger vibrating through the phone like some energetic hex: "*WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR YOU TO BE KIND?*"

53

THIS LAND IS NOT HOW I REMEMBER IT. Or rather—this land is not how I imagined it. How many times did I walk through these snowy woods, in the years and years I lived on this farm?

None, is the true answer. Not one time.

It goes by so fast. That's what you're supposed to say when someone, or something, forces you to consider all the horrible time-management mistakes you made as a parent, all the birthdays you forgot, all the beautiful moments that you attended, yes, but weren't really there for.

What can I say? It goes by so fast. You blink and they're grown, out of the house, gone.

It's true. I blinked and they were gone.

Clementine, *the child who made me a mother,* and Samuel and Stetson, *my darling young men.* And Jessa, *our resident firecracker!* And Junebug—well, I hadn't spent enough time with her to find her personality shorthand. Each additional child fell a little further away from me. When I try to conjure their faces now, it's only Clementine's I can see perfectly. If I think hard enough, I can manage the rough outlines of the boys—but Jessa and Junebug? They're not memories so much as they are ideas. Ancient hieroglyphs painted along the far walls of my mind.

As I move through the leaves, tracing my fingers along the parchment-paper feel of birch branches and the calcified wrinkles of maple trunks, I think of all the charcoal sketches of my life. All the things I meant to do and didn't.

I meant to learn Junebug's personality. I meant to walk through these woods. Meant to go fishing in our river with the boys; to pocket salmon by the handful and then lie out on the sun-warmed rocks and listen to the rushing water. I meant to turn off my phone. I meant to revive the old apple orchard I'd been so excited about when we first bought the property. I meant to actually learn about farming, and to actually learn how to grow things, not just a child or an Instagram account but a carrot, a calf, a sapling. I meant to have a media empire. Magazines and a television show and a big office in some faraway city. I meant to have sprawling gardens, acres of them, all around the ranch. Meant to know the name of every wildflower native to Idaho. Meant to learn about herbal medicines, tonics, and tinctures. I meant to meet more people in person—*really I did, I was nearly ready*—but then I blinked and I was gone.

Which is to say: this, right now, is the first time I have ever walked through these woods. Nothing is recognizable to me, not the small mole-like trio of boulders I stumble past, or the sloping, wide curve of this trail. I feel no flickering sense of déjà vu in this forest, no shutter-click of confusion, the way I do when I look at the children, the horse, the barn.

This forest has never been mine.

—

I walk for what feels like a very long time. The snow soaks through my boots, and before long my toes are stinging with cold. Eventually I see it. Just barely visible in the distance through the trees: a small log cabin. Strange: the trail I'm on seems to be taking me away from it. Maybe it will loop me around on the other side, but suddenly I feel pressed for time, and so I cut off the trail and half walk, half trot straight toward it. My feet are completely numb, and I keep stumbling and tripping on roots, and then soon I am standing in front of the cabin in the middle of a large, man-made clearing, and that is when I see it, just barely visible behind the cabin: metallic, unnatural blue.

I hear myself whisper—no, whimper—aloud, like I am a child, like I am just now being born again: “Truck.”

Smoke is rising from the chimney. Above the front door, a word is etched into the doorframe: *MANOSPHERE*.

So this is where the men go.

54

SHANNON'S HAIR HAD BEEN HIGHLIGHTED. The nose ring was gone. She was wearing a prairie dress from one of the clothing lines that frequently sent me massive clothing hauls. She looked less like herself and more like a girl from Brooklyn who had raided a roommate's closet an hour before she had to attend a steak dinner with her boyfriend's Midwestern parents.

The anchorwoman sitting across from her was the same one from the week before. Erin something. She was wearing less eye shadow, and her general demeanor had shifted from the breezy composure of an evening news summary to something more somber and investigative. *A woman in search of the truth.* She leaned forward, pressed a hand to Shannon's knee, and offered her a look of blazing solidarity. "Shannon, I want to start this conversation by asking you a personal question: How old are you?"

Shannon shifted in her chair. "I'm twenty-one years old."

"And how old were you when you first began work at Yesteryear Ranch?"

"Nineteen."

Erin gave the camera a long, sideways look. Everyone shifted uncomfortably. Caleb, Doug, Amelia, and I were all squished tensely on one stretch of sectional. The lawyers were sitting in chairs behind us. The nannies were with the children, having received firm instructions: *Stay out of the living room.* I'd been waiting all day for this moment, and still I felt unprepared for it and a little bit woozy. My phone hadn't stopped buzzing in days. My mother was a liar. My sister was a useless bitch. And the Angry Women, oh—

“That’s pretty young,” Erin said.

“Yeah. It feels like a really long time ago.” Shannon pushed her bottom lip out into a delicate pout. Remarkable. The girl was rich, the lawyers had learned. Her father was in finance. Her mother was a civil rights lawyer. Shannon, it turned out, had traveled to more countries already than most people do in their whole lives. *I’ve never seen the Pacific Ocean!* Oh, *please,* she’d seen practically all the others—and now some publicist had dressed her up and slapped her around to make her look as vulnerable as a five-year-old foster child. She might as well have been wearing pigtails.

“And how old is your employer, Caleb?”

“*I’m* her employer,” I said, right as Shannon said regretfully, “He’s thirty-five.”

The shot cut away to preroll footage of Shannon walking mournfully through a city college campus. Erin’s voiceover drifted somberly in: “Shannon was a bright young student with the whole world ahead of her when she saw a callout for a producer on the Yesteryear Ranch account. Professors in the film program described her as sharp-witted with a critical eye—so when Shannon told them she was dropping out for what she described was a huge opportunity, they assumed she was moving to Hollywood. They couldn’t have been more wrong.”

What? She’d already dropped out before she got the job with me. They were getting the timeline all wrong.

“Would you say, Shannon, that you gave up a lot in order to work for Natalie Heller Mills?”

“I would.”

Erin gave another sideways look to the camera. My brain felt hot, literally hot; if a drop of water were to land on my forehead, it would have hissed steam. Erin was asking Shannon about Caleb now: how they met, when things shifted from professional to “decidedly less so.”

“Caleb is a really great guy,” Shannon said. “He’s smart and kind, a really good dad.”

“Perhaps not as good of a husband,” Erin offered, and Shannon blushed, looking appropriately guilty. “Perhaps not,” she admitted. She started to cry.

“Let’s change the subject,” Erin said gently. Shannon nodded, accepting a tissue that Erin had procured from thin air. “In your lawsuit, Shannon, you mention several other…unsavory, let’s say, aspects of life at Yesteryear Ranch. There are some instances of alleged animal abuse—”

“Outrageous!” Caleb cried.

“—related to the number of dairy cows the family has moved through, for example. Is it correct, Shannon, that the family has witnessed the unnatural deaths of at least four dairy cows, just over the two years you worked there?”

Shannon nodded. “I can’t say whether that’s normal,” she said, “but I did find it creepy that the cows are *always* called Sassafras.”

“It’s a good name!” Caleb protested. “And it’s perfectly normal for animals to die on a farm!”

In my periphery, Doug placed a hand on Caleb’s shoulder, and Caleb fell silent. Then Doug noticed I was watching, and his hand slipped easily off Caleb’s shoulder and onto the spine of the couch.

“And is it true, Shannon, that the children don’t want to be filmed?”

Shannon nodded. “They hate it.”

Lying bitch.

“Do you have some footage to show us, Shannon?”

Shannon nodded.

Then my brain ceased the work of forming coherent thoughts altogether, because I was staring at Clementine’s face, on the screen, pixelated and morose, staring right at me. The footage was recent, she’d already had her growth spurt, but still: the last year, I’d been thinking near constantly about how grown-up she seemed, how close to adulthood she was—and now the truth smacked me in the face: she was so young. The screen flashed to another image: Jessa, crying in the barn, mouthing *Mama, Mama,* her hands and shirt covered in mud, or was that cow shit? And then just as quickly: Samuel and Stetson standing by the paddocks, their little cowboy hats backlit by a big blue sky. They were fighting over control of a nail gun. And then back to Clementine, shaking her head at—me. There I was. Standing in the kitchen, saying something sharp to my daughter. Pointing at her, and

then her sisters. Junebug was on the floor, wrapped around Clementine's leg. I was telling Clementine to watch them, probably. And she was saying quietly, repeatedly: *No.* And now I was saying, unmistakably: *Yes.*

What day was this? I didn't remember this moment. As I watched myself on the screen, I felt like I was watching another woman I used to know. Offline Natalie. Ugly and sharp and awkward and old. Like some fairy-tale witch. What was she doing here? Who let this woman online?

And then I was staring at—darkness. Shadows. Car sounds. Doors opening and closing, buckles clicking. Where were we?

Suddenly a horribly sharp voice filled the darkness. On the other side of the couch, Amelia jumped from the sound. "Vanessa, that *bitch,* is undoubtedly going to run home to post about me in one of those stupid snarky online forums—*bet you didn't think someone like Natalie would shop at Target!!!*—and then I'll have to suffer a whole week of online commentary, and Shannon! The nerve! The absolute unbelievable nerve of that spoiled uneducated morally bankrupt little son of a—"

I couldn't breathe. My hand was frozen on my swollen stomach, but the baby wasn't moving. Distantly, I wondered if she was holding her breath, too.

"Yes," my voice carried on mercilessly in the black. "That would be nice. I could share the moment myself and take the wind right out of Vanessa's stupid little sails…Girls! What did you get at our *very special* trip to Target today?"

No, was all I could manage to think.

"Stop filming me," Clementine said.

"I didn't know you were unhappy being filmed, Clementine. I've always told you to tell me if you felt that way. Haven't I?"

The footage cut away to a flickering montage of videos of Clementine, hundreds of them, rapid-fire, starting when she was just a toddler, and slowly moving toward the present. Fall, winter, spring, summer. Babies springing up all around her. And her expression, *Lord;* miserable, miserable, miserable.

Then we were back to the interview, and Erin was giving Shannon a tissue, and Shannon was sniffing, saying how much she loved the children, how much she loved the nannies and the farmworkers, how much she loved me, and how *worried* she was for everyone involved. “I know that’s hard to understand, given everything that…happened, but I mean it.”

“I have to say, Shannon,” Erin said, “I’m surprised to hear you voice gratitude to Natalie after what she allegedly did to you.” She paused, a perfect anchorwoman expression on her perfect anchorwoman face. “Can we talk, Shannon, about the incident?”

Shannon nodded. I leaned forward.

“The thing you have to understand,” Shannon said quietly, “is that Natalie is not well.”

“*Allegedly,*” Erin added nervously. “She’s *allegedly* not well.”

Shannon began to describe, in halting stutter steps, a different world than the one we were living in. An upside-down land. A straight shot into Hell.

“…called me all these terrible names…straddled me…my jeans were around my feet…screaming…”

Doug said suddenly, “What is this?”

“I felt so terrified, and she wouldn’t get off me—”

“Natalie,” Doug said, “what is she saying?”

“—felt so violated—”

“*Natalie.*”

“I told her to get off me, I was *screaming* for her to get off me—”

She didn’t scream.

Caleb looked at me. Amelia looked at me. Doug and the lawyers looked at me. I hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but it was true, wasn’t it? “She didn’t,” I said, suddenly defensive, “because there was nothing to scream about. She’s lying. Obviously she’s lying. I mean—”

In the background, Erin went on. “—certainly *sounds* like a moment that was…erotic in nature—”

I felt insane. I laughed, or tried to laugh.

“I can’t speak to her sexuality, but I can say it felt very violating for me __”

Next to me, Caleb said quietly, almost to himself, “I don’t get it.”

Upstairs, my phone was buzzing. I could feel it in my veins. A steady wave of comments, flooding the computer chip, threatening to short-circuit it. Millions of opinions, rising in my ears, a deathly choral scream.

I reached for the remote control and pressed the power button. Shannon and Erin disappeared.

“Hey,” Doug snapped. “We need to watch this.”

“Come on,” I said, “this is ridiculous. She’s spewing lies!” I forced out a laugh. “Does anyone actually think I’m gay?”

One of the lawyers cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Well, I imagine some people will absolutely think that, yes.”

“This is a problem,” Doug said. “This is a very, very big problem. And I like to be *fully aware* of problems.” He reached across Caleb’s lap and snatched the remote from my hands, then turned the television back on, right as Erin was saying, “Do you have anything you’d like to say to Natalie, if you could?”

Shannon looked straight at the camera, at me, and smiled a perfect—and I mean perfect—smile. Soft, smart, feminine. The holy trinity. “I forgive you, Natalie.”

A swell of fury rose in me, so sudden it knocked my thoughts off-kilter, sent them spilling over the levies of my mind.

Liar. Homewrecking cunt bitch—

“Natalie,” Caleb said. “My God. Stop.”

I froze.

“Well,” Erin said, “I think we can leave the conversation there today. Thank you so much, Shannon, for coming tonight and speaking your truth…”

Doug pressed mute and Erin fell silent. Then he turned to me and said, “You didn’t tell me the whole truth. And now, little missy, all of us are fucked.”

He stood up and stormed into the kitchen, the lawyers trotting nervously after him. Then Caleb stood up. He looked confused. “I need to think,” he said. I watched him slowly walk to the front door, open it, and step out onto the porch. For a moment he just stood there, staring out at our property. Then he shut the door behind him, and it was just me and my mother-in-law, who was looking at me with an expression like a cocked shotgun. “And may God have mercy on your soul,” she said softly, almost like she was finishing a prayer on my behalf. Then she leaned in, so close that I could see the flakes of dead skin peeling off her Barbie-pink lips, and whispered, “Bad girl.”

—

If only my husband had raped our producer. That was basically what Doug said that night—what he *roared*—for hours and hours, while a rotating cast of side characters (me, then Amelia, then finally just the lawyers) stared numbly at nothing. If only his stupid little son had raped our stupid little producer. If that had happened, it would’ve been over with and forgotten in two weeks. But a predatory woman? Unthinkable. A good Christian mother and wife who (allegedly!) found other women attractive? Who took what she wanted without asking?

Kill the witch. Burn her.

—

Upstairs, I sat on my bedroom floor and watched my phone light up on my bedside table, again and again, in little Morse code bursts.

Go-to-hell

Stu-pid bitch

I-hope-so-cial-ser-vi-ces-takes-ur-fuck-ing-kids

It wouldn’t stop buzzing. Finally I crawled over to the table, reached for my phone, then hesitated, my hand hovering over the phone as it twitched.

It looked like it was in agony.

I could turn it off. Throw it into a fire. Delete my account. But it wouldn't go away. All that furious energy—it had to go somewhere, and I could feel it, even now, vibrating up into the air in waves, rising like a mist, absorbing into my skin. Filling my bloodstream with toxins. I could feel it, physically *feel* the hatred multiplying inside me like cancer. Online Natalie was optimized for resentment, adoration, jealousy, obsession—but hatred? Pity? Disgust? It was unbearable for her. For me. For us.

I couldn't take it anymore. I picked up the phone and began reading the notifications. As I scrolled through the waves of fury, I found myself unable to discern between the progressive women who hated me and the good Christian women who hated me. For once, they were aligned in their fury. And then there were the texts.

From my mother:

> Natalie call me right now please

From my sister, a torrent of misspelled rage:

> I just findit reelly interesting that u were soooo jugmental of me for getting a divorce n being such a "sinner" and meanwhile—

From an unknown number:

> I'm going to slit your throat in the middle of the night you stupid fucking lesbo bitch

And then more unknown numbers, dozens of them, piling up in my phone like envelopes slipping through a mail slot.

> I will pray to God for your horrible sins

> U will burn in hell for this

> Disgusting faggot bitch

I stared wildly around. How had these people gotten my phone number? What other private information had they uncovered? Were they going to come to the farm?

Go, Natalie. Run.

But run where? I had fanatical followers who lived in Brazil, New Zealand, Mongolia. The whole world was a spotlight. Even *my sweet little farm* was rigged against me, bugged with phones, riddled with ungrateful children and disloyal workers. There was nowhere to run. Nowhere safe to hide. A terrible drowning sensation fell over me. All the safety I would ever feel in my life was now firmly rooted in the past.

55

IN THE OLDEN DAYS, girls, do you know how people got from one place to another? They walked. Yep, that's right. They walked for miles and miles and miles. If they had a little money, they might have a horse, maybe even a covered wagon to pull along with it. And if they were lucky, they might have a truck!

Wait—that can't be right.

—

No. That certainly can't be right!

—

I turn the doorknob, and the cabin's front door swings silently open. I cross quietly over the threshold and into a small wooden kitchen. Suddenly I am staring at a framed picture of my own family, hanging on the opposite wall. It's from a long time ago: me, Caleb, Clementine, Samuel, and baby Stetson. I don't remember the day it was taken, but I do remember the caption that accompanied it when I shared the picture online: God is pleased when families work together.

My heart is a wet dead thing in my chest. My gaze swings slowly across the room. I see a dirt-packed floor and a table. On the table: a hot plate. Next to the hot plate: three plastic packs of ramen. Beneath the table: a mini-fridge with a cord that is connected to an electrical outlet.

Then: a radio in the other room, flickering on.

I feel it, the cold air entering and leaving me, but I can't hear it—can't hear my heart or my pulse or my breath. I can hear only the radio, which is getting louder, because I am somehow crossing the kitchen, passing the vegetables and the ramen and the picture of me, and then I am crossing through another room, this one empty except for a turned-off television and a ratty old couch and a pile of blankets in the corner—three sleeping bags, three pillows—and then I am through that room and into another, where I come to a halt.

Through the far window of this room: the front fender of the truck. And right in front of that window, another table, which is holding the radio, and in front of the radio, sitting on a plastic folding seat, is a man. By his feet is a pile of vegetables overflowing out of an old plastic milk crate. Potatoes, carrots, celery, beets. The kind Mary chops and dices and then drops into soup. There are grocery store stickers all over them.

Doctor, I think distantly. *You came here for a doctor.*

It's the neighbor. The shorter one. He's facing away from me, whistling softly. A tune I recognize. *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world…*

It takes me a moment to process what he's doing: pulling vegetables from one crate, pulling the grocery store stickers off, then dropping them into another crate.

Speak.

An impossible feat; like trying to whistle while skydiving. "Help," is what I finally manage.

The neighbor freezes.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—

The neighbor looks over his shoulder. His eyes are wide. "Mama," he blurts.

I take one step back, then another. "Doctor," I whisper.

"*Mama,*" he says again. His face is contorted into ecstasy, or perhaps torture.

He stands up, the chair tipping back behind him, and I scream. Instinct takes over: as he lumbers toward me, I turn and run. Through the room with the television and then the kitchen and out the door, across the clearing and into the woods. This time, I don’t fall.

56

MOTHER'S LITTLE HELPER.

Mother's little—
Help her.
Help.
Mother, please help her.

—

Well. Heaven knows I tried long enough to be my mother's type of Christian woman. I worked myself to the bone, and where did that get me? Fucked. Alone in my bedroom, practically punch-drunk from reading so many slurs and curse words and death threats in such rapid succession.

Maybe it was time, finally, to try the other route.

—

The bottle of pills was eight years old. I'd found it on my bureau at the Mills estate the day after Amelia caught me in the hallway that day. *That's what family is for!* There was no label on the bottle, no name; just a scribbled black-Sharpie message on the plastic: *take one every 12 hours.*

But surely the medication had expired. I tapped three white pills onto my palm and swallowed them dry. Then I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, back, back until it thudded gently against the bathroom wall. While I waited, I thought about Clementine and how I should punish her for

what she had done. I could ground her, or slap her, or lock her in her room. Or I could do nothing, absolutely nothing, I could forgive without an apology and be so kind to her that she would begin to feel unbearably guilty for what she had done. Yes. That option sounded nice.

Time passed. At some point, there was a knock on the bathroom door. I opened my eyes to see Caleb's head popped around the corner. "Can I come in?"

I nodded. As soon as I moved my head, I felt them. The pills. I watched, speechless, as Caleb floated over to me and sat down, close enough that our knees were almost touching. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes," I said, after several moments of trying. It felt effortful, but good, to speak.

"Is—is *that* why you hate having sex so much? Because you're a queer, or whatever?"

I smiled. Funny man. "You're the one who never wants to have sex."

Caleb gave me a not-unfriendly look. "Come on, Natalie. Be honest. You want to have sex with me like you want to unload the dishwasher."

"Well." I chuckled and leaned my head back against the wall, keeping my eyes on him. "Maybe if you could get hard like a normal person, I'd enjoy it a little bit more."

The friendly expression fell from his face. "Well," he spat out, mimicking me, "if fucking you didn't feel exactly the same as fucking a dead body, then maybe I would be able to get hard more easily."

A delighted sort of terror filled me. It felt like my whole body had been circling the drain for years and was just now finally slipping down into cool darkness. I said without thinking, "Death sounds nice."

Caleb was frowning at me now. "What is wrong with you?"

I didn't answer.

"You humiliated me. Do you realize that? What you did with Shannon—it's humiliating."

"My dear husband," I said slowly, "you have been one big humiliation since the day we were married."

Caleb sprang to his feet, facing me as he backed away, like I might snap if he wasn't careful. He seemed not to realize I wasn't capable of standing. "You've always thought so little of me." His voice was shaking. "But you know what? Shannon didn't. Shannon *doesn't.* You heard her today: she thinks I'm smart, and kind, and—"

"Shannon!" I said, and laughed. It really was so funny. "Do you know what Shannon said when I spoke with her? She said she would rather kill herself than go anywhere with you."

Was this a lie? Certainly the spirit of the message was true, or somewhat true. Caleb processed this information very slowly, then said: "I don't believe you."

But he did. I could tell that he did. And so I said nothing, just watched as the light flickered in his eyes, then went out. He whispered, "Are all women as terrible as you?"

I was really feeling lovely, now. Three expired pills had been the perfect dosage. "I'd tell you to ask your mother, but then she might end up taking a single second to actually consider her own life, and do you know what, Caleb? I think if she did that, she'd probably end up killing herself."

The slap came out of nowhere. He must have stepped forward to reach me, but I didn't see it, or rather I couldn't remember seeing it now, as I stared at the bathroom floor tile, the vision in my left eye suddenly blurry. My hand was pressed to my cheek. I couldn't quite feel anything. I assumed my skin stung. That it was pink. I found myself thinking, for the first time since that phone call with my mother, of my father. I hadn't allowed myself to think of him until now. Where was he in the world? Had he married? Had more children?

Everything would have been fine if I'd grown up with a strong father figure in my life, I thought calmly. As soon as I thought this, though, I felt immediately certain that it wasn't true.

"Do you know what they think of you online?" Caleb said, standing over me. "They think you're a woman who needs to be disciplined. That you're out of control. That your head is too big for your own shoulders, and

I should've reined you in years ago, and they're right. Fucking devil bitch. My father was right: I should've divorced you when I had the chance."

I looked up at him. "Is that what he wants you to do? Divorce me?"

He took a step away from me, breathing hard. "That's what he *wanted* me to do, yes. But you know what he wants to do now?"

I tasted iron. My lip was bleeding. "Not in the slightest."

"He wants to kill you."

I shook my head slowly. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. He said a car accident would be easiest. These winding mountain roads, such a steep drop…" He shrugged. It was his turn to watch me absorb this information. "No one would suspect a thing."

I slowly got myself back up into a sitting position. This information felt too large for my brain's receptors, like we were trying to force a couch through too narrow of a doorframe. Still, it barged slowly in, taking the hinges of the doorframe with it. Kill me. They wanted to kill me. How absurd. How funny! And also: how practical. Even if they never actually did it: what a clever way to shackle me to this ranch, to make me never want to leave. Now I would never drive off the property again without wondering if *today* was going to be *the day.*

After all: What were good Christian men if not experts at making their good Christian women vanish from the world?

How boring. How deeply and utterly unfair. I did everything I was supposed to. I had the children and married the man and created a universe for all of us to live in, and what was I going to get for it?

Murdered, apparently. Featured in some future documentary about the latest pregnant woman to break her neck in a ditch somewhere. Caleb might go to jail for a year or two. Probably not. Regardless, he would be remarried within the decade. He'd have a second round of kids.

"You don't want to run for office, Caleb."

He paused. "What? What are you talking about?"

I repeated myself. "You don't want to run for office." I was speaking and thinking more easily now. The shock of the pills' effect had worn off—or perhaps the adrenaline jolt of my husband's death threat had created a

new chemical cocktail in my body. Either way, I was moving forward easily now. Like switching from walking to ice-skating: all I had to do was push off with each uttered word. “And for the record, you don’t want to move to New York. You would hate New York more than anything.”

“No I wouldn’t.”

“Yes, you would.”

He didn’t say anything. He was listening. And what was I doing? Skating free-form. Improvising for my life—which meant I now had to unravel what I had worked so hard to knit together. “What you want, darling husband, what you have *always* wanted, is to be left alone.”

“You ruined that for me,” he said. “Now I’ll never be alone. Not now that you’ve—and with the whole world—” He dropped into a crouch, his hands over his ears, his face contorted. “My God,” he said desperately. “I feel like I’m suffocating.”

“Let me fix it,” I said, over his panicked breaths.

When he looked up at me, his expression was that of a child. My husband had always been such a child. “How?”

“Let me talk to your father.”

“He’s going to kill you, Nattie. I’m not joking. He wants you dead.”

“He doesn’t want me dead,” I said softly. “He just wants me fixed.”

—

An hour later, I was walking slowly down the hallway, hand tracing the walls, my feet equal parts lighter and heavier than I was used to. It wasn’t clear to me if I was marching toward my own salvation or toward my own imminent death. *Don’t look back,* I reminded myself. *Don’t look back, don’t look back.*

I imagined Caleb and my children turning to salt. The ranch set on fire. My whole world burning, the sky filled with ash.

But what about the women in the Bible who look forward? What happens to them?

A question so much easier for me to answer at thirty-three than it had been for me at seventeen.

57

I WALK FOR HOURS through the snow. I didn't stick to the trail when I ran, and now my leg is aching and I am lost in the woods. For a while I hear the river in the distance, and I try to walk toward the sound, but soon it sounds like the river is all around me. Shortly after that, the sound has disappeared, and the forest is silent but for the creaking of trees.

I walk, and I walk, and I walk. Sometimes I pass a rock that is large and dry enough for me to sit on, and so I pause and rest. I do this several times.

Walk, rest, walk, rest.

At some point in the late afternoon, I entertain the notion that I am walking in circles, no farther than ten minutes from that cabin. It feels too hopeful to think I might have walked in a straight line away from the cabin and the ranch, that I might just be a few minutes' walk from the highway, where I might burst out of trees and onto the side of a busy road, desperately waving my arms. *Help!*

I never end up reaching the highway.

Instead, I find myself stumbling out of a thicket and into the base of the hill where Noah ran away from me that day, and I let out a low moan. I'm back where I started. I will never escape this place.

I am tired and starving and numb-footed as I walk up the hill, the house and the barn slowly coming into view. Old Caleb is standing by the barn entrance. He watches me as I approach him, pink-cheeked and out of breath.

"Hello," I say, when I'm close enough.

He squints at me. He doesn’t look furious so much as exasperated. “Where the hell did you go?”

“On a walk,” I say. I hope I look calm. I need a moment inside, in the safety of my bedroom, to pull the covers over my head and slow my breathing and think.

“Well,” Old Caleb says. “Maeve’s fever has broken.”

“Oh.” Of course it did. “Good.”

“I was worried you might’ve taken her with you.” He squints up at the sky, leans over, and spits loudly. Glances sideways at me. “You know she’s not vaccinated.”

I am about to reply, and then a strange sound cuts me off. The sound of an engine. A car is rolling up the driveway. Not a blue truck, but a red Subaru, climbing the hill, rolling slowly through the drops and divots in the bumpy dirt road, until it pulls up to the barn, and stops.

The engine is killed.

A woman steps out.

She’s my clone. She looks exactly like me, except her hair is shorter. But everything else about her is the same: the sharp face, the dark brown eyes. Even the way she walks. Identical.

I stand there and watch as this woman, this uncanny version of myself, approaches me. She’s crossing the driveway, and then she’s passing the chicken coop, and then she’s standing ten feet from us.

She brings a hand to her face to shield her eyes from the sun. “Well,” she says. “I sure love what you’ve done with the place.”

Judgment Day is here.

PART THREE

THE FUTURE

THIS IS THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself.

This is a day I imagined for myself.

This is a day I imagined.

This is a day.

Imagine.

This is a day I—

—

"Clementine," I say.

My grown daughter doesn't smile at the sound of her name.

—

Online Natalie, Offline Natalie.

Good days, bad days.

Dirty, clean.

Lost, found.

Hello, ladies!

—

Clementine's hair is the shortest I've seen since she was two years old. It's cut into a severe little bob. A tattoo, some sort of symbol, is inked into the soft of her wrist. She's my height, my weight. She stands the same way I stand: straight and still, like a blade of grass. She's wearing an expensive-looking winter puffer coat, dark blue jeans, and waterproof boots. At the sight of so much modern clothing, my heart gives a double-panged squeeze. Then my eyes travel to my daughter's face, and the breath leaves my body.

This is my daughter, *the child who made me a mother.* A fully grown woman. No ring on her wedding finger. She's never given birth. I can't explain how I know that. I just do. A mother always knows.

I turn to my husband. “Well,” he says. “What a wonderful surprise.”

Clementine cocks her head, gives her father a funny expression, one that tells me they haven’t been colluding behind my back. He didn’t ask her to come here. He’s as surprised to see her as I am. Good.

“When you live without a telephone or internet, then everything must be a surprise,” she replies evenly.

There’s a noise by the porch. All three of us turn to the house. Mary is looking at us through the window. She sees us and disappears quickly out of frame.

I turn back to face Clementine, who’s now staring at the house with a nakedly emotional face. Her first sign of distress.

Run, Natalie. Take your chance. Push her to the ground and take the keys and get into the car and go.

Instead, I behave courteously. “Do you want to come inside?”

—

It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Heller Mills. I’m Lucy, one of the producers assigned with preparing you for the interview tomorrow. Before we get started, though: Are you comfortable? Can we get you anything? Coffee? Water? Kombucha?

And while I have you—this might be rude, please tell me if it’s rude, but I just need to know: Is it nice, having so much access to choice after so many years of living so sparsely? Or are you overwhelmed?

—

“So this is how you live,” Clementine says. She’s standing in the doorframe. She leans forward to get a good look around the kitchen, but her feet stay planted on the threshold. Like Shannon all those years ago, who seemed so obviously afraid to take a single step farther into her bedroom, lest she get sucked into the swirling vortex of this ranch. Good instincts, these women.

I stand by the kitchen counter, seeing the world through my daughter's eyes. This shabby little shithole. The fire in the corner; Maeve's sock puppets on the kitchen table. The cracks in the ceiling, little slivers of bright blue sky. I note, in relief, that it's not so cold today; the house feels warmer than usual. I hope she doesn't have to pee. I'd hate to have to show her the outhouse.

Clementine shivers. She pulls her zipper up to her chin. She shakes her head in sadness, or maybe disbelief. Then she looks at me, and her expression twists with anger. "My God, Mother, do you seriously still smile all the time? For what? For *whom*?"

All I can do is—well.

You know.

—

Producer Shannon. Nanny Louise. *A good wife doesn't speak to her husband that way.* Weekly Sunday school, warm pool water. Young Caleb, Old Caleb, Smart Caleb, Stupid Caleb (*one fish, two fish, red fish, blue!*). A pantsuit, ordered online, for a court hearing I would never attend. *Do you swear to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?* Baby-blue sneakers, a senatorial grin. *What's an ocean?* American-flag lipstick. Holy rodeo lights.

Shannon sued us, Shannon is suing us, Shannon will sue us.

A million voices in collective reply: *Apologize.*

—

I believe you've already been prepped on the talking points of this interview, so I'll just run through a quick overview of what we plan to cover tomorrow. What we're really curious about is what happened after your former producer accused you of assault. Your social presence really changed after that. It became increasingly…intense, I guess you could say, in terms of your homesteading lifestyle. And then when you chose to delete your account so abruptly…well, let's just say your followers have a lot of

questions! We'll spend some time today unpacking that time period, and then after that we can talk about your father-in-law's failed presidential campaign, and then—well, you can drive that part of the conversation. How does that sound?

—

"Clementine," Caleb says, "why are you here?"

Ah, I think distantly. *Yes. Good question, idiot!*

"Why are *you* here, Dad?" Clementine says. "Have you ever even asked yourself that? Why you're still here, after all this time?"

"We were trying to be good Christians. We really were. Trying. Good Christians." It's only here when I realize I'm speaking, and so I forge onward, stumbling and stuttering like a radio channel moving in and out of frequency. Something about being a good wife, a good mother. Something about God. Something about love.

Clementine watches me with an expression like flat soda as I trail off into silence, and then she turns to her father. "Is she always like this now?"

He pauses, then says, in the kind of diplomatic tone that would really make his father proud, "There are good days and bad days."

—

Good days, bad days, dirty, clean—

Welcome, y'all!

On good days I am calm. I believe that if I do a good enough job, if I prove to the world that I really am living out here on the land as an honest woman, a good Christian, a traditional wife, then the Angry Women will eventually forgive me, and the momentum will swing back in my favor, and the state of Idaho will drop all its pending charges against me, the ones the lawyers warned would come before Doug paid them all off: sexual assault, aggravated assault, improper working conditions, wire fraud, animal abuse, child abuse.

Do you see? If I finally, actually and truly, became the thing I claimed so long to be, then no one could call me a liar anymore. A liar anymore. A liar anymore. A liar anymore. A liar anym—

—

And then there are the bad days. *You don't need to know about those, Clementine. You don't need to know about the panic attacks and the conspiracy theories, the tests from the Lord, the producers in the trees, the pebbles, the microphones, the mornings I wake up and feel so spun around that I think I've been kidnapped.*

"We're so happy to have you!" I blurt out.

Clementine's face twitches, and my heart sinks. It was the wrong thing to say. *Bad Natalie.* My Online Natalie sensors fizzle and spark.

"She takes pills sometimes," Caleb says. "To calm down."

"Pills," I say. "Pills?"

"We crush them into a tonic," he tells Clementine. "They help, but we're always running out of them. Samuel gets them when he can, but with all the external scrutiny, we have to ration them."

"So she's constantly moving in and out of a pharmaceutical haze," Clementine says. "Perfect. That's just perfect."

"Clementine," Caleb says again. "*Why are you here?*"

"Stetson called," she says. "He said that Mom stumbled into his house, rambling about needing a doctor, then ran off just as quickly. He was really freaked out."

"No, no, no," I say. "It was nothing like that. It was—well, it was obviously—" I pause. "Did you say Stetson?"

There is a name I haven't allowed myself to say out loud in a very, very long time.

But Clementine is looking past me now. I turn to see Mary, standing by the door of her bedroom, staring at Clementine like she's just caught a glimpse of the afterlife.

—

So tell me if I understand this correctly: Your father-in-law resolved Shannon's lawsuit out of court and then paid the media to stop covering the story. Any person who spoke about you on social media in any speculatory fashion received a cease-and-desist order from his lawyers. He strong-armed local law enforcement to drop the case they were building against you, and then you, Natalie, began again. You ripped out the hardwood floors, renovated the walls and ceiling, and removed all signs of modernity from your barn and farming areas. You decided to live like the olden days—for what, though? To prove a point? To protect yourself from your legal troubles?

You're going to need to help us make sense of this, Natalie. You're going to need to help us understand.

—

The fact that Mary and Clementine are now standing next to each other is too much for me. For the first time in months, maybe ever, I see Mary with a critical eye: she's short for her age, undernourished, her complexion grubby and sallow. Her teeth are yellow and crooked. Even the blank look of terror on her face feels somehow antiquated; she looks like a Victorian woman who has stumbled upon a ghost. By contrast, Clementine looks impossibly modern. Her expression is so bright and penetrating, her clothes so clean and colorful, that I suddenly feel like I'm staring into the sun. What I am thinking, what I am trying not to think: *They look so much alike.*

"I'm Clementine," she says to Mary. "I'm your sister."

I look at Mary, who looks at Clementine. For a split second, two compartments in my mind become one.

My sweet little sea creature.

"Mary," I say.

My sixth child, my fourth daughter, looks at me the same way she always has: like I'm her mother. Like she's disappointed in this fact.

Then her gaze flickers past me to the kitchen window. She whispers, “What is that thing?”

“That’s a car.” Caleb clears his throat, and all three of us turn to look at him. “You’ve seen it before,” he adds. “You were young.”

—

A memory, fluttering past: me and Caleb, in the early days of the experiment, explaining the game to toddler Mary. That was how we talked about it then. A game, an experiment, *just a fun little trial!* It was gradual. Sometimes deliberate and sometimes instinctual. Like checkers. Like chess. Cowboys and Indians. Barbie Dreamhouse, but backward. *We’re going to pretend it’s the olden days*, *sweetie pie.* The pioneer days! *Just play-pretend!* Just a summer activity. Just a creative way for the family to bond over traditional values while we hid from the outside world and figured out a plan. Just, just, just. There was a greater plan, I swear. But at some point over the years—I really can’t remember when—the hiding became the plan. The beginning and the end.

But the clothes—were they the beginning or the end? It was the winter I gave birth to Mary. I spent my breastfeeding hours ordering piles and piles of pioneer reenactment outfits on my phone. I got them shipped to the ranch. *100 percent cotton*, the labels read. *Hand-dyed for lasting use!*

Labels. I haven’t thought about those clothing labels in years. They’ve long since been ripped out, and all that clothing has since been hemmed and patched within an inch of its life. Authentic, now. It really does look authentic.

Another memory, alive and twitching in my hand: “It’s fun,” I would say angrily at night, scrubbing furiously at some stupid iron pan while my children whined for a trip to Target, a weekend ride to a rodeo, anything to get out of the house, and Caleb stared wildly into the fire, his eyes alive and dead at the same time. They didn’t yet realize that those days were over for good.

“This is fun,” I would shout at them in the darkness. “Don’t you realize we’re having fun?”

—

The children left when Clementine turned sixteen. A month earlier, we had finally sold our car, the last piece of modernity we’d been holding on to. *Time to live off the land, kiddos!*

Clementine must have known what was coming. She took the kids one morning for a walk and they never came back. She knew those woods so well. Better than anyone. It would’ve been easy for her to find her way out.

Suddenly Caleb and I were parents of an only child, a little girl.

That is, of course, until we had more.

—

For what it is worth: I do not recommend giving birth in the pioneer days.

—

“The girls,” I say, thinking of Jessa and Junebug. “Are the girls okay?”

“In some way or another,” Clementine says evenly. “The girls aren’t doing well. But they’re alive. And the boys—well. The boys are here.”

I don’t know what to say to that. There are whole universes inside that response, but every firing neuron in my brain is hissing and sparking against the idea of inquiring further. So I say nothing, and Clementine, who is watching me carefully now, lets out a huff of breath and smiles an angry smile. Like she had made a bet with herself seconds earlier and is disappointed to learn she has won.

“Where do you live?” Caleb asks Clementine, and she shrugs and says simply, “Nearby. All of us live nearby.”

And now I am thinking of something my mother said in my early parenting days, back when Clementine was just a little thing: *They watch*

every move you make. It's true. For decades now, my children have been watching me. They're the only ones who never stopped.

Clementine turns to look at me. Her attention is almost unbearable.

"Tell me," she says. "What did you say to Mary? Where did you say we all went?"

Mary is watching me now, a careful frown on her face. Like she is remembering something for the first time in a very long time. Remembering what we said.

—

Dead. We told her they were dead. Gone to heaven. She was so young. A toddler. Milky mouth, moldable brain. It was easy. She barely understood what we were saying, and soon—*thank you, Mother, for the inspiration*—we didn't say they were dead, but simply that they were no longer with us.

They were dead, and then they were gone, and then they were not discussed at all, and soon we moved through each day as if they had never been here to begin with.

Children are amazingly flexible creatures. They can move through the centuries, adjust to new living conditions, transport themselves into new realities with surprising ease. She was so flexible, our little Mary, so capable of adjusting to this new life, where she was not the youngest sibling but the oldest, not the child of a famous woman but the child of a homestead family in the nineteenth century. *Good girl,* I would say on the days she didn't cry, or scream, or glance wildly around at the empty house like she was surrounded by ghosts. *Look how grown-up you are.*

For every detail of her life we snatched away, we added a new one to fill the vacuum. I taught her how to make soap, how to bake biscuits, how to snap at children when they don't do their jobs. I made up fake recipes for bullshit tonics. I gave her brothers, and a sister, and so much work to do. And Caleb? He told them stories about faraway battles, cowboys and savages, good and evil. "Prepare for battles," he would say. "Civil war is coming."

Together, we taught our children how to pretend.

And do you know what? If I had been as flexible as Mary, everything would've turned out fine. But I was not flexible, and over those years those years those years those years those years those years—

—

Pause, Natalie. Take a deep breath. Try again.

—

Over those years my brain began to whine and smoke from the pressure, until finally it snapped in half like a twig.

—

There really was no other option.

—

You believe me, don't you? That there was no other option?

—

Doug was on board with the idea, and then he wasn't. He couldn't believe we sold the car. Came to visit one day and saw Caleb digging a hole for an outhouse. Said we had lost our fucking minds. But by then, it was too late. The hole we had dug—too big. And so he reversed slowly down the hill and never visited us again.

And my mother—we weren't speaking much by then. By the time she realized what was happening—she was—and we were—

—

“It happened slowly,” I say. “The transition. The—believing. It happened so slowly, and then—”

And then?

—

What then, Natalie?

—

“And then I found out I was pregnant again, and everything changed, and I realized I had to leave.”

There’s a long silence in the room.

“I couldn’t, *I can’t,* give birth in this place again,” I add firmly, looking around at everyone. “The last time…” I trail off, suddenly sick.

The last time. The last time with Maeve. Was. Terrible.

“Oh, Mom.” Clementine sighs.

“Are you saying—” Caleb shakes his head. “Are you saying you think you’re *pregnant,* Natalie?”

“I’m saying I *am* pregnant,” I say. “And I need to—well, I need to get rid of it.” I pause, letting the full weight of their shock sink in. They must both be so shocked, hearing their mother talk openly about the need for an abortion. How modern of me. *See, darling? Look at this old dog with her new trick!* “I know it’s awful. But I just—well—I need to get rid of it. And soon. I must be twelve weeks along by now.”

“Mom,” Clementine says, “you’re fifty years old. You’re not pregnant.”

Now it’s my turn to fall silent. *Come again?*

“It was unbelievable that we could have Maeve,” Caleb mutters softly. “And *that* was ten years ago.”

Yes. Right. *Sorry!* So many compartments in my mind, so many mirrors of myself grinning back at me, it’s hard to keep track of—I can’t always find my—

Maeve, sweet thing, is ten years old. Yes. That’s right. That sweet girl, *my little shadow,* is—how would a modern woman say it? *My daughter has*

learning deficiencies. My daughter is developmentally challenged. My daughter was born blue in the face, not breathing for minutes, and my husband is not a midwife, and I am not a doctor, and so we wasted precious time screaming at one another, a dead child on the floor between us, until eight-year-old Mary thought to breathe into her little sister's mouth.

"I will not give birth here again," I say a second time.

"You're not pregnant, Mother," Clementine says. "You're going through menopause."

There's another long pause. Then Mary says hesitatingly, "What's menopause?"

—

Someday you won't be able to have children.

That was what my mother said of menopause when I asked her about it as a young woman. At the time, the thought panicked me, made me sick with fear, and so she reassured me that this time of decay was a long way away for me; that I had plenty of time to have plenty of babies. *A whole life ahead of you.*

Well. Here I am, on the other side of a whole life. When I was a child, and I was forced to imagine a world where an adult woman couldn't have children, I felt a terrible heaviness in my chest, a crushing sadness. But now that I'm here, I feel very light. Like a weight that settled onto my shoulders as a child has finally, decades later, been lifted.

Welcome to the afterlife.

—

I drop into a seat at the table. No baby, no pregnancy, never again will I give birth in this world. What is that feeling, bubbling up in my throat?

Laughter. I really want to laugh.

But laughter would be inappropriate, because Clementine is asking her father about the food now. "Do you actually grow any of your own food? Or are you just as bad at farming as you always were?"

He glares at her. “You’ve become hateful,” he says. “A spiteful woman.”

“I take it that means no,” she says breezily. “It’s interesting—I knew the boys had some creepy little cabin out here, I knew they still saw you sometimes, but I didn’t know they were keeping you all *alive.*”

Mary speaks before Caleb can. She raises a hand. Her expression has such emotional velocity to it that she looks suddenly like a mirror of Clementine. “Are you saying that the neighbors are my brothers?”

—

Do you think you have a mental illness, Natalie?

What about your husband?

What about your father-in-law, and your sons, who helped you manage this fantasy for over a decade?

What about your followers, the ones who thought your life was like this from the jump?

—

The neighbors are our sons. Samuel, Stetson. They are the ones who have been, for years now, supplying us with vegetables and fruits and big frozen hunks of grocery store butcher’s meat when the traps come up empty and the fish don’t bite.

This is the part I have never known, not even in the farthest recesses of my flickering lightbulb mind. I never knew. It’s a delight to be able to say that honestly. *Can you hear me, your honor? I really didn’t know!* I suppose a normal person would have wondered how their incompetent husband could have managed to provide food, year after year, but do you know what? I didn’t wonder once. I have become—*hear me when I say this*—a good motherfucking Christian woman. I do not, anymore, ask questions of my husband that he does not want to hear, and my husband—oh yes, a very good Christian man—does not tell me things I do not need to know.

Every few days, for the better part of ten years, my husband has left the house and wandered out into the fields, and I have watched him go. I have said to myself, *He's going to work the fields*, when what he really has been doing during that time is walking out, out, out into the woods, until he reaches the small cabin a full mile away and steps inside, dusting off his shoes to sit on the couch and watch a football game. Then he has accepted a crate of dirt-smeared grocery store vegetables and carried them home to us. *All in a day's hard work.*

No wonder Abel was grinning so hard when he came home that first day. What a delicious secret for a young boy to have.

Since she arrived here, Clementine's face has been a carefully constructed mask of disinterest. Now she looks at me like I'm the most pitiful thing in the world. "Did you honestly never suspect?"

I know what she's thinking: how blind and stupid her mother is. How crazy. My daughter is so modern, so she's probably trying to think of the correct diagnosis for me. That's what liberal women do in the face of what they can't understand. Bipolar, maybe. Schizophrenia. Multiple personality disorder!

Bitch, I think. *Spoiled little brat.*

"I don't know how to answer that!" I say cheerily. I am smiling like a game show host.

She looks at Caleb. "Why did you go along with it?"

"I didn't want to leave your mother and the children alone out here," he says passionately. "I didn't have a choice, Clemmie. You have to believe me."

I roll my eyes. If there's one thing I know, it's that this is a lie. *Your father went along with it because it was a perfectly fine deal for him. Better than fine. Ideal. Because it allowed him to escape from the pressure and criticism and disappointment that has followed him his whole lousy life. Because he became crazy, a doomsday prepper loon of a conspiracy theorist, and because he always dreamed of a world where he could do absolutely nothing and have no one say boo, and I, the ever-loving wife, offered this to him on an increasingly large silver platter until finally we*

reached the grand finale. Because Shannon, it turned out, was completely right: he had so little to give up, and so very much to gain. And if I really think about it, he's always been a stupid fucking asshole to begin with.

Caleb is about to continue, he looks ready to give a stump speech, but then Clementine holds up a hand. "I want to talk to Mom," she says. "Alone."

This might be, of everything, the thing she has said that shocks me the most.

—

Mary locks herself away with Maeve and the boys in the bedroom, and Caleb skulks outside, glancing inside at the windows every few moments while I make lunch. Clementine watches me from the table. She doesn't seem to be in any rush. With trembling hands, I slice the loaf of bread, then spread butter across the sides. I set the plate of bread down on the table. Clementine looks at it. I know what she's thinking: it's a far cry from the elaborate meals I used to make, which always turned out ready just after she'd gone to sleep.

She takes a bite of my buttered bread. Chews. "Jesus," she says. "This is terrible."

—

Some of your children have, as adults, become passionate activists against child exploitation on social media. How does that make you feel?

—

"Mother," Clementine says, when she's finished eating, "do you remember Shannon?"

I smile. "Of course I do."

Bitch fucking homewrecker cunt.

“She and I have…kept in touch, let’s say, over the years. When I told her I was going to try to see you, do you know what she said?”

I don’t reply. At the mention of Shannon, I am suddenly so furious I’m worried I might pass out.

“She told me to go easy on you. She said it would be hard for you, seeing me. Seeing how I’ve moved forward.”

I nod, but I’m not quite listening. I’m stuck on Shannon—who’s in her late thirties now. Amazing. For the first time in almost twenty years, I realize something strange: the world didn’t stop when we left it. Clementine didn’t die. She grew up. And Shannon—

And the world—

I shake my head. Clementine and Shannon and the world and Clementine and Shannon—

“Civil war?”

Clementine doesn’t answer. She just looks at me, like she’s deciding how to respond. Finally she leans forward on her elbows and says seriously, in a tone that is not unkind, “Do you know, Mother, what the hardest part of leaving you was?”

I say nothing.

“It wasn’t walking through the woods with the kids, or waiting for a car to stop. It wasn’t moving in with Grandma, all five of us in a single bedroom. It was months after I’d gotten to the other side, when I realized that every single thing you told me about the world was a lie.” Her hands are shaking. She’s staring at her own fingers as she says, “Everything was so much…*better* than I thought it would be. The people were nicer. The cities were cleaner. I was right: it was better living with Grandma and Abigail than it was with you. And when they took us to see the ocean—” She stops, her breath suddenly shaky. She inhales deeply, then exhales. Speaks again. “I just didn’t get it. I didn’t get why my family never wanted to be a part of it.” Her eyes meet mine. “Why did you never want to be a part of it?”

—

WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR YOU TO BE KIND?

—

“Forward,” I say. “Forward?”

And just like that, her fury gives way to sadness. “Time only moves in one direction, Mom.”

Then Caleb throws open the door, startling both of us. “That’s enough girl time,” he announces. He’s agitated now. He’s probably been fuming outside, working himself into a froth imagining what we were talking about inside the house, without him. *Welcome to the Ladysphere: Where the Women Go!*

He points a finger at Clementine. “I think that it’s time for you to leave.”

Clementine looks perfectly peaceful now. “I agree,” she says. She stands up. “Where are the kids?”

Caleb and I speak at once. “The kids?”

“Oh, yes. Did I forget to mention that? Silly me. I didn’t come here for lunch. I came here for the kids.” She pulls a folded-up paper out of her jacket pocket. “I have a warrant, if you’d like to see.”

She hands it to Caleb. He doesn’t read it, just shakes it and says, “What is this?”

“Something I’ve been wanting to do for a very long time, but couldn’t until Doug ran out of money and Stetson called the officers and agreed with everything I’ve been saying for years.” Clementine looks at me. “So thank you, Mother, for reminding my brother how crazy you truly are.”

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. *Think, Natalie, think.* The kids are leaving. The kids—leaving. Which means—

No fucking way. I will not stay at this ranch alone with my husband.

“Well,” I say lightly, “a warrant is a warrant. No fighting that. I’ll just go pack some of my things and then we can—”

“Oh no, Mother. You’re not coming with us.”

My smile falters.

“Why?”

She shrugs. Her eyes are red, but no tears fall. “Because I said so.”

“You cannot leave me here,” I say quickly. “Clementine. *Clementine.* Listen. You cannot leave me here, alone. You cannot leave me here *with him*.”

She cocks her head, and I see an ounce of sympathy in her gaze. “You’re the one who built this place, Mom. You don’t need anyone’s help to leave it.”

—

It happens so quickly that it feels like I’m skipping along the surface of my own life. Clementine, down the hall, knocking on a bedroom door, telling the children to come out. Introducing herself softly to Maeve and Abel and Noah, and then guiding them toward the car. In minutes, they’re inside, buckling their seat belts, too stunned and terrified to fight. Caleb and I stand on the sidelines, looking equally helpless. It’s like the force of Clementine’s presence alone has short-circuited the whole family.

“You should say goodbye to your children now,” Clementine says to Caleb and me, when they’re all in the car. “You probably won’t see them again for a very long time. Maybe not ever.”

“I don’t understand,” Caleb says, but I do, and so I walk over to the car and open the back door. Little Maeve peers up at me. “Mama?” On her other side are the boys, limp in their seats, pale with fear. They’ve spent their whole lives preparing for battle, these boys, they’ve been waiting and wishing and planning for enemy intruders, and now, in a single instant, the battle has been waged and won. The boys have lost before they had a chance to pick up their imaginary swords. They are prisoners to the victor, now—or maybe, I think numbly, they’re prisoners who are suddenly set free.

I shake my head of those thoughts, turn away from the boys and look at Maeve. It feels like a cruel trick that the last child I ever had is the first one where the love came easily. “I love you, Maeve,” I say. My tears fall all

over Maeve's face as I kiss her cheeks and forehead and nose. I grab at Noah next to her, but he pulls away. "I love you, I love you, I love you," I say to them. "It's not my fault. Do you hear me? Don't believe what they tell you. Do you hear me, Maevie? Don't listen to them."

Maeve doesn't reply. She won't remember this. I know that. There's too much novelty all around her. When I step back, she's looking around the inside of the car with a blank expression, like all the emotion has been stunned out of her. Finally, her gaze reaches me, and she seems to realize for the first time that I'm not in the car with her. "Mama, come," she says. She starts to cry.

"I love you, honey. Do you hear me? I love you so much."

In the background, I can feel Mary and Clementine watching me, silent.

I shut the door, waving brightly at Maeve. Now Clementine is guiding Mary to the passenger seat of her car and helping her in. Mary's eyes are wider than I've ever seen them. Clementine shuts the passenger door. I watch as my daughter leans forward wordlessly and traces her fingers softly along the radio buttons.

Soon all the children in the back seat are crying. I can hear them through the paneled glass: the boys are calling for their papa, Maeve is screaming for her mama. Mary is sitting in the passenger seat, her face as white as the winter sky.

Suddenly I feel sick. I tell myself Mary's off to something better; that someday not too far from now, she will run through an outdoor shopping mall, laughing and shrieking with other girls her age. She'll be a normal girl, with normal problems and a normal life.

This is a lie, of course. Mary will never be normal. All our children will suffer, but it is Mary, I think, who will suffer the most.

—

And then they are leaving.

In one moment, Clementine is telling me that animal control will be here shortly for the animals, and in the next minute the car is backing down

the hill, Clementine looking over her shoulder to steer, Mary staring at nothing, all three younger children sobbing in the back seat. Finally, right as the car is about to drop out of sight, I realize what I'm supposed to be doing. I fix my expression into a smile and lift my hand into the air. I wave at my babies. I shout lovingly, "*Goodbye!*"

—

And then we are alone.

Caleb is standing next to me in his stupid pioneer husband outfit. Impossibly, he looks as lost as I feel. "The children are gone," he says. "I can't believe the children are just—gone."

I wonder: How many disappearing acts can a single family survive?

I look at my husband, who looks sorrier than I've ever seen him, and I think: *chicken*, *egg*. Lord, I'm so tired of thinking about chickens and eggs.

Lord. I pause. *Where is the Lord?* I crane my ear toward the sky and strain to listen.

Nothing. I hear nothing. Strange. Now that I think about it, I can't even remember what He sounds like.

"I think you were right, Caleb."

He's still staring at the bump of the hill where Clementine's car vanished from sight. The dust is still floating in the air. "Right about what?"

"I think," I say slowly, "that we should've gotten a divorce a very long time ago."

He turns to look at me.

"I think I hate you," I say.

"I think," he says slowly, in a stunned sort of voice, "that I might really hate you too."

I turn back to look at the house. It really does look, from this angle, like a cardboard cutout. Like I could step forward and knock it over if I wanted to.

"I think we should go," I say suddenly.

"Go? Go where?"

“Away.” Yes. That is right. I nod decisively. “I need to get away from this ranch before I—well, before I lose my mind again.” I can feel it, the force of Clementine’s arrival, how she magnetized all my thoughts into momentary order—and I can feel it just as powerfully, how the momentary order is already shivering and straining from the effort to hold on.

There will be consequences if I leave. But none so great as the consequences of staying.

“Well?” I say impatiently. “Do you want to come with me or not?”

A long moment passes.

“Yes,” he says. “I think I do.”

I reach for his hand, and together we walk.

EPILOGUE

FIVE YEARS LATER

THIS HOUSE IS NOT MY HOUSE. It's smaller, much smaller, and the kitchen is all wrong.

"Are you sure?" I say. "That we're in the right place?"

The producer told me her name a few minutes ago, but I forget it now. Something harmless, I think, like Lucy. "I'm sure," she says, and guides me to the kitchen table, which is similar to my kitchen table, but definitely not my kitchen table.

She pulls out a chair and helps me sit. It's hard to keep balance with the ankle cuffs, especially the way I keep looking around, getting distracted by the details. The production crew members are rushing past, setting up lights and screens. I've been told we're running behind schedule.

"A flower vase makes no sense here," I say. "And these muffins—who chose these?"

A young man dressed in black and standing a few feet away looks at me, then the muffins, suddenly nervous. "I did so much research," he says, to everyone in the room. "In the pioneer days, they made this exact recipe, so I just figured—"

Quietly, Lucy says, "They never had a historically accurate household, John. I told you that in last week's email."

He looks truly panicked now. "No one told me not to make the muffins!"

"We never made muffins," I say loudly. "We made *biscuits*. And this isn't the right house, I'm telling you, this layout is all wrong!"

Lucy sends the boy away with a sharp look, and then she turns back to me. "Natalie, can I ask you a question? When we were driving up to the house, did you look out the window?"

I hesitate, then say, "Yes."

"So you saw when we turned onto your old dirt road?"

I've always hated games, and this feels like a game. "Yes."

"And you saw the mountains and the big red barn?"

“Yes.”

“So help me understand: How could this *not* be your house?”

I open my mouth and close it. Suddenly I feel unmoored.

“Do you see how I might be confused, Natalie?”

“Well, yes,” I say. “But—”

Then I am saved by a commotion: Reena Magliotti walks through the front door in a flurry of earth tones and clacking heels, a cashmere coat shrugging off into the arms of an assistant, revealing a silk blouse that has, I notice approvingly, not a single wrinkle to be found. I watch her as she speaks to a series of crew members, her gaze carrying wondrously around until finally it lands on me. “Natalie,” she says. “My God.” She looks—yes. Gobsmacked.

Suddenly I am nineteen years old again, pregnant with my first child, and Reena is hungover, standing before me with that same astonished look on her face. Then I blink again, and I am fifty-five years old, covered in worldly shackles. A few literal ones too.

“Reena,” I say. Instinctually, like the raising of a moat to shore up for battle, the corners of my lips lift.

She’s a regional anchorwoman now, after years of climbing slowly up the media ladder. She lives in Chicago. She is far from a household name.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” she says. “I can’t believe I’m here.” She looks around again, taking in the muffins, the cameras, the lights; the flower stems strewn across the cutting board, the jar of sourdough starter placed *just so* by the window. “I think this might be the strangest day of my life,” she says.

“Not me,” I say happily. “I’ve had much stranger days. But Reena, we have a problem.”

Her eyes flit back to me. “What’s that?”

“This isn’t the correct house.”

She frowns. “Oh?”

“And Lucy over here”—Lucy is now desperately trying to catch Reena’s eye—“she keeps trying to tell me it *is* my house. But she’s lying to me.”

Reena is maintaining eye contact with me now, ignoring Lucy's waving arms. "Ah," she says. "I see." She pulls out the chair next to mine, and sits down. "Natalie," she says, looking closely at my face. "Do you still want to do this interview?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I just want to make sure you're feeling…comfortable. On top of your game." She leans forward and says quietly, "And I want to make sure you weren't coerced, or anything like that."

"Not at all. My lawyers tell me this is the best way for America to see the true Natalie Heller Mills," I recite faithfully. "It's how I'm going to"—I lift my hands to make air quotes—"*engender sympathy.* And I told my lawyers if that was the case, then there was only one person up for the job of speaking to me: Reena." I lean forward confidentially. "That's you."

"All right," Reena says. She's smiling now. "And forgive me, Natalie: But you do know this interview will be seen by quite a lot of people?"

"Oh yeah," a nearby camera girl says. "It's pretty much guaranteed to go viral."

"Virality," I inform the girl mildly, "is a curse. But yes." I look at Reena. "I'm aware of how this will work. I'm not an idiot, you know."

"Of course you're not. I just—"

"God, Reena. You always were *so* annoying." I survey her bemused expression. "I was always prettier than you, but I'll admit: you look fine for your age."

"That's very nice of you."

This is a huge win for her career, this interview with me. I'm surprised she hasn't thanked me yet.

"Tell me," I say, while someone dabs her nose with an oil blotting sheet, "did you ever have a family?"

"Oh," she says, keeping still. "I'm not sure we have time to get into all that."

"We should get rolling," a producer adds. "Or we're going to lose the light."

I roll my eyes. “I’ve spent far too much of my life chasing the light.” Then I say to Reena, who has just received a stack of note cards, “Did you, though? Get married? Have kids?”

She hesitates, then says, “I have a family now, yes—but it probably looks different than what someone like you would imagine.”

“What does that mean?” I press.

She taps the stack of note cards on her thigh. “How about this: I’ll answer your questions after the interview. Okay? I’ll tell you all about it.”

—

Soon we’re surrounded by lights. Reena is sitting opposite me. She lets out a long, shaky breath while the producer counts down. “We’re live in five, four—”

“Don’t be nervous,” I say quietly. “You’re going to do great.”

Reena looks at me like she can’t tell if I’m mocking her or encouraging her. *We’re a team*, I try to signal with my eyes. *We need each other.*

The red light flicks on.

Reena looks into the bright white light. “My name is Reena Magliotti. I’m the nightly news anchor for WUBZ Chicago, and I am Natalie Heller Mills’s former college roommate.” Crisp smile. “A few months ago, I received a call from ABC News with a highly unusual request: They were hoping to interview Natalie, who is currently serving out a thirty-year sentence for four counts of aggravated child abuse, among other lesser charges. I was told that Natalie was interested in having a conversation only if the conversation, in question, was with me. To say I was surprised by this request would be an understatement. Tonight, I want to get to the bottom of *why*, exactly, Natalie would choose me of all people to interview her.”

I’m ready for this question. I’ve been waiting my whole life to answer this question. *Hello, Angry Woman.*

“But we’ll get to that later in the interview. First, I want to talk about the book news that has lit America on fire this last week.”

I frown.

“Natalie, do you know what book I’m talking about?”

“No, I don’t.” What is this, a book club?

“Well. In advance of this interview, I was lucky enough to receive an early copy.” Someone has just handed Reena the book. She leans forward, handing it to me.

I look at the book in my lap, run my fingers across the raised letters of the title: *The Book of Mary.*

“It’s your daughter’s memoir,” Reena says. “It will be released this week. By preorders alone, it’s expected to be a bestseller. Did you know that?”

“No,” I say softly. “Well—yes.” My lawyers mentioned something, but I never thought it was—I didn’t think it could—

Suddenly I am acutely aware of my own body: the coat of sweat on my hands, the heat of the production lamp on my face and neck.

This house is not my house.

“Open it,” Reena says. “See what it says.”

I open the cover, and then flip past a few blank pages. Finally, my eyes rest upon the first printed words:

For my mother

I look up at Reena.

This kitchen is not my kitchen. These children are not my children. This life is not my—

“I was wondering if you’d read the prologue today.”

“Right now?”

“Yes. Right now.”

“You read it,” I say. Then I think of my lawyers, who always tell me to be polite, and my mother, who always told me to be kind, and so I add quickly, “Please!”

—

Once upon a time, a little girl lived out in the mountains, in a small cabin on a hillside, surrounded by woods. There was no town nearby. There were no

other families. But the girl was never lonely, for she had her mama and her papa and her sister and brothers, not to mention their beloved cow and their coop full of chickens and their trusty quarter horse.

It was a quiet, simple life. The little girl never wanted for anything. In the mornings, she went out to the chicken coop and got eggs for breakfast. During the day, she did all the chores a little girl is fit to do. And at night, she sat with her family by the fire, listening to stories about faraway lands. The only food they ate was the food they caught or grew. The only stories the little girl heard were the ones her parents told her, about wolves and cowboys and Indians, about the great battles of good versus evil that were being waged out there beyond the woods, a very far ways away. Sometimes the little girl would have strange dreams, dreams that almost felt like memories. When she woke up screaming, her papa and mama would remind her that none of the nightmares were real. She was safe, they insisted. Safe and warm and hidden in the world they'd built just for her. They would never let the wolves inside.

Then the little girl grew up and realized her mama was sick. When she was old enough to understand, Pa told the little girl that her mama was filled with evil spirits. He said it was her job now to take care of the house and her siblings. He told her she needed to become a mother for her own mama. And so she did.

Years passed. Soon the little girl was no longer a girl at all, but a young woman. And one fine day, she was walking in the woods, looking for saffron, when she saw an angel standing in the trees.

A woman, standing still as a blade of grass, wearing clothes so bright it looked like she was glowing. At first, the girl thought it was her mama, restored to health. Then the angel spoke.

She told the little girl a terrifying story, too horrible for her to ever believe. The angel said the little girl's parents were not parents at all but wolves. *If you want a better life*, the angel said, *then you and your siblings must come with me.*

But the girl didn't want a better life. She didn't even know what that could possibly mean. She began to think this woman was no angel, and so

she ran back into the house and vowed never to return to the woods again.

Then one day, not long after the first time they met, the angel reappeared in the kitchen of the girl's house. The request was now a demand: *It's time for you to come with me.* And so she did.

—

The little girl in the woods was me. Mary Heller Mills.

It's been five years since I left Yesteryear Ranch. I live in Santa Monica now, in a small apartment with my older sister, Clementine, and my little sister, Maeve, and my brothers, Noah and Abel. It was Clementine's idea to move here. She always wanted to live by the ocean but had refused to move away from town until she found a way to save us from our parents. The day we left Yesteryear, she broke her apartment lease. It was time, she said, to begin again.

In the last five years, my life has changed completely. One of the police officers I met the day we left the ranch gave me a journal and said I should write everything down, that so many things were going to happen, and so quickly, that I'd be happy to have a record of this time period. He felt really guilty after I told him I only knew how to write my family members' names. Then he gave me an audio recorder instead. One day, he said, I *would* be able to write it all down, but for now, if I couldn't write, I could speak.

I'm glad he told me that. If I hadn't had that audio recorder, then I might never have been able to write this book.

The story you are about to read is in many ways a very sad one, so I would like to give you my ending up front: I'm okay. I survived. I have my real family with me: my sisters and my brothers, a grandmother I never knew I had, an aunt who calls me weekly. I take reading and writing classes at the local community center. Most of my classmates are people who want to learn how to speak English. They're all very patient with me, even though I'm definitely the furthest behind in class.

On Saturdays, I work as a grocery bagger at the Whole Foods down the street, and on Sundays, we all go to a church in Ocean Park. During service, our pastor talks about a God who is so very different from the God my parents taught me to know. I am starting to think that church might just be another word for people. After service, if it's sunny, Clementine buys us donuts and then we walk to the beach. We've been living here for years, and still, she can't see the Pacific without crying.

Clementine says our mother will never read this book, but I know she will someday. And so I want to address her directly now, before I tell my story, the whole story, of what it was like to grow up on, and eventually escape from, Yesteryear Ranch:

Hello, Mama. I miss you.

Isn't that funny? Even after everything, I still miss you. I miss your temper and your jokes and your strange little moods. I miss what it felt like in the rare moment that a true smile lit up your face. I want you to know I'm sorry you got so lost in Yesteryear. I'm not sure if it's your fault, but I don't think that matters as much as some people say it does. I know it was hard for you either way.

There's a lot about our life that makes me sad, but do you know what makes me the saddest, Mama? How much beauty you've missed. Because it really is beautiful: this future you prayed we would never get the chance to see. I think you'd like it if you gave it a chance. But that's something I've learned in the years since I left the ranch: you cannot change people who refuse to be changed. You can only love them. So here it is, all the love I have to give, pressed into the pages of this book. I hope you read this book one day, all the way to the end, because as it turns out, the place where your life ends is exactly where mine begins: the moment when I saw the world and wanted every part of it.

—

The moment happened when we reached the end of our long dirt road. The car slowed to a stop. I tried to understand what was laid out in front of me.

“Highway,” Clementine said. “This is what we call a highway.”

The children were crying in the back seat. They didn’t understand. I stared at the smooth gray road, then I shrieked as a truck roared past, shaking the car frame. I thought I was going to die.

“The car’s going to pick up speed now,” Clementine said. “It’s going to go much faster than you’re used to. But I need you to trust me when I say: you’re safe.”

A trio of cars barreled past, one after another. How did they not slam into one another? What kind of world was this? How would we ever survive it?

And yet: the only future more terrifying to me than the one where we merged onto this highway was the one where we turned around. “I trust you,” I said, because I had to.

She reached for my shaking hand. “Hold on tight.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. Squeezed her fingers. Braced for impact. But there was none. Just a muffled rushing sound and a rising sensation in my stomach.

A moment later, I opened my eyes. We were flying, hurtling into the future, toward a world I couldn’t yet begin to imagine.

For the first time in my life, I smiled.

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Someone told me once that the mark of a good career is characterized by one's ability to attain the rare kind of employment that's meaningful enough to justify the time you spend away from loved ones. What a privilege to have finally gotten the job, so to speak—but the job will (the job *should*) always pale in comparison to the life that surrounds it. Thank you, Riley, for this life. Thank you for supporting me for the better half of a decade as I wrote. Thank you for believing so doggedly that something would come of it—and thank you most of all, now that something has come of it, for giving me a life I am always desperate to return to when the work is done. At this very moment, as I write, you are whistling in the kitchen, making breakfast for the two of us. Keep the coffee warm, please. I'll be finished in a moment.

Oh, and if I ever have a daughter: sweet girl, I wrote the ending with you in mind.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caro Claire Burke received her master's in fine arts from the Bennington Writing Seminars. She is the cohost of *Diabolical Lies*, a politics and culture podcast. *Yesteryear* is her first novel.



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