



THE VANISHED SERIES

BOOKS 1-3

B. B. GRIFFITH



FOLLOW THE CROW

B. B. GRIFFITH



BEYOND THE VELL

B. B. GRIFFITH



THE COYOTE WAY

B. B. GRIFFITH



THE VANISHED SERIES

B. B. GRIFFITH

OceanofPDF.com



Publication Information

The Vanished Series

ISBN: 978-0-9963726-5-7

Copyright: Griffith Publishing LLC ©2019

First published 2017

Written by B. B. Griffith

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means without the prior written permission and consent of the copyright owner.

Enquiries should be made to the publisher:

brad@bbgriffith.com

Publisher Information

Griffith Publishing LLC is a registered trademark.

bbgriffith.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

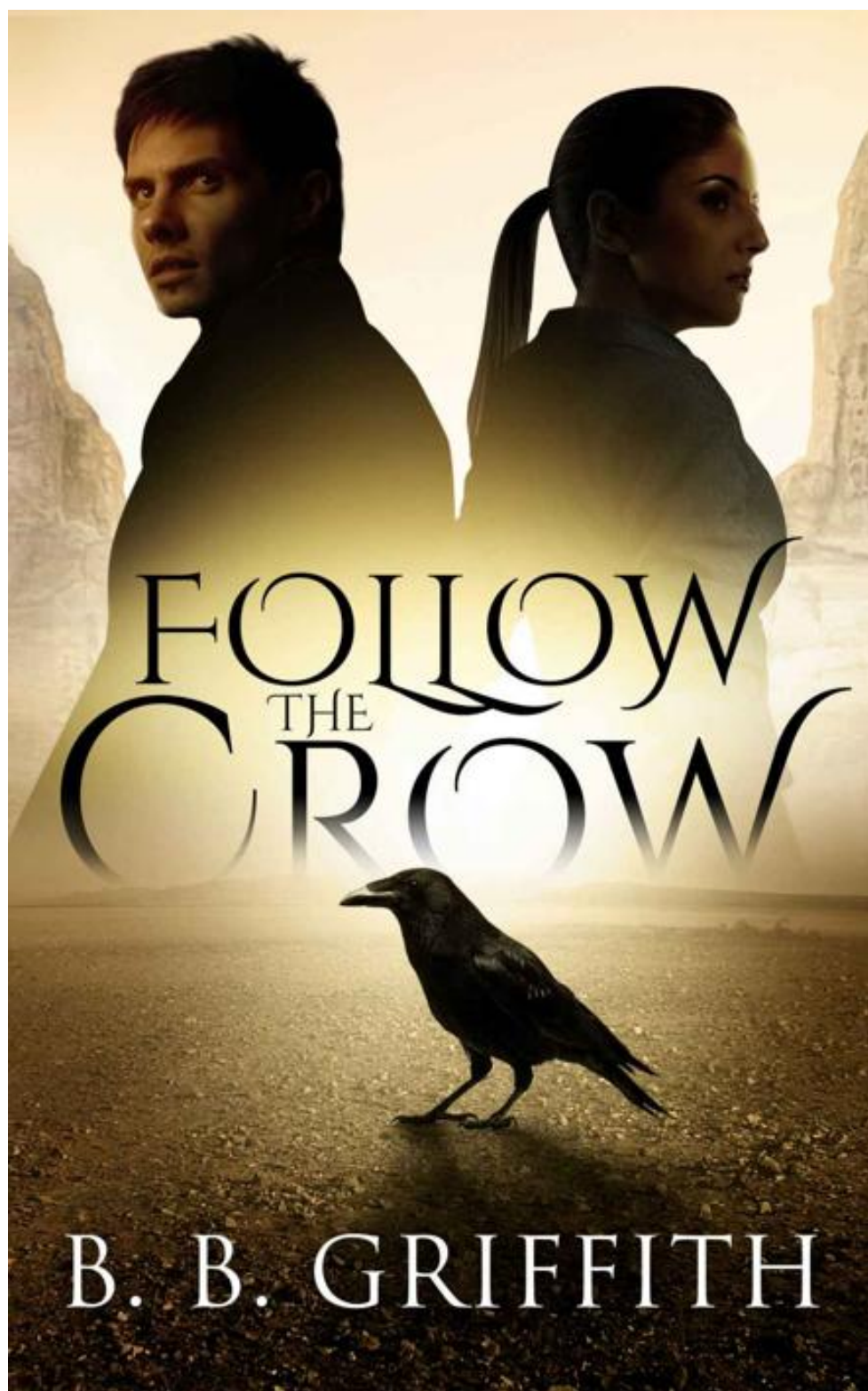
OceanofPDF.com

THE VANISHED SERIES

[Follow the Crow](#)
[Beyond the Veil](#)
[The Coyote Way](#)

[About the Author](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)



OceanofPDF.com

FOLLOW THE CROW

VANISHED: BOOK ONE

B. B. GRIFFITH

GRIFFITH PUBLISHING
DENVER

OceanofPDF.com

FOLLOW THE CROW - TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter 1: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 2: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 3: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 4: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 5: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 6: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 7: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 8: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 9: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 10: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 11: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 12: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 13: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 14: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 15: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 16: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 17: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 18: Ben Dejooli</u>
<u>Chapter 19: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 20: Caroline Adams</u>

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

***To Mom.
For everything.***

OceanofPDF.com

*Strange—is it not?—that of the myriads who
Before us passed the door of Darkness through,
Not one returns to tell us of the road
Which to discover we must travel too.*

- Omar Khayyám
Rubaiyat
(Edward Fitzgerald, trans.)

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

BEN DEJOOLI

If you drive due west from the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, for two hours and then cut north before you hit the city of Gallup, you'll see a big stretch of glass—flat nothing dusted with sand, slightly lighter in color than the rest of the Red Rock Country to the north. It's called the Chaco Flats, and it'll go wavy on you in the distance, give you an unsettled feeling in your gut and make your eyes water to look at it if you catch it at mid-day. If you were tempted to turn back at this point, to get yourself back to humanity in Albuquerque or to cut northwest to Santa Fe, you wouldn't be the first. You might even be tempted to keep going west, straight on to what passes for civilization at the shithole Nevada border towns, and if you did, I wouldn't exactly blame you. But if you have enough gas in the tank and want to see one of the greatest feats of social engineering the United States ever attempted, head north through the flats and keep driving until you hit the Chaco Navajo Reservation.

You can't miss it. Drive far enough north and all roads eventually lead to Chaco. Whether or not you'll be happy you came is another matter entirely. I promise you'll find the rez. But that's all I can promise. You'll know it by the dented sign that says Welcome to the Navajo Nation. The dents come from buckshot fired by drunk kids with nothing better to do. For years we kept replacing it only to find it shot up again the next morning. Nothing says "shoot me" like a pristine white tribal sign leering at you along a seven-mile straightaway. I'm a tribal cop, and even I know

that. But don't let some shot-up sign scare you away. There's plenty that'll scare you, mind. Just not that.

So say you drive from Albuquerque, and say you got the gas and the morbid curiosity once you hit the flats, and say you head north and pass the buckshot welcome sign, then you'd hit the welcome center. It's nice. Renovated just last year. Come on in and take a seat, and we'll show you a pretty video and an entire wall full of educational pamphlets about what it means to be Navajo, from patent (proud nation of warriors and statesmen) to present (it's complicated). There's a gift shop there too, and directions to our popular stopovers, including the Tribal Museum, Old Town, and the Wapati Casino.

The employees at the welcome center won't tell you this, because it's one of the cushiest jobs in the rez and they don't want to lose it, but we *really* hope that you hit the highlights and bounce out of here, hopefully a few bucks lighter. Maybe with a nice arrowhead collection or a little plastic tomahawk for the kids. Stick to the main road. Because if you don't, you'll start to notice things.

For instance, if you were to turn left off the main road about a quarter mile past the welcome center but before the turnoff to Wapati, you'd see that the cleaner houses and apartments sort of disappear on you. You duck your head to check the car radio then look up, and all of a sudden you're at a row of tract homes. This is the Painted Sand development, and it's not that bad, actually. What's bad is another quarter mile south, where there aren't even homes. Just metal boxes. Like a bunch of semi-trucks dropped their freight containers off the side of the road and left them there to slowly rust out but before that happened about six people moved into each one. This place doesn't have a name. At the station we call it Boxes. You go there with your partner, and you keep your gun hand free.

Today, if you were to drive past Boxes where the concrete turns to packed gravel and the gravel turns to dirt and the dirt turns to mud, you'd find a bootlegger's joint called Sancho's. And today, if you were stupid enough to walk inside, you'd find me,

Ben Dejooli, officer of the Navajo Nation Police, and my partner Danny Ninepoint. And if I saw you, I'd usually tell you to get the hell out for your own good, especially if you were white. But today I've got worse problems, and it looks like you're along for the ride anyway. Maybe you're a stubborn one, like me. Like most of us here at Chaco. Don't get me wrong, we have a lot of nice places on the rez. Places that are beautiful and peaceful and welcoming. It's just that the cops don't go to any of them.

Today, some poor Navajo ended up dead in the storeroom of Sancho's, strewn out on the floor amid empty bottles, the sick still damp on his face, and a needle still stuck in his arm. His rubber tie-off dangles loosely from around his bicep. He's purpled and stiff.

"Found him when I opened up," says Sancho, a ruddy-faced Navajo with a round, bearish head and a banded tail of black hair halfway down his back. I check my watch. Bootleggers open early in Chaco, and the sun is already high in the sky.

"That was almost two hours ago, Sancho," I say. Danny gives me a quick, wary look from under the flat brim of his hat. Danny thinks I talk too much. Or maybe it's that I just say the wrong things. He's usually right. Danny was an NNPD veteran back when I started, and that's going on six years now. He doesn't like to let me forget it. But when things go south, there is no better Navajo to have your back. He usually finishes things before they start. They call him Ninepoint because he was already as big as a nine-point buck back when you're that age when kids start giving you nicknames. So you can imagine how big he is now. He carries around a scalp knife with a bone hilt and a beaded leather wrist strap. He keeps it where his gun should be and his gun where his stick should be. It's a clear enough warning: mess with Danny Ninepoint and he's going straight for the knife.

Sancho glares at me for a half second longer than a civilian should rightly glare at a cop. And a couple seconds longer than he'd ever glare at Ninepoint.

"We didn't find him ÷til later. We called you boys as soon as we stumbled ÷cross him." He sounds like he's talking about a raccoon that got stuck in the ducts. I squat down to get a better

look at the dead guy. He's puffy and mottled, but I recognize him as one of the old regulars who works the Wapati penny slots. He's even got a Wapati Casino jacket on, muddy and frayed. Probably a comp. You sit for five years pumping coins into a box, and they'll be happy to give you a buffet voucher and a jacket. The jacket looks well-worn. The guy's old. Well-traveled. He doesn't strike me as the type to overdose on heroin like some teenaged tweaker, but I keep that to myself for now.

"You normally let your customers shoot up in your back room, Sancho?" I ask. Sancho doesn't answer me. One of the barflies shifts forward in his chair. He doesn't get up, exactly, but he's letting me know he could get up and over real quick if he wanted to. He's staring at me through the mirror behind the bar and rolling an empty shot glass. Danny sees it too and steps in.

"Now just hold on here. Nobody is saying anyone did anything." He points at the barfly. "And you, big fella, if I see you get up from that seat, I'll paste you to it. You hear me? Mean mug the mirror all you want, but you stay set."

"Sorry, Ninepoint," Sancho says on behalf of the bar, but he's looking right at me. "It's just that your partner's been known to run his mouth, and I like my bar and my life here just fine." His eyes glitter. He knows what he's saying.

See, Sancho doesn't like me. Neither do any of Sancho's regulars. Or most people on the rez, for that matter. Your average Navajo isn't exactly buddy-buddy with Navajo Police, no different from the US cops and the civvies on the outside, but they'll abide a steady presence like Danny. They know Danny. They trust Danny. Also, Danny doesn't give them much of a choice. With me it's different. There are two things a Navajo cop gets known for. The first is killing another Navajo. That's bad, but people know that sometimes bad things happen. Hell, sometimes they'll even allow that the other guy deserved it. The other is banishing a Navajo. That's worse. Danny never did that. As far as I know, nobody on the Force has done that. Nobody but me.

Technically NNPD can't banish anyone ourselves. Only the tribal court can do that. When you're banished it means you are no

longer Navajo. It means you've been thrown from the Navajo Way. Our path is no longer yours to walk. Your soul has been untethered from the souls of the People, and you are now a wanderer. It's a heavy hand. The heaviest. The only time it's been used in Chaco in recent memory was in a case I helped build against Joseph Flatwood. A case that didn't make me any friends, and that took away the best friend I had.

This isn't the first time someone's jabbed me about the banishment like this. It won't be the last. Still, it gets to me. It's not like I don't think about it every day already. That case ripped my family apart. It ripped my life apart. Flatwood and I ran together. He was my best friend right up until the second I decided to banish him. Now he's dead to me, but sometimes, when I dream about the old days, we're still raising hell together.

I know I should back down from Sancho, but I can't. I've never been very good at letting things be. "I cut Joey Flatwood loose, and he and I were friends. Imagine what I'd do to a shitbreath old pusher like you."

"Now Ben—" Danny says, but stops when the big fella and the man to his left, both of them built like fire-hydrants, get up from their seats. We're trained to defuse situations, but I never liked Sancho, and I never liked his bar. And right now, I just don't feel like defusing.

"You're what's wrong with this rez, Sancho," I say. "If it was up to me I'd dump you and your drunk fuck friends out in the middle of the flats then come back here and burn this place to the ground."

When I get in Sancho's face he backs down, even though he's a good foot taller than me. He wasn't lying when he said he cared about his business, such as it is. But the big fella and his friend don't back down. They're the type to get liquored up at ten in the morning hoping for something like this to go down. The type who think Navajo cops aren't real cops. The type who think Indians shouldn't police other Indians. There are a lot of people that think like these two, and for them, this is payday.

The quiet one decks me first. I shoulda known. It's always the quiet one. To my credit, I do stay on my feet. I'm small, but I'm wiry. I can bend. He damn near knocks me to the floor, but I pop back up like a toy and jack him once in the throat while I reach for my stick. He clutches his neck, and I flip my baton from its holster. Sancho is screaming something in Navajo that I know I should understand, but everything starts to spin and I don't recognize this type of spin. I've been hit plenty of times, even knocked out a time or two, and I know that spin. That's a suck-the-world-out-from-under-you spin where one second you're on your feet and the next you're on your face. This time it's sort of like when you stand up too fast, but worse. Like if you stood up too fast with a hangover and a sack of sand around your neck. There's a high-pitched ringing in my head. It's so loud I feel like it's coming from my face where he popped me. In my daze I think that maybe if I cover my face it'll mute the sound, so I do. I almost fall over, but I steady myself on a bar stool.

Under normal circumstances I'd probably be in for an ass kicking, hitching up like that in the middle of a fight like I need a tap out and a glass of water, but I've got Danny Ninepoint with me. By the time I shake the spins from my head, Joe and his quiet, sucker-punching friend are sprawled out on the floor, and Danny is pulsing one fist like it's just warming up and pulling his long black hair back around with the other.

"You alright, Dejooli?" he asks, and I can tell he's none too happy with me either.

"Yeah, just...wasn't expecting that."

"Maybe you should have," he says, and it's a reprimand and it stings, still, even after six years. But the good thing about Danny is that's where it ends. I try to straighten up, but the buzzing lingers and Danny must see it on my face.

"Watch the door," he says. "I'll write all this up."

I nod, grateful for some air. I hadn't noticed it before, but Sancho's smells like sulfur. Which is fitting, I suppose.

Outside I wave away a few of the rig monkeys fresh off the night shift looking for a drink, and they grumble but leave all the

same and wait in the shadows for us to finish up. For some reason the smell is slow in going away, and maybe it's the adrenaline, or the knock to the head, but everything around me is intensely bright. The ruts in the dirt are sharp and clean, the rust on the cars looks like rich mud. The dirt-spackled yellow of the tenement houses seems saturated, almost like it's glowing. When the fall sun breaks from the clouds, I can barely feel the heat it gives, but it flashes like a bomb of light. I cover my eyes and I turn away until it's cloudy again. When I turn back, a crow sits on top of our squad car, on the light array, and it's staring right at me.

The Navajo have a rhyme and reason for every living thing under the sun, and I'm going to be honest with you, I forget most of them. And if you were to point out a crow on any given day and ask me what it *means* I'd look at you like you're a lunatic. But this crow is different. This thing is massive, almost as tall as the driver's side window, and the flashing hazard lights don't faze it at all. Its eyes glisten black, then yellow, black then yellow, in time with the lights, and as it shifts in the light I see a peculiar coloring, almost like it's striped in dark red underneath the ink black of its outer feathers. I realize I'm expecting it to do something, like talk to me, or point the way to an ancient secret with its bony beak. Instead it takes a huge shit on the squad car, then squawks once and flies away just as Danny walks out of the door. He walks out alone. The fire behind his eyes is calmed. His face is wide and smooth and unknowable once more. Sort of like the Chaco flats.

"Can't help but notice you didn't arrest anyone," I say, resisting the urge to massage my temples.

"If we arrested every drunk Navajo we came across we'd have paperwork out the ass. You know this."

"How about every drunk Navajo who assaults a cop? How ÷bout that, Danny? In a sane world that guy is in jail."

Danny Ninepoint gives me that flat gaze that says I still don't understand. I'm not sure how I still can't understand after six years, but I somehow don't. I'm trying, but I keep not understanding.

"Sancho's run booze out of that place for almost twenty years now."

"So? It's still illegal."

"So you tell me what happens to guys like the big fella and all his drunk friends when they get their stipends and show up at Sancho's only to find we've shut it down because some boozebag swung at a cop. I booked the big guy once before on a disturbance call because he was hopped up on paint thinner. I let him out of the tank the next morning, and he asks for a ride right here. These are the type of guys who ask cops for rides to bars, Ben. I'd rather they be Sancho's problem."

I see his point, but I'm not willing to concede it yet. "And the dead man? We just gonna let that one slide too?"

Danny looks away, and for a split second I think he's gonna say yes. But then he shakes his head.

"Of course not. I reported him to IHS. They'll give us the autopsy. I know what you're thinking, but Sancho isn't a pusher. He's an asshole, but he's not a pusher. He's not lying when he says he wants to keep his business. He's not stupid. This place is his life."

I know Danny doesn't mean to bring up Flatwood. Danny doesn't hold it over me like the rest of the rez. It was Danny who told me to stick to my guns in the whole mess, to see it through, to take the stand against Joey. But it still stings.

"Look, the point is this is just what it looks like. That old gambler probably lost a bit too much at Wapati, went to a place he knows, Sancho or one of these guys forgot to check the back, and he settled in for one last kick. That's it. No need to get anybody arrested."

I still don't feel right about the whole thing, but my head is killing me and the place smells like a million matches, so I nod. Danny claps me on the back with his bowl of a hand. In the car, the radio buzzes from dispatch, crackles a code, and waits for a response.

"C'mon, we got shit to do," Danny says.

On the drive out I look for the crow. I see a lot of crows, but I don't see the one from before. I think I'd recognize that one if I saw it again, even at a glance.

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CHAPTER 2

BEN DEJOOLI

The rest of the day I'm thinking about Sancho's and that dead gambler. Danny and I go on a few more calls after lunch—routine stuff, a minor wreck outside of Wapati between an uninsured beater and some poor family in a minivan who cut through Chaco on their way to Farmington up north. We drove down along the floodplain to make sure it was all clear, meaning no tweakers or squatters. Sometimes people think the rains are done by this time in the fall, but we usually get one or two more big ones before the end of October, and they'll sweep that entire flood channel clean in a second. Dirt, debris, animals, people, all of it.

The whole time we're making rounds I want to bring up Sancho's, but I know Danny is done with it. He's old school. After he files a thing away in his mind, it's over. He's also seen a lot more dead Navajo than me. But it's more than just the OD. It's the whole scene back there. It was bad all around. The drunk and the dead and the smell of burning. Nobody should spend their last seconds on this earth holed up on the floor of Sancho's back room. And then there was the crow. And how I almost pitched over. On my drive home after our shift, some guy catches me spacing out at a stoplight and honks. I'm thinking about how palsied the gambler looked, like he was clawing at the needle with his last breath, and how sad it was that all the guy had to his name was a Wapati jacket, dull gold and dirty. Nothing at all in his pockets, no rings, no necklaces. Not even a shitty bead bracelet. Nothing.

I can feel my eye swelling up where the quiet one sucker-punched me. That'll be a fun little reminder of how I punked out when it counted, staring at me in the mirror for a few weeks. This is one of those days you should try to put behind you as soon as you clock out, but it just won't leave me.

The way I've been talking about the run-down tenements and shacks on the fringe of Chaco, you may think that where I live is a world away. You'd be wrong. My home is one half of a split duplex a quarter mile north of the police station. I live there with my father and my grandmother, which is pretty standard around here. People live with their families under one roof their entire lives. Believe it or not, with just the three of us there's a lot of space. We each have our own room, and there's a small kitchen and a yard out back that we share with the neighbors. Just one bathroom, but by now we all know the routine and nobody bumps into anybody else. In fact, it's downright spacious considering that when we first moved in, back before I joined NNPD, there were five of us. Back then it was my sister Ana and me in my room, and Mom and Dad in theirs, and my grandmother content in the small storage room off of the kitchen. But then I lost my sister, and because I lost my sister I lost my mom, although in a different way. She still stops by every now and then, but for the most part she's long gone. She lives in a studio apartment in Albuquerque now and has a job as a caretaker there. You could say that she banished herself.

It's late by now, and since the night quickens even earlier in the fall, it's nearly full on dark by the time I get home. But it's a false dark. You can't trust the early dark of fall. You want to think the day is over, but it's not.

As soon as I get in, I get a beer from the icebox. I'm not even going to try to hide it. Gam would know anyway, because she always knows. Dad's different. I could eat dinner with an icepack plastered to my face and my father wouldn't notice until it was brought to his attention.

I'm sitting in the kitchen eating a reheated mole stew and holding a cold beer to my puffy eye when Gam comes in. She

mostly cooks and knits these days, and the kitchen is her domain. She seems to know any time anyone crosses the small threshold she's carved out for herself there. When she sees me with the beer pressed to my face, she pauses. Her face darkens, then she sees that I'm eating lukewarm mole on rice and takes it from me, shooing me out of her space. She gestures for me to sit at the small table across from the refrigerator while she puts the stew on the stove top and takes a smoked chicken breast from the refrigerator. She shreds the breast with two forks while the sauce heats and then adds the chicken. All the while, she's quiet, waiting for me to talk, but I don't feel like talking, not least of all because she makes me do it in Navajo, and despite her best efforts, my Navajo has always sucked. She refuses to speak English. I have a hunch that she's fluent, but if you don't speak Navajo to her, she won't answer you. She stirs the stew and stares at me with that benign, blank expression her generation has. The look that says they've got all the time in the world to sit right there waiting for you. She's small—the top half of her body barely clears the counter—and her long black hair has gone entirely grey, but that look is still strong.

I sigh and set the can down, then I crack it open and take a big swig.

"Bad day at work," I say, in Navajo. She nods and plates the stew and sets it in front of me.

"Did you catch them?" she asks. I don't know how to explain the Sancho's situation in English, much less in Navajo, so I just grunt and give a weak nod. She watches me placidly, and I know she can see right through me, but just then Dad comes home and she stands again, ready to dish up another plate.

"I'm going to bed," he says in Navajo, waving her off. He slurs just a bit, and I can see Gam's slight frown.

"You should eat dinner," Gam shouts.

"I'm not hungry right now," he says quietly, and softly closes the door behind him. Gam covers the stew and sets it back in the refrigerator. Dad will eat it later tonight when he pads around the house, usually from one in the morning to three or four. He's up

every night at the witching hours. Has been ever since Ana disappeared. Most of the time he just watches television, but every now and then I catch him out back where Ana used to play. There's a pile of rocks in a little sandbox there that she loved to stack and arrange. Mostly he just sits and stares at that, too, like it was the television, although a couple times I've seen him talking to it like it's a shrine of some sort and not a six-year-old pile of rocks. He looks hunched these days, and since he's as short as I am it doesn't do him any favors. He's been drinking more, too. Gam and I know it, even though we haven't said anything yet. He only works part time at the hardware store south of the welcome center, but he's gone the whole work day. He's not the type to go to Sancho's, but he's probably at some place just a step up. Which isn't saying much.

Gam looks down at the ground and says everything without speaking a word. Oren Dejooli is her son, and she is embarrassed by him. She never forgave my mother for leaving him and still refuses to be in the same room with her on the rare occasions she comes through the reservation. Gam's generation took everything on the cheek and kept plodding, especially as it concerned their husbands. The idea of leaving everything and running away to the city like Mom did is foreign to her, but more and more I think she's beginning to understand how strange Dad has become.

I made a conscious decision not to dwell on Ana. Every day I tell myself to file it away. Do like Ninepoint does. You can see how well that's worked. Like talking to Gam in English. You can say whatever you want, but you're not gonna get any results. Over the six years since she went missing her name has become an all-encompassing thing that hangs over the house and follows us around every day. Our lives have been shattered and then rearranged into pre-Ana and post-Ana. The line that separates them is Ana, too. She's everywhere you look around here, but nowhere to be found.

I want to keep Gam around. The thought of her shuffling back into her room to pick up her knitting strikes me as unbearably sad just now.

"You know Sancho's?" I ask her. She frowns and makes a spitting motion. She knows it all right. Gam knows just about everywhere on the rez and just about everyone. And their parents. She speaks of people in terms of "the kid of so-and-so," or, more likely, "the no-good kid of so-and-so."

"A guy died there last night. An old Navajo. He was always at Wapati, or walking along the roads by Wapati in a gold jacket. He was a..." I struggle to find the words, but Gam finds them for me.

"Alone," she says, and a brief flash of genuine sadness bows her face. It throws me for a second. She says something in Navajo that I don't catch completely, but I think it's an old prayer. Something about a last visit and the end of a journey.

"You knew him?" I ask. Already she's composed herself again, and she waves her bony hand dismissively.

"He was old, like me. Old people know each other in small towns. That's all. How did he die?"

"Drugs," I say, in English. I don't know the Navajo word for drugs. I'm not sure there is a Navajo word for drugs. Gam pauses in her stirring of the pot. She furrows her brow, then shakes her head.

"No," she says, simply.

"No?" I ask, incredulous. Gam shakes her head once, sharply. I laugh. I can't help it. I'd spent this whole day trying to convince myself that there was nothing wrong with an old timer overdosing in the backroom at Sancho's, and I'd basically done it, too, by the time I walked in the house, so it annoys me that she throws open that door in my mind again. Especially when there's nothing I can do about it. My laugh sounds harsh and hollow. Gam frowns at me.

"I guess you're pretty sure of that," I say in English, not expecting a response, not wanting one.

"Die at Sancho's?" she says, stirring the pot again. "No. Not him."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, fully switched to English now. "And where was he ÷supposed' to die, then?"

Gam watches me calmly.

"Where is a man supposed to die?" I ask.

"At home."

"He lived out of his camper, Gam. He had no home."

Gam shakes her small, round head in soft rebuke. Her bun flops.

"The gambler's home is the Arroyo," she says.

The Arroyo is just like it's advertised. It's a wash at the far end of the floodplain, due south of where Danny and I swept through today. It's also the prime car camping spot on the reservation. If you live out of your car in this country, there's a good chance you'll get robbed if you're on your own. A sleeping man in a car is a prime target. Lock your doors and they'll smash your windows. If the tweakers and the drunks see something valuable inside, it doesn't matter if you're in it or not. If you're a camper, it's best to stick together. ÷Course, it's best not to sleep in your car at all, but for most of these folks that's not a choice, so they park in a half-circle around the top of the Arroyo. It's gotten to the point where it's become a neighborhood in its own right.

Danny said when he first started that Sani, the chief of police, wanted them gone. Said they were unsightly, and ramshackle neighborhoods often come with ramshackle "businesses," most of which aren't remotely legal. When an old camper blew up and took a pair of Navajo with it, two more casualties of the meth businesses, Sani told Danny and his partner at the time to clear them all out. The two of them blew into the Arroyo like a whirlwind and screamed and thumped cars (and a few people) with their sticks. The cars left for a day and then pulled back in the next night. That's the thing about neighborhoods on wheels. They're tough to catch.

"The Arroyo is nobody's home," I tell Gam.

"The Arroyo," she says again, nodding. End of discussion. She picks up her bowl of stew, goes to her corner chair and sets it carefully down on a pull-out tray. She takes a bite, then she picks up her knitting. It's the beginning of a blanket, and it's gonna be a beautiful one, too. As I watch her, I see her hands shaking, and not

for the first time I wonder if that blanket is ever going to get finished.

That night I don't sleep. I sort of fade in and out of consciousness, but I wouldn't call it sleeping. When I'm alone in my bed I realize that the ringing in my head that started at Sancho's never really left me. It was perched behind my forehead and murmuring to me the whole time; it just took complete quiet to notice. Every time I start to drift, the sulfur smell comes back to me and I blink myself awake, scrunching my nose. My eye feels tight and puffy, and my head throbs in time with my heartbeat. I already know I'm getting the brawler's wink.

I'm not sure exactly what makes me shoot out of bed, but some time near midnight I come around and find I'm already standing by the window, panting, with my heart in my throat. After my blood slows and my eyes adjust, I see my dad standing outside in the moonlight, staring at Ana's shrine. There's also a skittering on the roof. My first thought is it's a squirrel my dad somehow disturbed on his nightly excursions about the house, but on second listen this thing sounds too big. There's a sharp tap, and then I hear the explosive fluttering of wings. Big wings. Crow wings. I look up and out the window and strain my eyes to scan the sky, but the moon has thrown everything above ground into inky black relief. It's as if the bird, or whatever it is, is absorbed into the fabric of the night as soon as it leaves the roof. I turn back to Dad. He doesn't seem to notice anything but the rocks in front of him.

I sit back down on the bed, take some deep breaths, and listen hard for the ringing. I think it's gone, which is a relief, but in its place is a strange quiet. And the quiet is made worse by the fact that my dad is in the back yard sitting on the dry grass and staring at a cairn my sister made six years ago like it's a totem pole rooted to the secrets of her vanishing. I remember when Ana built that thing. She attached no significance to it. She was messing around in the back yard, digging up weeds looking for "fossils." She plopped some rocks on top of each other on her way to the next door of her imagination, the way nine-year-old girls do. Dad has

made them far heavier than they were ever meant to be. After another fifteen minutes of listening to this silence, I give up, throw on an undershirt, and go downstairs. I move by the light of the muted television, not wanting to wake Gam, and I sit at the table again, drink an entire glass of water, and stare at my father, trying to make sense of him. The stew pot is empty and meticulously washed. Dad is a fastidious man. He doesn't want to disturb anyone with what he's dealing with at midnight on the back lawn. He doesn't want to disturb us with Ana. He knows each of us has our own Ana to deal with, and he's a hardline Navajo in that. His problems are his own.

Gam and I know he goes outside like this. Gam thinks it's far more normal than I do, and she thinks the fact that I find this type of ritualistic meditation strange is proof of a creeping white influence. Usually I just let him alone with his grief. But tonight I'm not getting back to sleep, I already know it, so I slide open the door and step outside. The porch light catches my motion and flicks on, and Dad is startled. He jumps up and backs away from the light. He doesn't meet my eye.

"The rocks saying anything to you tonight?" I ask.

I think my dad was expecting some sort of scolding, so when he hears the soft tone of my voice, he steps forward and looks up at me.

"Stranger things have happened," he says. "But no. They are quiet."

"Rocks can't tell you where Ana is," I say, and then, because I think the day still has its fingers in me, and because somewhere I feel that fucking crow still watching me, I say, "Flatwood might have been able to, but he's gone now. Is that why you're out here? Is it because of me? Because I got rid of him? Because he was never going to help us, Dad. Whatever he knew he took with him when he was banished."

Dad seems to snap out of his fog, and he shakes his head, his face imploring. "Is that what you think? That I'm out here blaming you?"

"The thought has crossed my mind, yeah. Everyone else blames me for Flatwood. And I've had a shitty day. Another day in which people who have no idea what happened that night somehow hate me for agreeing to testify against the guy who abducted my sister. Like I'm the bad guy."

Dad steps forward into the full flush of the floodlight, and I can see just how pitted and hollow his eyes are. "Not me, Ben. Never me. Do you understand me?" His eyes still have a touch of liquor to them. He grabs me by the shoulders for a moment, and I'm struck by how much we look alike. He has the same sharp features that I do and the same softly sloping eyes. It's just that he looks hollowed out, and he's shrinking. It's hard to watch. Some part of me thinks a son should never grow taller than his father.

Dad turns his head back to the cairn and drops his hands from my shoulders. "I was the one who left him alone with her. I was the one who stepped out for a quick drink. I was the one who thought I needed a drink because she'd been in the hospital for nearly a month and it was draining on me. I was the one who dropped my guard."

"Dad—"

"—and I was her father, Ben. You did your duty. In front of the court and the elders, you stood like a man. All you did was tell them the truth. I was the one who failed her."

"Nobody failed anybody, Dad. Joey was practically a member of the family. Things that bad don't happen because you step out for a drink. Things that bad happen whether you step out or not."

Dad walks back to the cairn and moves out of the way so the light washes over it. He cocks his head at it like an old dog.

"I think I see her, sometimes," he says.

"So do I. Every day."

"But only when I watch a thing until my eyes stop watching. Only when I drift. That's why I come out here. Because I can drift."

I understand where he's coming from, but I also think the whisky I can still smell on his breath might be helping with his "drifting." It's not that I'm not sympathetic. It's just that if I kept hanging on to Ana the way he does, I'd have driven myself insane

by now. Sometimes I wonder if that's not the route Dad's heading down, and sometimes I wonder if he's not doing it on purpose.

"Are you gonna come inside?" I ask.

"No, you go in. This is my time."

So I leave him. But I don't go back to bed either. I spend the next hour listening for a bird on my roof, and at one in the morning I feel more awake and restless than I did outside talking to Dad. Whenever I don't know exactly what's bothering me, I tackle the first thing that I think of, and the first thing I can think of is Gam saying the word *Arroyo* like it was the answer to everything.

I get up, splash some water on my face, throw on another layer of deodorant, and button myself back into my uniform. I strap on my belt and holster my gun and grab my keys and my flat-brimmed hat. Danny Ninepoint would hate me going to the Arroyo alone, but Danny would also hate me waking his ass up at the birth of the morning to chase after a dead man he was over and done with the second we left the bar. So I don't call him.

The road to the Arroyo is winding and barren. It's past Main Street, and past the tenements, and past the fringe, and past the stretch of desert beyond. After a good dust storm, the tracks can sometimes be hard to follow, but I've been here more times than I can count, and I know my way. It's only when I get into the velvet black of the desert at night—when the headlights of my old truck get swallowed up five feet in front of me—that a small part of me wonders if this was a smart thing to do at all, much less alone. And the buzzing begins again. But it's not so bad, and I've come this far already, and I don't think I can stand turning around and finding my dad still staring at a pile of rocks, so I kick into low gear and creep my way out into the desert.

The Arroyo appears in front of me like a shelf on the ocean floor. The drop-off beyond the campers that ring the ledge is steep, and at this hour looks a shade darker than black. In the daylight it's a trash pit, but right now it seems like a swirling door to the worst Chaco has to offer. Almost all of the cars sit silent and cold like boulders, but a handful are lit from within, and I can see

shapes shifting about like genies in lamps. Danny and I have been here in the dead hours before. Usually this group knows enough to let a patrolling cop be, but then again, I thought that about the men at Sancho's up until today too.

Already I see blinking eyes peeking out of makeshift curtains like coyotes caught in my headlights. A van nearby starts its engine. That's to warn those still awake that a cop is here. In the daytime they aren't so subtle. It's three honks. Nice that they're considerate to the sleeping vagrants, I suppose.

I'm looking for a memorial of some sort. If the gambler was really a part of the Arroyo, they'll know he's dead by now and will have set up something to mark his passing. They're addicts and drunks here for the most part, but they are a tight community and they watch their own. It's been that way since Gam's time. The Navajo don't like death. Old school Navajo, like many of the folks at the Arroyo, still think death is a thing that's catching, so they'll have cleaned and purified his camping spot and gathered anything he may have left about for burial. It takes me nearly a full pass before I find it.

In the darkness it just looks like an empty spot between camps, but it stands out like a lost tooth and I slow down. When my headlights glint off the small pile in the center of the space, I know I've found the right place. I throw my truck into park and check the perimeter. There's a rusted out camper to the right that's as dark as a cellar closet. To my left is a flatbed truck with a tarp stretched over it. A one man job. But that one man is out in the night leaning against his truck and smoking a cigarette. The cherry burns like a demon's eye in the blackness. He stares me down as I hop out. I can't tell if he's being surly or if he's bored. Around here it's most likely both.

I close the door to my truck gently, keeping one eye on the smoker. He's dressed in a faded Cleveland Indians baseball jersey and tear-off gym slacks, and he's swimming in them. He's not wearing shoes, and his head lolls a bit toward the ground, like he's watching me out of the top of his eyes.

"Officer," he says. He doesn't sound condescending, but he doesn't sound happy to see me, either. "Funny seeing your kind at this hour."

Guys like this don't worry me. What worries me is if he causes a scene and brings the whole shithole camp down on me. I'm hoping he knows the drill and doesn't want anything more than a late night smoke.

"A man showed up dead today," I say. "He was an Arroyo man. In fact, unless I'm way off, I'd say he lived right here. People knew him as the gambler."

The smoker is silent, but that tells me as much as I need to know.

"You're holding vigil," I say.

"I am. Not that it would matter to an apple like you."

The Navajo who live at the Arroyo are probably the worst off of any of us, but they're fierce nationalists. You get some of the most hardline Navajos living out of vans on the edge of the desert out here, and they stick to the old ways. They respect the purification periods and observe the holy days and practice the chant ways, and they look down on anyone who doesn't and still calls themselves a Navajo. I try not to take it personally when he calls me an apple. I think he'd call any Indian who didn't live hand-to-mouth right next to him an apple. It means red on the outside, white on the inside.

"His name was Oka Chalk," he says. "He'd been here longer than any of us. He only became the gambler because of fuckers like you and the shit you bring into our land."

A lot of people lump NNPD in with tribal politics and the dealings of the council and the elders. Never mind that we have nothing to do with Wapati or the finances of this rez. We're just tasked with trying to keep it together.

"Easy," I say. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened to the man." "Seems clear. He died," says the smoker, staring blackly at me.

"Yeah, I got that." I stare right back at him. "Thing is, what's a veteran Arroyo man doing dying like a common smackhead?"

This throws him. His glower cracks just a bit. "Smack?" he asks.

"Yeah. Smack. The gamb...Oka Chalk died in his own puke propped against the backroom of a dive bar near the fringe. So I'ma ask you something, seeing as you're on vigil and all and that probably means you and him were friends. Does that sound like the guy you knew?"

The smoker takes a big drag, and it washes over his head in the white of the moon.

"Smack?" he asks again, and I know he's speaking to himself. And I already know that's not how the gambler died. I also know I'll never get a straight answer from this guy. They have a code around here, and it doesn't include working with "apple" cops like me. Instead, I take a look at Chalk's camp site.

It looks like the gambler lived his life out in a fifteen-foot square of dirt where he parked his car. I look out beyond the Arroyo drop-off and try to give the dead man the benefit of the doubt. I say to myself that there was probably some beauty here, in the unfiltered sunsets and the endless plains, but I can't sell it to myself. Right now this patch of dirt reminds me a lot of the prison cells we have down at the station. And at least there you have plumbing.

There are tokens in the center of his spot, left by the Arroyo community. Herbs and flowers mostly, and piñon and juniper branches. Things meant to purify the space. There are also other gifts with no Navajo significance at all. A carved wooden whistle and a tattered stuffed rabbit. There are folded notes, as well, and a collection of coins. The tokens form a big pile, about a foot high, in the dead center of the spot. I get the feeling that the gambler was well liked here. I turn back to the smoker with a new appreciation. I see now that the man looks bereaved. And here I was about to come out swinging. I decide to come clean to the guy.

"Look. Something about this doesn't sit well with me. About this whole thing. I don't know what yet, but I'm trying to figure it out. All I know is he shouldn't have died that way."

The smoker watches me for a good fifteen seconds in silence. Then he speaks.

"He used to give me a spare can of beer every now and then. That's all. But around here, that's enough. I said I'd hold vigil because I think he was a man worth it. I don't know nothing about him more than that."

I nod. Sounds about right. Sounds like the end of a poorly placed hunch.

"But I do know this," the smoker says, and it sounds like he was debating telling me this thing, this one thing, from the second I said I was out here trying to place the gambler on the right side of the books. "He started this token pile," the smoker says.

This throws me.

"What? You mean he knew he was gonna die?"

"Don't know nothin' bout that. Just know the last time I saw him, after he pulled out of his spot in that van of his, he got out, walked back over here, and set down the first token. Then he left."

I cross my arms and turn to the token pile. I walk over to it and kneel down. I gently move pieces of the pile, and the smoker doesn't seem to mind, so I go digging. I set each piece in a row to the left of the pile, flowers, beaded jewelry, bits of pounded leather, coins, braided strips of hair, until I get to the very bottom, and there I find a totem.

A totem is a powerful thing for an Indian, especially an old-timer, for whom these things generally mean more than for your average young buck. The Navajo believe that a person and an animal can be connected and that connection is unique and powerful. We don't carve any totem poles or anything like that, but if a Navajo believes strongly enough that they are connected to an animal, sometimes they carve it out of rock or stone and make it into a totem that they keep on them, usually in a pouch by their side. Different animals mean different things, but the connection is always personal and symbolic. I feel like I used to see more totem pouches on people when I was young. I even thought of making a totem myself when I was a kid. I wanted a bear. The bear is popular because it stands for power and courage and great

strength, all things a little boy wants. The problem is, you don't choose your animal. Your animal chooses you. I've never seen a bear in my life, and I don't much care to, and I'll be the first to tell you I don't exactly have "great strength," so there went that.

If a Navajo has a totem, he never parts from it, which makes it strange that the gambler would leave his behind. And the gambler's totem is a crow. A solid turquoise crow, about the size of a walnut, and beautifully detailed. The marbling of the turquoise makes it look like it's in mid-flight even as it sits in the dirt in front of me.

The crow is a strange animal in Navajo lore. It's not that the crow has negative connotations or anything, but it's not exactly the type of animal you see carved into totems. In fact, I'd never seen a crow totem in my life. The crow stands for spiritual strength, but it's also a symbol of change. In Navajo stories, the crow is often tricky, and sometimes he's actually a shape-shifter. You never quite know where he's coming from. And if we count the tapping on the roof, which I do, this is the third encounter with our tricky friend I've had in the past twenty-four hours. I'm not exactly a spiritual man, but I'm not blind, either. I look up at the smoker, who watches me calmly. The buzzing in my head gets louder.

"It's a crow," I say, lamely. He nods.

"Don't touch it," he says, but he doesn't need to worry. You don't touch another man's totem. It's wrong. Even I know that.

I carefully bury it once more and then stand, too quickly. I stagger for a few steps until I right myself on my truck. The smoker is still watching me, and an image of him peering, cigarette limp in his mouth, spins around my head. The smell is back again, but it's stronger, almost like plastic burning. I gag with the intensity of it.

The smoker says something to me, but I'm holding on to my truck for dear life and I'm not listening anyway because all of a sudden I see thousands of crows and I realize that the night sky has been a patchwork of oil-black feathers all along. They seem to wave gently like heat coming up from tar on the road. The leather and bones and coins in the pile seem to dance, like the crow totem

is trying to work its way out. I look up at the smoker to see what he thinks of all this, and he's still trying to talk to me. His brow is furrowed, but his words sound like gibberish. I have an irrational urge to grab the crow and steal it for my own, an abhorrent thing for a Navajo to do to another Navajo, especially one who has just left this world, but right at this moment it doesn't seem strange at all. It seems right. My vision is constricting, but still the crow calls to me, like light shining through the holes in a black button.

And in a brief moment of clarity I realize I'm going to pass out, and this is about the last place in the world a guy should pass out, especially a cop. I try to get into my truck, but my body is floating away from me bit by bit. I paw at the com on my shoulder, click it on, and mutter into it.

"Danny. Danny, I'm at the Arroyo. Danny, I need..." What do I need? Whatever is coming from my mouth is distant and muffled and certainly doesn't sound like my voice. I drop my hand from the com. The white noise that comes back from it floods over me, and I drop to the ground. My head bounces off the runner of my truck, but I'm too far gone to care.

Then everything is black.

CHAPTER 3

CAROLINE ADAMS

I always get slammed with work at the end of a night shift. Like, half an hour before I'm supposed to go home. And it takes all of the Nurse-Fu I've accumulated over the past two years working here not to rip my hair out. It's not even the late admission itself, or that it's an ER overflow. We get overflow admissions all the time here on the oncology floor. Albuquerque General is constantly overflowing, and it's usually the same people spilling in and out. No, what gets to me most is the cutesy way my nurse manager says it: *Car-o-line, we got one more for ya!* As if she was out looking for four leaf clovers on my behalf. I try very hard not to express disappointment. I know better than that. I feel like she watches me for it. Mary Ellen is the kind of manager who swears by the power of a positive attitude even as she pisses everyone off. Or maybe it's just me. Although I don't think so, because I've seen other nurses scowl after her, some doctors, too, although they're doctors and they can get away with it. I tried to bring it up once in the break room, but I didn't have the words to explain what bothers me so much, and I felt like the other girls there were waiting expectantly for some ammo to use against me. So I talked about how I felt like I'd gained ten pounds since starting night shift, which set off a round of the usual *Oh my God I knows* and brought us back to safe ground. Sometimes I don't know about this floor. For nurses, a lot of my co-workers can be quite uncaring. Exhibit A is that I have no friends here. But again, maybe that's just me.

If our ER gets a late-night rush, it's usually because of the Navajo. I'm not being racist here or anything—nurses don't have time to be racist. It's just a fact. And if we get an overflow case and it's a Navajo, they usually give it to me. Maybe they think I'm better with Navajo patients because I spend one day a week working at the Chaco Health Center inside Chaco Rez and should therefore have some sort of connection with the Navajo. I have no such thing. I've tried, but the Navajo are a close people. Or maybe I'm a bad nurse. I waste a lot of time obsessing over things like this, in case you can't tell. And since we're being honest, I think I might as well tell you that the reason I work one day a week at CHC is because it's a condition of the government grant that put me through nursing school. I find it rewarding, don't get me wrong, but it's not like I came out of school on some crusade to help the Navajo. That's just what ended up happening.

When Mary Ellen tells me about the new admission, I'm already taking care of one Navajo who happens to be detoxing from alcohol, and it's not going well for either of us. Alcohol withdrawal is a mess. Detoxing from opiates or stimulants can be bad, but going cold turkey won't kill a drug addict. Detoxing from alcohol can kill you, so we have this step-down system that tapers the patient over a long period of time in which they tend to threaten your life and spit in your face.

I don't blame patients for what they say when they're detoxing. I know they're not in their right minds. I try not to take it personally when grizzled old men with purple noses call me a cunt or tell me I'm a waste of time and to get the fucking doctor. I'm getting better about it, but for a while I stayed up late wondering if I *was* a waste of time. Or, more specifically, If I'd wasted my time becoming a nurse. Those were early jitters. I hardly have those any more. Still, when you have to have the CNAs restrain the patient and strap a face-mask on the guy to keep him from spitting at you while you take his vitals, you do wonder. And this guy is taking it to such extremes I feel like I might start laughing.

"Any tingling in the hands or feet?" I ask.

"Cunt."

"How about your stomach? Do you still feel nauseous?"

"You cunt!"

"If you have any appetite at all it'd be really good if we could get something in your stomach."

"Yoouuuuuuuuuuu..." he winds up, puffing his chest out like a mangy goose. **"Cuuuuunnnnnnnnnntttt!"** he finishes, whooshing out like a whoopee cushion. The CNA in there with me, a big Mexican woman named Inez, smiles kindly at me.

"Well," she says, **"at least we know there's no shortness of breath."**

I let out a sharp laugh before I can cover my mouth, which sets him off in a string of babbling. This is the kind of laugh that threatens to go manic, so I have to excuse myself from the room and take some deep breaths. Naturally that's when the attending doctor walks by. I have a moment of panic when I see the long white coat and here I am leaning against the wall trying to keep it together, either about to laugh or about to cry. But then I realize it's Doctor Bennet and I relax again, but only a little. He's a floor favorite, but he's still a doctor.

Doctor Bennet is a tall, thin redhead. I'm a small girl myself, and I'm pretty sure we have the same waist size. He's a foot taller than me, too, so I think I have him beat in the thigh and calf muscle mass as well. He wears well-fitted slacks when he's attending, and trim white shirts with thin ties of every color. I'm not sure I've ever seen him repeat a tie, which is impressive, and every one of them is as thin as a ruler. A thick tie would look like a dinner napkin on him. He's holding a medication cup between his thumb and forefinger, and he holds it out to me.

"Caroline," Bennet says, in his formal way, although he does smile. **"I was glad to see you on the schedule tonight. This is from the pharmacy. Benzos for your detox patient."**

I take the cup and thank him, bobbing my head wearily.

"How's the night been?" he asks.

"Cuuunnnnnnnnnnt!" comes a throaty reply from inside the room. I blush and reach over to close the door softly. I look about

and see that two nurses at the nearby charting desk are staring at us.

"About like that," I say.

Doctor Bennet doesn't laugh, but his eyes do. "I see," he says, putting his hands on his flat hips.

"And I have another admission," I say. "I don't think I'll be leaving any time soon."

Bennet checks his watch. He knows night shift switches over soon and that if I haven't admitted my last patient I haven't done any of my charting. And that means I'll be here well into the morning.

"Tell you what," he says, and he gently plucks the medication cup back from me. "I'll take care of our friend here. You get to your admission."

I could hug him. Then I blush again because of how totally out of line that would be. Wouldn't the girls at the charting desk like that? God knows what kind of firestorm that would set off. Thankfully I'm already sweaty and red from the general work day, so the blush blends right in. I give him a breathy thanks, and if he sees how desperately relieved I am, he doesn't let on. He glances briefly at the pills, nods at me, and just walks right into the room.

"Now that's quite enough of that," he says, and his voice is hard and final, and it works. The patient shuts up. Another thing about Doctor Bennet. He may look like a reed, but he's got an incredible bedside manner. He sets patients right. Sometimes that means he cracks down on them and sometimes that means he's gentle, but either way it's always what they need.

But I'm already gone, down the hall, into the next room and to my admit. And not a second too soon, either, because when I knock and open the door he's already sitting up and probing his IV line, looking to pull. It's a miracle the bed alarm didn't go off. That might just have been the straw that broke the nurse's back.

"Whoa, whoa! What are you doing?" I ask, a little too desperately. "Let's just sit still for a second, shall we?"

I skid over and grab his arm and check that the line is secure, and I'm so flustered that it takes me a minute to realize that he

hasn't said anything at all. I look up at him and realize he's as surprised to find me holding his arm as I am to find him trying to pull his IV line. I can tell he's a Navajo, and what with the late hour and all the nastiness with my last patient, I brace myself for more trouble, but it never comes.

"Sorry," he says, and he takes his fingers off of his line. His face is smooth and dark, not ravaged or ruddy like some of the Navajo that I come across, and his eyes are clear and deeply brown. The kind of brown that is at the bottom of a jar of honey. I suppose eye is more appropriate, since one is wide and alert and the other looks like it caught a baseball. He's also young. My age. Maybe younger. And short. Shorter than me. But cut in that stringy, athletic way. And by now I realize I'm staring.

"...It's just, I don't think I need to be here," he says. "I didn't want to bother anyone. Thought I might just slip out."

He has a touch of the Navajo accent, the careful emphasis on each word, and I can't help but smile. This smile is nowhere near the manic smile I was fighting down in the hallway outside. This one relaxes my face.

"Slip out? You can't really ÷slip out' of a hospital, I'm afraid. We have to sign you in and out. Plus, you just got here."

"I feel fine, now, really," he says. And now that he's not going anywhere, I pick up his chart from the foot of the bed.

"Ben Dejooli," I say. "Navajo?" Whenever I see a patient uncomfortable, I start talking. Sometimes they don't even answer me, but it does settle them more often than not. If anything, it's simply better than the sterile white noise of a hospital. "What's Dejooli mean, if you don't mind me asking? I work at the Chaco Health Clinic once a week. I like to hear about Navajo names."

This stills him, and he looks at me with a newfound interest.

"It means ÷gone.""

"Gone?"

"Well, it means ÷went upward.' But things in Navajo have a lot of different meanings. I think it's more like ÷gone.""

He seems distant all of a sudden, and I wonder if I screwed up by going down this line of conversation, so I bring it back to the

task at hand.

"Says here you lost consciousness on the reservation. A Daniel Ninepoint called in the ambulance, and when you were non-responsive they bypassed the clinic and brought you straight here."

Ben looks down, and I can see that he's ashamed. A lot of Navajo men are ashamed of illness. They associate it with weakness.

"I woke up in the ambulance. Tried to get them to turn around. They wouldn't listen. I'm fine. I don't need to be here. I just passed out is all. Haven't you ever passed out?"

"Not that I can remember," I say. But the answer is no. I would remember. I remember everything. And I would be such a hypochondriac about it that I'd probably check myself into the hospital as soon as I woke up. "It's most likely nothing, but we still need to check some things. See if you concussed yourself. I see you have a black eye."

"That's from before. So Danny found me?" he asks, grimacing.

"Don't know about that, but he called the ambulance."

"Great," he says, shaking his head.

"I take it he's not a friend of yours."

"He's my partner."

Wonderful, I think. He's gay. Naturally.

"I'm a cop. He won't be too happy with me. I wasn't supposed to be where I was when I passed out."

I blink. *A cop.* Why am I so relieved he has that kind of partner? What is going on here?

"Where was that?" I ask, to keep him talking.

"The Arroyo." He rubs gently at his face and taps softly around his eye. "Never mind. Look, I really need to go. I gotta straighten this out."

I've found that when a patient tries to derail an admit—which happens often because there are a whole litany of questions I'm supposed to ask—it's best just to power through.

"The black eye is from earlier? Before you passed out at the Arroyo?"

"Yeah."

"Is it from a fall?"

"Yeah. I fell into a fist." He says this looking down at his lap, but I laugh. Then it strikes me that he might be offended, so I cut it off with a cough. I'm still working on Navajo humor.

"Well, sometimes concussion symptoms show up late. Did you feel nausea, or light headedness after you were hit?"

"He didn't knock me out," Ben says, a little defensively. "He only got in one punch."

"Sometimes people can lose consciousness for only a second and don't even realize it. Usually there's disorientation and nausea afterwards. "

Ben pauses, and I can tell he's not telling me something. It's very hard to fool a nurse. We may miss things on our own, but we can usually tell if you keep things from us.

"No nausea," he says softly. "But..."

I wait.

"But I was...I don't know. Things got blurry and I couldn't talk, so I sat down for a second. But it cleared."

"And this was before the Arroyo?"

"Yeah. Yesterday morning. It was a rough day." He eyes his uniform, folded, with his belt and badge hanging neatly from the chair nearby. His gun he'll have to get from the checkout desk at the front entrance. He looks uncomfortable, more than just embarrassed. He's swallowing and brushing at nothing on his forehead. He looks up at the hanging bag he's connected to and then down at the bed. He crinkles the sheets, and he starts breathing faster. I've seen this before too. White Coat Syndrome. I think some part of him is terrified of the hospital.

"Listen, Ben, we'll get you out of here as soon as we can, but —"

"Do you smell that?" he asks.

"What?"

"That smell, it's like a...a burning smell. Is something on fire?"

I look around myself and even try a subtle sniff of my armpits while he's ghosting his head back and forth.

"Nothing's burning, Ben. It's okay. You're okay."

I do something I rarely do uninvited, which is step forward and lay a hand on his shoulder. He reaches up and tries to wrap his fingers around my wrist. I'm expecting him to throw my hand away, but when he grips me he just holds on. All the while he's sniffing, moving his head a fraction of an inch and sniffing again. He looks out of the small window as if he's expecting to see someone there, then he blinks several times, and all of a sudden he's under control again. Or at least faking it well. He looks up at me and even manages a shaky smile. He plucks his fingers away and sets his hands in his lap.

"Like I said. Tough day, that's all."

I unclip a small pen-light from my breast pocket and look into his pupils, and he allows it. There is no delayed dilation, no trouble tracking. None of the symptoms of a concussion. But rather than make me feel better, this gives me a cold, clammy feeling. Like water is dripping down my back. I'm an oncology nurse, and two things here raise huge red flags for me. One: he smells a smell that is not there. Two: when he tried to grab my hand, he missed by a good six inches on his first attempt. Like he was swiping at a missing ladder rung.

"Ben, was that time after you got hit the first time you smelled something burning?"

"I think so. Near enough, anyway."

"How many times have you had to sit down to get your bearings?"

Ben shrugs. "A few. I don't drink as much water as I should, and I think I'm kind of dehydrated—"

"Think with me here. More than twice?"

Ben nods.

"More than five times?"

Ben nods.

"More than ten times?"

Ben thinks, then shrugs. Which might as well be a nod. I swallow.

"It always goes away," he says, but he's eyeing the equipment again and picking lightly at the skin on the back of his hand. He's trying to look around me and out the door.

"Ben...are you alright?" I ask.

His face finds mine and softens. "Yeah, really, I am. I just...I don't like hospitals."

"Not many people do," I say, by way of reassurance, but it comes out sounding condescending, and I shake my head. I'm not normally like this around patients. I keep the second-guessing and endless over-analysis out of the patient rooms. Usually it hits me around three in the morning. Or three in the afternoon. Whenever I'm supposed to be sleeping.

"Sorry. What I mean is that it's normal to feel stressed out in a hospital. It's a proven effect. It's called White Coat Syndrome. It skews a lot of our blood pressure readings."

Ben nods and manages a half smile. I can tell he knows about White Coat and that he also knows what he has is worse, but I don't want to press him. He's eyeing me with this soft, tired, lopsided wink, and it's ludicrously endearing. Probably because he doesn't mean it to be.

"I don't even know your name," he says.

"Caroline."

"Caroline," he says, nodding. "I know you're just doing your job. But I'm fine, and I really want to go. No offense."

When you work on a cancer floor, you see cancer everywhere. Melanoma on arms and backs at the gym, liver cancer in the pallid, red-nosed strangers you pass on the street, lung cancer in the chronic, wet cough of someone next to you in line. You learn to dampen down the desire to smack some medical sense into these people, but the urge never really leaves you once you've worked on an oncology floor. Right now I really, really want to grasp Ben DeJooli by the shoulders and tell him to hell with what he wants. What he needs is to get an MRI immediately, and if he's lucky, it'll say that all he's having are cluster migraines or that it's vertigo or something.

But that's me running away with myself again. That's three a.m. Caroline. If I let her loose, it's all over.

"How would you even get home?"

"I'd take a cab."

"A cab from here to Chaco? You know how expensive that is?"

He taps his teeth together and nods.

"There's nobody you can call?"

"There are people I can call. But I'd rather take a cab."

I shake my head at the stubbornness of men in general.

"Well, if you really want to go, you and the attending physician have to sign an AMA form."

"What's that?"

"It's a form that says you're leaving against medical advice."

"Whose?"

"Mine."

He ponders this, and me, for another moment before nodding. I take a big breath and throw up my hands.

"All right. I'll get the doctor."

I leave the room before I can say anything else. I don't know why this guy is affecting me like this. I'm acting like a nursing student, not an experienced RN. Actually, I'm acting more like a pining teenager, if I'm completely honest with myself.

I find Doctor Bennet at the computers drinking a large, black coffee. He's both hunched over and tucked under the desk, and he makes the chair he's sitting in look like it belongs in a kindergarten class. He looks up at me and presses his lips together. No doubt I look like a flustered hen. Except sweaty. It's amazing how working nights throws off your internal temperature. I'm freezing one second, then I'm clammy the next.

"What's up?" he asks.

"The patient is nine seventeen wants an AMA."

"That was quick."

"He's insistent. I think he has a problem with hospitals."

"And what do you think? Should we let him go?"

This is another reason why all the nurses love Doctor Bennet. He asks us what we think. Yeah, I know, it doesn't take much. But you would be absolutely flabbergasted at the number of doctors who treat us like hospital accessories about on par with the vending machines.

"They brought him in because he blacked out, but I can't find any evidence of a concussion. He's responsive and alert, aside from the paranoia. He's not complaining of any pain."

"Well, if he wants to go and he can go, we gotta let him go."

I deflate a little at this, and Doctor Bennet sees it.

"What's the problem? I'd have thought you'd be relieved." He checks his plastic Timex watch. "You're already here past shift change."

"It's just...he's complaining of a burning smell. And I think he may have some visual impairment. Depth judgment issues."

"Is he driving?"

"No."

Bennet creaks back in his chair and crosses his long arms over his white coat.

"And this isn't his first episode. He said he's had at least five of these incidents in the past."

"You think he may have a brain tumor," Bennet says.

I don't answer him, but that's answer enough. It's always a strange thing when you pull out the word 'tumor' in a diagnosis. It's such a heavy word. Nobody wants to say it. We get as used to it on the oncology floor as I think anyone can, but it's still heavy, even to us.

The other reason I stay quiet is because technically nurses aren't supposed to diagnose anything. That's what the white coats are for. I know a lot of doctors who would laugh my concerns off as the nervous ramblings of a young nurse, but like I said, Bennet is different.

"You're serious about this, aren't you." It's not a question, it's an observation.

"I know it's not really my place to say—"

"Of course it's your place," he says, stopping me as he gets a call on his phone. He snaps it from the table and answers it with a gruff "Bennet." He's quiet for a moment, and I look elsewhere. There are about a million things that I should be doing, but none of them seem all that important at the moment. Bennet says, "Can they wait?" and then he waits for a moment. "Then they'll have to wait," he says. He clicks the phone off and looks up at me, and his brow softens again. As he unfolds himself and stands tall, he grabs his stethoscope and drapes it around his shoulders.

"Let me get a look at him," he says.

When we walk in to Ben DeJooli's room, Bennet has the AMA clipped to the board in his hand.

"Hi, Ben," he says, pulling the low stool out with his foot and sitting down in front of the bed. He grabs Ben's charts and flips through them, and there is a silence that would have been awkward if I was the only one here with Ben. But Bennet makes it seem like an expectant silence. Like a conductor about to take the stage.

"So you passed out," he says.

Ben nods. I can tell that he is weary. He doesn't want to go through all of this again.

"Did Caroline tell you that she wants to count out a brain tumor?"

Ben widens his eyes. Which is an amazingly restrained response. I have to lean back on the door frame, but Bennet moves on. His delivery is so straightforward it's as if he's told Ben that he might be allergic to cats. And because Bennet doesn't treat the elephant in the room like an elephant, it doesn't become an elephant.

"No," Ben says, looking up at me. I can't hold his gaze. This is the first time I can ever remember turning away from a patient like this.

"And I have to say, Ben, after reading her admission, I agree that it's a concern. Something is giving you trouble."

I never gave him an admission, but that hardly matters now.

"So I'm gonna do a couple of things here. First, I'm going to sign this AMA. You're free to go. We aren't liable for anything that happens to you." Bennet wipes his hands across the air as if to shoo the legalese away.

"Second, I'm going to write up a referral to the CT clinic. Indian Health Services will take care of your costs." So Bennet knows he's Navajo too. It shouldn't surprise me. The doctors at Albuquerque General have a program where they rotate at the Chacho Health Clinic. I've seen him there once or twice. He's smiled at me.

"What's a CT?" Ben asks.

"It's a brain scan," Bennet says, grabbing for the pen and pad in his front pocket. "We just want to rule out the worst, that's all."

He rips a page from his pad and hands it to Ben, who looks at it like it's written in a foreign language.

"Just take that to the clinic, second floor."

"I really can't today," Ben says, and I can see he's gone a little pallid, but it's more than that. His general color seems to be fading. "Maybe in a couple of days," he says, half-heartedly.

"The referral is good for a month, but I really would encourage you to go as soon as you can. Just get it over with, and then we'll go from there."

"So I can leave?" he asks.

Bennet signs the AMA form on his clipboard and then hands it to Ben. "This certifies that you are leaving under your own power and against medical advice. Sign here."

Bennet's tone is strong, but Ben doesn't flinch. He takes the clipboard, signs his name as a little scribble and then holds out his arm with the line in it. "Can you help me out of this?"

Bennet's phone rings again, and he snaps it from his hip, glancing at the readout.

"I have to move," he says.

"I'll unhook him," I say. Bennet nods. At the door, he gives one last, unreadable look to Ben and is gone.

"He wasn't very happy with me," Ben says, smiling sadly as I pull the line from his arm and push the rig aside.

"I'm not very happy with you either," I say, not daring to meet his eyes again. "Promise me you'll get that scan."

He laughs and looks at me strangely. "Promise you?"

"Yes. Promise me."

"I can't promise you, I hardly know you."

"Fine," I say, curtly, before attempting to bring down my trusty curtain of separation. Well, trusty until now, anyway. "Your clothes are on the dresser there. Have a good night." I turn to go.

"Caroline..."

I stop at the door and glance over my shoulder. He's still sitting on the bed. His feet dangle above the floor. His coloring is strange. I can tell that he wants to say something, but he doesn't know how. I don't know how I know this, exactly, except to say that it's almost like it's coming off of him in waves. I feel like I can sense the exact moment when he gives up and resigns himself.

"Look, I'll try to get the scan, okay?" he says. I've heard this tone before. It's the same tone people use when in polite company as an alternative to a flat no.

"Well, *really* try," I say, after another long moment where I feel like I'm staring at him like he's a mirage. It's almost like his skin is smoking. It strikes me that perhaps I need to get more sleep. Either that or maybe I have something wrong with my own head.

Then my phone buzzes and I can hear a bed alarm going off somewhere in the back, and I'm off running. It's almost forty minutes later when I finally clock out, and by then Ben's room has been empty for about thirty-nine of them.

CHAPTER 4

BEN DEJOOLI

I'd planned on calling a cab from outside the hospital, slinking back to the rez and never talking about this little episode again, but when I get outside I see that Dad and Gam are already in the lobby. Gam is nested in a chair, puffed up in her old down jacket, and she's looking right at me when the elevator doors open. She hops down from her chair and shuffles my way, shaking her head at me. My father is at the help desk, and he looks white as a sheet. He might be the only person on earth who hates hospitals more than I do. That he even got this far past the front doors speaks volumes about how worried he must have been about me. I'm touched, actually.

Gam is now nodding her head and patting me on the side of the arm and muttering in Navajo, too low for me to understand. I grasp her bony hand, its skin paper thin.

"I'm okay, Gam," I say. She keeps nodding and shaking her head at the same time.

"Ben!" Dad says, striding over to me. "I came as soon as I heard. Danny told us. What happened? What happened to you?" I haven't seen him this worked up in years. He's borderline frantic, and I think it's best to get all three of us out of the hospital. We have bad memories of this place.

"Come on," I say, shepherding Gam in front of me. Dad follows and soon we're outside and in the car. I said I could drive, but Dad insists. He's treating me like I'm some flower, which is exactly what I didn't want, and exactly why I was hoping to sneak

my way back home. It takes until we're cruising down the highway, the sun cracking over the horizon ahead, before his free hand stops trembling. Gam is sitting in the back seat, nearly buried in her coat and scarf. Her eyes are closed, but I know she's listening.

"I'd been feeling off all day. I just blacked out for a bit, that's all."

"That's all? Ben. Danny scared us to death. Said they found you at the Arroyo. And I kept thinking if it was something I said, or what, and I was having these flashbacks of Ana—"

"This isn't like that, Dad. I'm not sick, I don't feel weak, it's totally different."

Gam says something in the back to the tune of *Ana said the same thing*, but I cut her off right there. Ana was anemic. She didn't know what it was like to feel well. She was always tired, but she refused to sit still. She wanted to be a normal nine-year-old girl. I just had a bad day on the job. Totally different.

"Gam, this isn't what Ana had," I say, and it feels weird even to equate the two. Neither of them is that reassured, but eventually I think they sense that I haven't had much sleep and so when I lay my head back and close my eyes they leave it be for the rest of the ride back to Chaco. I wish I could say I did get some sleep, but in my mind I keep seeing the black curtain of feathers that seemed to fall over me right before I lost it at the Arroyo. Gam starts humming something. An old Navajo song I remember her singing to Ana and me when we were little and couldn't fall asleep, our beds side by side. It was always me that worried about the dark. Ana wasn't afraid of anything. Not even of dying. She just liked to hear Gam sing. I roll my head and open my eyes to look at Gam, but she's not looking back at me. She's looking out the front window, and her eyes are small slits in the shadow of her face. I follow her gaze, and I see nothing but flat road and rolling desert hills. I'm about to close my eyes again when I catch movement in the far distance, high in the sky. A whole mess of crows streaks ahead of us, like pepper strewn across a table. I try to blink them away. I've had enough of crows. But when I open

my eyes again, they're still there, and it's like they're leading our car back home. One in particular. A huge one at the head of the flock.

When we get home, the crows wheel off and away, but I still watch the sky out of the kitchen window while I manage to eat some cereal and calm my gut. I sit with Gam while she knits. Dad is off at the hardware store. Danny calls, and I pick up, and he tells me to sit out the day to recover, everything will keep ÷til then.

"You know what I'mma say, don't you?" he asks.

"That I'm an idiot."

"No, you're no idiot, Ben. But sometimes you do dumb things. Can you imagine if I had to explain to your grandmother that you disappeared at the Arroyo while I was sleeping?"

"I know, Danny."

"Did you run into trouble out there?" he asks. "Tell me true."

"No trouble. I think maybe that sucker punch at Sancho's hit me harder than I thought."

Danny grunts in agreement.

"Did you find anything, at least? Was it worth it?"

Danny Ninepoint has one tone when he speaks. It's slow and methodical, like he's reading a speech. It's hard to tell if he's angry or if he's disappointed, although if I was to guess I'd say he's almost always just a little bit of both.

"No," I say, sighing. "Just a vigil and a token pile for burial."

Danny grunts again.

"Don't ever do that again, Ben. Go off without me like that."

"I know. I won't."

And just like that I know he's done talking about it. Just like I know he was done talking about the gambler, but I couldn't let it go. Danny could have said that's what I get for picking at things when they're settled, but he doesn't. He doesn't have to. He knows I get it.

"Get some sleep. Tomorrow we got some work to do."

"All right. And Danny. Thanks for looking out for me."

"Yep."

"And for dropping it now that it's done."

"Yep."

And that's that. Right now I've never been more grateful for the single-track mind of Danny Ninepoint. I take his advice and get to bed early. I sleep for twelve straight hours, and when I wake up again it's just past four in the morning. I think I have maybe another hour in me, and I flip my pillow and try to sink back to sleep again. But I think I was dreaming of the hospital because I'm in mid-thought when I wake up, and I'm thinking about the way Caroline looked when she asked me to promise to get that scan. She looked afraid. There's really no other word for it. And I wonder if I should be afraid too, but I feel better than I have in weeks. I just can't fathom that I have anything seriously wrong with me. Still, that look of hers lingers.

My brain is a funny thing. It's that look of hers that's on my mind when I wake up, but it's the way she held my shoulder, and the feeling I got when I held on to her hand for a moment, that ends up lulling me away and back into another solid hour of dreamless sleep.

The next morning Dad takes me to get my truck at the Arroyo. Dad drops me off but refuses to leave without me. Says he wants to follow me out. He's still handling me with care, but I see no way around it for a little while, at least until the sour taste of the whole event washes out.

I walk up to my truck with my tail between my legs. I don't want to see the smoker again, or anyone, for that matter. Thankfully, it looks like the vigil is over. In fact, it looks like the campers moved away from this edge of the Arroyo entirely. There's nobody here at all. If it weren't for the fact that my truck was still parked where I left it (and still locked, and intact, which is a blessing), I might have thought I had the site wrong. But no, this was it. In the light of early morning, the big black pit beyond the lip looks about as ominous as a sledding hill. The vigil pile is long gone too. It takes me until I walk over to where the pile was to realize I'm looking for the crow totem. I sigh, not really knowing why I'm disappointed. It's not my crow, after all. It feels right that

it should be buried. Decommissioned. Given back to the earth, just like the gambler himself.

Dad honks. He doesn't like it here, and I know I'm lingering. I take one last look around the site, and it looks almost like it's been swept. Like someone took a big, wide- framed straw broom and flattened the whole place. There aren't even any footprints. That's why I stop on the walk back to my truck when I see the tire tracks. They stand out like huge fingerprints, especially to someone like me, who is trained to see them. Uneven weight—the front tread is clean but the back has displaced dirt around it. Medium width but long from front to rear. I'd say a rear-wheel drive, four-door sedan. There aren't a lot of those around here. Mostly trucks and vans and campers. If I had to guess, I'd say this tread looks a lot like an official vehicle. A town car or maybe a standard cop cruiser.

Could Danny have come by? Maybe. He thought I might have run into trouble when we talked on the phone. Maybe he came to check out the scene before I did. But he smacked my hand for coming here alone at night. He's a big bastard, but even he wouldn't be keen on jumping in his car and racing down here in the dead of night. Especially once he got confirmation that the ambulance picked me up.

I follow the tracks from where I pick them up coming out of the loose rubble, crossing over into the finer dust near the ring of the slope. They look to stop in front of the gambler's old camp site, and then there's a clear sprayback of dust and two divots. Whoever they were, they came here looking for something, either found it or didn't, and then peeled out.

I know I should file away this whole thing. Should have long ago, like Danny, but something about it won't let me close the drawer. I have this crazy desire to look for turned earth, and a creeping suspicion that even if I could find the gambler's burial pile, it would be missing one crow.

But I'm late, and I'm making Dad late for his day by wasting time, and Danny said we had work to do, so I get in my truck, start her up, and pull out. I wave at Dad on the way by, and he nods. He pulls out after me, and we leave the Arroyo behind. I check the

rear mirror for crows out of instinct, but there are no black specks on the horizon. Nothing but the sharp, cold blue of a fall morning.

*

Danny wasn't lying when he said we had work to do. Turns out it was more work than usual, it's just Danny didn't want to lay it on me the day before. As soon as I get into the station I can tell that something is up. We have this rotating group of young kids that work the front desk, another cush job staffed by the council, and usually all they want to do is talk, but today they're all business. At first I think it's me and my episode, but Danny's not a talker, and he wouldn't throw me under the bus like that. When I get to my desk I can see that it's not just me. Our district is big; we have nearly a hundred cops who work the streets and desks here, and usually the patrol guys are in the kitchen, shooting the shit, while the higher-ups gossip in their offices. The central desks generally serve more as places to sit than to work, but not today. Today everyone is glued to their seats. Today you could hear a pin drop in the kitchen. There's still a full pot of coffee. That means things are serious.

It doesn't take me long to see why the station has flipped a switch. It has something to do with the two men in black off-the-rack suits who are talking to the chief behind closed doors. I can see through the window of his office, and so can everyone else.

Danny sits down with a steaming cup of joe.

"What's all this?" I ask. "They don't look Navajo."

"They're not," Danny says, keeping his voice low.

New Mexico state patrol has come into our jurisdiction a handful of times, but never dressed like they were attending a funeral. Only one type of law dresses like that.

"FBI," I say. Danny nods.

The Feds have no jurisdiction here. The US Government checks its people and its power at the welcome sign, usually, so this is strange.

"What do they want?"

Danny looks up at me. "Rumor is they're asking about Flatwood."

Danny says this like he was reading a grocery list. Same way he says anything. But he watches me carefully because he knows what's going through my head right now. It's not enough that people like Sancho have to throw Flatwood in my face, as if I didn't already think of the man every day of my life. It's not enough for people to quiet down every now and then when I walk into the station kitchen. Now the Feds have come to remind me, and all of us, of the man I banished. I take a deep breath, and I think I smell a tinge of sulfur.

"Ben, they're not here for you. Not as far as I can see. They haven't talked about anything to me."

"I wasn't even a cop when that happened," I say. I became a cop right after that happened. Because that happened.

Danny holds his hands out low and nods as if to say *you don't have to explain anything to me*.

"Just lay low and see what it is that they want. Hopefully just a file of some sort, then they're gone. No reason to think they're here to dig up old bones."

I appreciate the sentiment, but I know in real life things don't work like that. There are no coincidences. That's why I'm not surprised when the phone at our desk lights up. Danny watches me. I know it's not for him. I pick up.

"Dejooli," I say.

"Ben, its Sani. You have a minute?"

As if I wouldn't have a minute for the captain. I look up at Danny and then over at the closed office, behind glass. The agents are looking my way. Danny nods slowly to tell me it's okay. One step at a time.

"Course, Cap," I say. "Be right in."

I hang up and look down at my desk, nodding to myself. Makes sense that the guy I banished would haunt me every day since. Seems quite Navajo of him. I get up without another word and make my way to the big office.

Sani Yokana is a veteran of the Chaco rez. I say veteran because he's more than just an experienced cop. He worked the streets like me for ten years, then made detective, then lieutenant, now captain. He's savvy. Nobody becomes head of the Chaco district of NNPD without knowing their way around tribal politics. Thankfully, Sani has a no-nonsense reputation and seems to have reached his position without owing too many favors, at least that I've heard of. I think it helps that he's not a member of the council and has no intention of ever being a member of the council, and has, in fact, come as close as anyone I've ever met to telling the council to fuck off while still keeping his job. He likes to run our department his way. He's a heavyset man, wide bodied, with long, grey hair that he never bands. When I walk in the office, all three men watch me. The suits are blank, but Sani gives me a pinched nod. He looks a bit piqued. I can tell that he's not exactly itching to drudge up the Flatwood case again either.

"Ben, this is Agent Parsons and Agent Douglas. They're with the FBI."

I shake their hands. Some Indians say that all white men look the same. I never held with that until now. Both are medium height, medium build. Brown hair, neatly parted. Pale complexion, not a hint of facial hair. No smile to speak of. All business. These are men whose profession it is to get in, get out, and get forgotten. They are wearing different colored ties, at least. I can give them that.

"They have a few questions to ask you about Joseph Flatwood," Sani says, furrowing his weathered brow. He's not happy having these agents in his station. I can tell before they even open their mouths that they have an air of blank-check entitlement to them. No doubt they've been trained extensively about Indian affairs, but I'd be surprised if either of them had ever set foot on a reservation before.

"Mr. Dejooli—" Parsons begins.

"Call me Ben."

"...Ben. We have an open investigation regarding Joseph Flatwood, whom we know to have been an acquaintance of yours.

It's progressed to a point where we feel you might be able to help us."

I look at Sani for a long moment. He barely holds a scowl at bay. The dimple in his chin turns into a pothole.

"Council has given them free run of whatever resources Public Safety can provide," he says, strained.

Now that's interesting. For the council to buddy up with the Feds, Flatwood must really be raising hell.

"All right," I say, slowly.

"But first you need to understand that this is a classified case, and no details about what we will tell you should leave this room. It's standard protocol for an ongoing investigation."

I feel a twinge of pain behind my forehead. It's like Agent Parsons is reading from cue cards behind me.

"Okay...but listen, I haven't seen Joey Flatwood in almost six years. Not since he was banished. I haven't heard from him either, if that's what you're getting at. That's kind of the whole point."

Agent Douglas nods his head. "We know. We've been tracking Flatwood for years now. He's been all over the southwestern United States, but just about the only place he hasn't popped up is anywhere near Chaco Reservation."

Banished means banished. Flatwood respected the council, and our laws. That was one of the worst parts of watching him go: I knew he would be gone forever. I was glad of it, and I hated it at the same time. I still remember the way he turned back and nodded at me after he passed the welcome sign going the other way. It was a reassuring nod, as if he wanted to say *It's okay, Ben*. That's what made it so terrible. Nothing was okay. My sister was gone. We'd decided it was my best friend's fault, and now he was going, too. He should have fought it, but it was like he gave up. That, more than anything, is what I keep coming back to in the middle of the night when I wonder for the millionth time if Joey Flatwood is really the reason Ana is gone. Why didn't he deny it? I scrunch up my nose to try and cut off the subtle burning smell, but it's getting stronger.

"I thought he might be dead," I say. "The way he just... disappeared like that. No word of him at all."

"Oh, he's not dead," Parsons says. "At least, not yet. He's come close to killing himself several times, though."

Parsons' textbook delivery makes me want to smack him. If Joey tried to kill himself, it's probably because of me. There was a long stretch of time, right afterwards, when I wanted to kill him myself. But the idea of him wandering the southwest, drifting in and out of depression, makes me feel wretched. I'm almost positive that he knows what happened to Ana, and I hate him for refusing to tell me, but it's been six years now and sometimes I think if I knew then how hard friends are to come by, I might have been a little slower to take the stand. I swallow down the distaste and try to match the agents' flair for deadpan.

"In fact," Douglas says, "that's what we wanted to talk to you about."

"What, Flatwood trying to kill himself?"

"And failing...when he shouldn't."

"I don't follow you."

"We have reason to believe that Joseph Flatwood should be dead, but he's not."

"You mean he's bad at killing himself?"

"No, he's quite good. He's just...still here."

I cross my hands over my chest and look at Sani, who gives me a small eyebrow shrug. "Why do you guys care if he kills himself?"

Parsons clears his throat. "Between suicide attempts he has a penchant for robbing hospitals. We started following Flatwood after security cameras in three separate states picked him up lifting pills from the medicine cabinets."

Joey Flatwood, a drug addict? That's even less believable to me than the gambler as a drug addict. Joey's grandpa used to lecture us about drugs, and Joey got a firsthand education of the mess they can turn a man into living out at the Arroyo. He never touched the stuff. We made a pact back in the day. Cut our palms with Joey's grandpa's old buck knife.

"He robs hospitals?"

"Yes. We have him on security footage taking enough to drop a man twice his size. He looked right at the camera. He's quite brazen. We also believe he may be selling what he doesn't take, to keep himself liquid and able to move."

"And this is Joseph Flatwood? Joey Flatwood? About my height, bit bigger in the chest. He's got a split lip—"

"That was repaired, but poorly. Bowlegged. Grew up in your *Arroyo*," Parsons says the word with mild distaste. "Has the tattoos on his knuckles to prove it."

"It's him, Ben," Sani says. "I've seen the tapes."

I shake my head in disbelief. "Can I see these tapes?"

Douglas looks at Parsons, who doesn't move a muscle, but some agreement is passed between them.

"If you'll help us build a file on him, yes. We'll give you access to the tapes."

"Ben, I've told them we'll give them what we have, but you don't have to work with them further. These gentlemen know where their jurisdiction lies."

My first instinct is to turn around and walk right out the door. I'd already helped the council build a case against Joey once, and I've been paying for it ever since. Now the US government wants me to help build another case, and I'm thinking how it is that it falls to me to damn a man twice. I think maybe the gods are giving me the retribution I asked for six years ago in spades, only right now I'm not so sure I want it anymore. It won't make Ana any less gone. I oughta take a page out of the Danny Ninepoint playbook and throw out the playbook. But I can't. I'm not like Danny. I just don't know why, but my book is bolted open. As surely as Dad wanders the back yard. As surely as Sancho and his ilk talk circles around Flatwood to let me know they remember. For some reason, Joey Flatwood can't be forgotten. Not yet.

"What are you gonna do with him, when you catch him?" I wasn't naive enough to think Joey could run forever. Not from the Feds.

"We're going to prosecute him on narcotics charges, breaking and entering, trafficking, and theft, and then, quite frankly, we're going to breathe a sigh of relief," says Parsons.

"Why's that?"

"Because his behavior fits certain profiles. We have reason to believe that Joseph Flatwood is on his way to hurting a lot of people."

Just then a huge crow clatters to a landing on the sill of the high window in Sani's office, and it startles all four of us. It grapples with the stubby awning for a moment, its long black claws scraping at the metal. I step closer to it, looking for a flash of red and terrified that I'll find it.

"They're all over the place these days. It's that time of the fall," Sani says.

The crow watches us sidelong, its arrowed head nearly pressed up against the glass. In profile I can see that its beak is like a six-inch shard of obsidian. It only lingers for a moment, then it drops from the sill. I can hear the beating of its wings. Still staring at the empty sky where it was, I know my answer.

"All right. I'll help. Give me the tapes and a few days to run it down. I'll tell you what I can."

"How about two days. We'd need a full character profile. What he was like growing up. How you knew him. What he was like in school. Any warning signs you might think of. And, of course, a full account of the banishment. We want your personal opinions, Ben. You knew him best."

I nod. "Two days," I say. Something about how eager these men are doesn't sit well with me. The whole story is off. Suddenly I remember the Arroyo. The tracks. The Feds roll around in just the type of town car that would leave those marks. I saw a Lincoln town car parked out front, in the handicapped spot, coming in. That would have done it. They wouldn't have any care for the gambler, of course, but there were strange similarities: the drugs, the Arroyo...the crows. Pieces of a bigger story all butting up against each other like tumbleweeds. If the Feds knew Joey grew

up in the Arroyo, what else did they know? And what weren't they telling me?

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CHAPTER 5

CAROLINE ADAMS

I've been thinking a lot about Ben Dejooli, and it's kind of annoying me. I'll be working along, giving meds or helping a patient to the bathroom, and then out of nowhere he pops into my mind. I have four patients today, and one of them is a really large Navajo. Morbidly obese. She requires our specialized bed and the new hoisting system to get her on her feet so she can get to the restroom. She's also extremely rude to me and to every other person assigned to her. And a lot of people have been assigned to her. This is her sixth time gracing us with her presence in my tenure here. She's been bumped from the ER and onto the Oncology overflow. She is what we call a frequent flyer. She doesn't have cancer, but she has just about everything else. That's what happens when you're two hundred and fifty pounds overweight. You get everything.

I have no problem with fat people, but I do have a problem with mean people. Especially when we are understaffed and one of my patients who actually has cancer looks ready to code on me at the drop of a hat, and instead of tending to him like I should I have to deal with this woman and her whining for more pain meds and accusations of abuse from the staff. It's all I can do not to file her away, and just when I'm about to give up on everything—her, the Navajo, Chaco Reservation, the whole day—Ben Dejooli pops into my mind. He's looking at me with that haunted gaze, and his eyes are like dime-sized windows into the rich-clay bottom of a lake. And it gets me through the rotation and keeps me moving

until I can get a half a minute in the break room to eat my granola bar.

But then, when I'm two bites in to my "dinner," my phone rings and the code alarm goes off at the same time. That means it's my patient dying, and I drop the bar and start running, along with everyone else. Mary Ellen grabs the crash cart from the manager's station and is a half-step behind me. When I get there, the CNA is already doing chest compressions, and there is more blood than I have ever seen at once pouring from the patient's mouth. This is one of those horrible times when a nurse is faced with a crossroads, and this is the longest I've ever stood frozen in one spot during a code. It feels like half a minute, but in reality it's just a few seconds. Then Mary Ellen is behind me with the crash cart and in full-blown battle-manager mode, and I can see why she's the boss.

"Get him on his side," she says, firm and cold as winter stone, as she's rolling out the defibrillator pads. All hesitation gone, I wade into the blood, jam both hands under the patient fireman style, and roll him halfway around while Mary Ellen slaps one pad to his back.

"Front," she says, and I ease him back as Mary Ellen slaps the second to his chest. He is completely non-responsive. It's like moving a bag of dirt. I place the Ambu oxygen bag over his face, but he's still breathing blood and it smears against the inner plastic like melted lipstick. It's already collecting in a pool.

"We're gonna need suction," I say. My voice is distant and small, but another nurse hears me and preps the vacuum.

"Clear!" snaps Mary Ellen, and we all step away. I take the Ambu bag with me, and blood drips from the mouthpiece in a steady line. We wait for a horrible eternity for the readout. It says "No shock advised. Continue CPR." We all move in. Mary Ellen revs the panel again while a doctor injects the IV with epinephrine. The second nurse sucks the blood from in and around his mouth then steps back, and I pump oxygen. The CNA is sweating profusely but hasn't given up on the CPR. God bless him. We're supposed to do

this for three minutes before we can shock him again. That's what the book says. It feels like an hour.

"Clear!"

We step back. In the movies the patients jolt. In real life it's more of a sad shudder.

We wait for the readout. "No shock advised. Continue CPR."

We move back in.

Suck, squeeze, suck, squeeze. The Ambu mouthpiece leaves red rings around his nose and lips. They dry black just in time for another suction and then another squeeze of the bag. They're lurid on his ghost-pale skin. There is no movement under his eyelids, and all of a sudden I notice I'm quietly crying. Some detached part of me wonders when that started. How long have I been here? Minutes? Hours?

"I'm calling it," I hear, and Bennet's voice is like a bucket of cold water. He's looking at the readouts. His face is grim, but his voice is strong.

"He's dead. There's nothing else we can do. He had lung cancer. Once the tumor bursts into the great vessels there's nothing that's going to stop the bleeding. It was only a matter of time. We knew it. He knew it."

And now that he says it, I see the blood is everywhere. It's on the patient. On the bed. On the floor. Up and down my sleeves and on the CNA's face. It's on Bennet, too. Tears roll down my cheeks, but I don't want to touch my face. Bennet looks at me, and his eyes soften. I think if he says anything to me I'm going to break down, but he just nods, thank God.

"Everyone give your roles to the nurse at the door. Time of death, three twenty-seven."

It takes ten minutes to sort out the roles for the log, and by then everyone is shaking, including me. The CNA most of all. I make a mental note to buy him coffee, or lunch. Then I almost laugh out loud at how tiny that gesture would be, all things considered, and it occurs to me that I am in a minor state of shock.

The line limps along. I step up.

"Caroline Adams. I'm the primary nurse."

Then I shuffle out. We all shuffle out in different directions like we're lost in the place we've worked for years. I just cross the hall. I'll need to clean him up and present the body to the family.

"Anybody willing to help me do post-mortem?" I ask, and it feels like I haven't talked for days. I have to clear my throat. I'm pretty sure I squeak.

The CNA nods at me, and Bennet says, "I will." I want to hug both of them then go to sleep for a week. And all of a sudden I'm thinking about Ben DeJooli again. Would he bleed like that? Probably not. If my worst fears are true and he has a brain tumor, he'd probably go out like a candle. There'd be no blood at all. Just the cancer pushing down on the nerve system until he stopped breathing. Bennet brings me back from the brink of breakdown again when he hands me a stack of wet towels. Then he and the CNA roll the patient and strip the bed. I've never seen a doctor do anything like this before, and it's the next thing that makes me want to cry. I viciously clear my throat and dab my face with the hot towel. I'm supposed to be one of the strong ones here.

I busy myself cleaning the floor and swallow down the ball in my throat. Eventually I'm under control. The repetitive swabbing movement helps. But then a strange thing happens. I don't usually go in for supernatural stuff. I believe that there's something bigger than me out there, and I guess I call that thing God. But when you've seen death like I have, you recognize it less as a scary passage or sacred departing and more as just the flipside of life. It's what's at the bottom of the sack of time all of us is handed when we come in to this world. I suppose this makes me disillusioned, but if it does, I'd challenge you to find a nurse out there who isn't. A lot of people prefer to keep the guts and gristle of life behind the skin, like our bodies are bags of magic. Doctors take the opposite extreme. Nurses, for whatever reason, are wired differently. We get in this game for the people, but we also see the guts for what they are: guts. This patient is gone. That's why it gives me pause when I feel something brush past my back while I'm cleaning the patient's face and mouth. I actually step aside.

"Sorry," I say, thinking it's Bennet or the CNA trying to get around me, even though I know it felt different. More subtle. Like a whisper. The brush of a blade of grass.

Bennet looks up at me from across the room. "It wasn't your fault, Caroline. It was stage four lung cancer." The CNA looks up at me and nods in silent agreement. He's by the far closet pulling out new sheets. Neither of them is anywhere near me. I blink at them until I realize that Bennet mistook my meaning, then go back to gently swabbing the side of the dead man's face. Then it happens again, and this time it's like I can hear the crinkle of the bed, like he's sitting up, even though he's just as still and rigid as when I started cleaning him. This time I step back, and I can feel the hairs on my forearms standing on end. Which would be understandable if I were the type to get creeped out by a dead body, but I'm not, which makes it all the stranger.

Then I swear I feel the movement of air on the damp at the back of my neck, and I find myself turning and staring at a spot in the middle of the room. My eyes tell me nothing is standing there, but there is just a hint of color to the air. Like that same strange smoke I saw on Ben's skin, but this is a different color, and it takes me a minute to recognize that it was the unique color of my patient. It snuffed out when he died, I realize this now, yet here it is again, like an echo of cologne passing by me for just a moment. And then it's gone. And, naturally, the two men I asked to help me clean and dress the room catch me staring into space like a cat.

Later, after it's all over and I've changed into my second pair of scrubs and convinced myself that the strange smoke and the soft touch of air were the result of shock, when I'm sitting back down at the table where nobody's touched my granola bar and it lies there like a sad relic of the time when my patient was still alive, Bennet comes in and sits down across from me. He's not wearing his coat anymore, and he's changed his shirt. His tie is a different color too, although it's just as skinny. It almost makes me smile.

"That was a bad one, Caroline. They're gonna do a debrief. I think you should go."

I nod. I pick up the bar, look at it, then set it down again. "Do you remember Ben Dejooli? The patient I had last week? He's Navajo. He passed out on the reservation."

Bennet nods.

"Did he ever fulfill that CT scan?"

"Not yet," Bennet says, and he seems confident in his answer. I wonder if Ben hasn't crossed his mind a time or two since that early morning as well.

I'm not surprised he hasn't gotten the scan. Not in the least. For one, he's a young Navajo man. And he's in a macho line of work on top of that, one that doesn't give him a lot of free time, from what I've seen of Chaco. And top it all off with that terrified look in his eyes—that look that practically begged me to get him out of the hospital—and you have a textbook recipe for negligence.

"He's not going to," I say, and I know it's true. That ball in my throat makes a grand re-entrance. I have to look away and scrunch up my face, so I'm sure it looks like I'm disgusted and not oddly heartbroken. It's probably better that I look disgusted. It's easier to explain away.

Bennet picks at his tie, brushes it flat. He rests his elbows on the table and lets out a deep breath.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he says.

"You work at the CHC same as I do. It's hard...with the Indians...and cancer." It's so much more than that, and my words come out sounding pathetic, but Bennet seems to understand.

"I've found that some of the Navajo need reminding. It's not their way to work on our schedule. They have their own schedule. It's been theirs for thousands of years."

"I'll never see him again," I say.

Bennet looks at me head-on, and I know that his bright-blue eyes, sharp and alive and refreshing after the horrible stillness behind the lids of the man I just saw die, can see damn near right through me.

"You're really worried about this guy," he says, but it's not accusatory. It's soft, and it's appreciative.

I nod. "I see a lot of crap out there at CHC, a lot of things that can't be helped, and I don't want to count him in that number. Somehow I think it's really important that I help him if I can."

Bennet nods again, and I notice that the sharp, aquiline blue is more than just in his eyes. It's all over him. I rub at my own eyes. The color's still there, rolling in soft wisps off of his skin.

"How about this. When are you next at the CHC?" he asks, clearly unaware that he's suddenly glowing blue. It occurs to me that I'm having a breakdown of some sort in the break room. I stare at the table and pretend to be figuring.

"Next Tuesday," I say.

"Why don't I do a little switching around and take the attending shift that day, and after we wrap up we can go find him? Nudge him along a bit."

I look at him head on. Smoke or no, that is an incredibly gracious thing to offer.

"You would do that?" I ask.

"Why not? He's a cop, right? I've been to the Chaco station tons of times working with patients who come to the clinic. I'll make an excuse to get over there at the end of the day when most of the cops are doing their own paperwork. With any luck we'll find him."

"And then what?" I ask, but I feel better than I have in weeks at just the thought of being able to address this Ben thing, this nagging fear, instead of sitting and waiting for bad things to happen.

"Well, that's up to you, but I'm sure you'll think of something," he says, and he smiles. And then I smile, and I can't help but notice that his smoke dances a bit. It makes me smile all over again, and I wonder if this is what a lunatic feels before a giggling fit.

"Okay," I say, perhaps a little too quickly.

"So it's a date?"

"It's a date."

It's only afterwards, in that night's three a.m. wonderings, that it occurs to me that maybe Bennet meant ÷date' as in *date*. I

actually blush, as if I was still talking to him and not alone in my bed. Probably he meant it just as a turn of phrase. Ninety-nine percent chance he meant it that way. Although doctors rarely mince words. Okay, maybe a ninety-five percent chance. And the other thing is that I could tell he was dancing without him ever moving his feet. He was dancing on the inside. I don't know what is happening to me, but if I'm going blind or nuts or having a breakdown, at least I got to see Owen Bennet dance first.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

OWEN BENNET

If you asked me why I proposed the idea of finding this Ben Dejooli, I'd say ostensibly because I have a responsibility as a doctor to help my patients however I can, and then I'd probably add that I, Owen Bennet, personally have an additional responsibility to the Navajo people of Chaco Reservation. It's in keeping with a long line of Bennet doctors who find their practice and then find their cause. My grandfather's practice was a small pediatric clinic in Essex County; his cause was the underserved communities of upstate Massachusetts. Granddad in particular, with his black bag and his racks upon racks of black suits, would find the idea of a site visit like the one I proposed for Ben Dejooli completely normal. My father's practice was in South Boston. He did general medicine. His cause was the Southie Irish-Americans. Working class men and women who might go twenty years at a time without a checkup were it not for him.

I don't have a practice, per se, since I'm an attending at ABQ General. That didn't go over well in the family, so I doubled up on the cause. The Navajo. I work full time for the hospital and then volunteer another full day at least once a week for the Chaco Health Clinic. The sixty-hour work week is brutal, quite frankly, but it didn't kill my grandfather (although Alzheimer's did) and it didn't kill my father (he just loved whisky), and it's damn well not going to kill me.

It's for a good cause. That's what I'd tell you if you were to ask why I'm going out of my way here. But the reality is that I

think I'm in love with Caroline Adams. I also think I'm terrible at hiding it.

I wish I could tell you that I'm no stranger to love. That I've had my heart broken a time or two then pieced myself back together again. That I'm stronger for it and all that. But if I told you that I would be lying. I feel that physicians are hobbled in love to begin with. My grandfather used to say that the only thing more powerful than the knowledge a doctor has is the illusion that he has even more. There has to be distance, he would say. He was remarkably cold for a pediatrician, but he was fabulous at what he did. Dad was a bit warmer, but even he told me that people don't like to look behind the curtain. They don't like to know that their physician is also a man. He is a physician first, and then a man. We may be the only profession in the world where those two are switched around. Interesting men, Dad and Granddad. You can imagine where father and husband fell on their lists.

Distance. Curtain. Practice. Cause. Is it any wonder that I have no idea what I'm doing when these feelings for Caroline slap me in the face?

Thankfully, I know what I'm doing when I make my rounds, even when I'm at the Chaco Health Clinic, where every new hire (or volunteer, as the case may be) walks around the cramped hallways with this look about them like they've stepped onto another planet. I don't blame them. I was that way, too, when I first came here nearly seven years ago. And in a lot of ways, when you step onto the Chaco Reservation you are stepping onto another planet.

Caroline was that way, too. But it's been almost five years for her, and she's leveled out. Once she hits her five-year mark she's fulfilled her grant stipulations with the US Government. She won't have to work at the CHC anymore if she doesn't want to. I've spent an embarrassing number of hours wondering if she'll leave Chaco, and then ABQ General, too. It's a decent enough place, but if you feel no obligation to stay in Albuquerque, it would certainly be easy enough to leave, too.

Sometimes I have these drawn-out fantasies where she tells me she is going to leave and it forces me to make some sort of move on her. But like I said: That's not me. It took nearly everything I had to ask her to go after Ben DeJooli with me. I felt like my heart was beating so hard it was vibrating my tie like a bass string. The trick to not looking like a lovelorn sop is to keep it professional. Thankfully, that is my zone. That is where I am king. Call me Doctor Professional. That is why I've been able to work with Caroline at the CHC for nearly five years without seeming untoward or awkward. But time is ticking, and I don't want to back myself into a corner with all the rest of the kids who are too afraid to ask the girls to dance. I have to leave my zone.

The CHC isn't a MASH unit, but it's no Mayo Clinic either. It's a repurposed office building, four stories, and it has that cubicle claustrophobia about it still. We have two old conference rooms that we use for revolving-door office hours for six hours a day on the main floor. I try to get there when I can, but mostly we stock it with the resident docs. It's good practice for them. Other than that there's a small waiting room that is almost always at capacity, and then three other floors' worth of patient rooms. Just over seventy-five beds. We get about two hundred thousand outpatient encounters a year. We cram ÷em in, as they say, but it's better than nothing. I like to think we do all right.

The day of our trip passes like a blur. I see Caroline occasionally, but most of the time I'm in and out of patient rooms one after another, like I've misplaced my keys and am popping in to have a look around. Here at the CHC we are strongly urged to keep patient visits to five minutes and under. That kind of thing drives me crazy, and my grandfather would most likely have spoken to every administrator there is, face-to-face, about the travesty of rushing a physician. My father knew how to work within the system better. He would have written a strongly worded letter. I simply endure. The one time I do get a free minute and Caroline is nearby, it is she who brings up our impending outing. As if it could have slipped my mind.

"Doctor Bennet," she says. "How are your rounds?"

"Never-ending. But that comes with the territory," I say, and inwardly cringe. Territory? Who am I, Meriwether Lewis?

"We're still on for this afternoon, right?" she asks, and she raises a hopeful eyebrow. She could have asked for just about anything right then, and I would have done it.

We're still getting tattoos, right?

Sure are!

We're still running away to Bali, right?

Got my bags right here!

What actually comes out is, "If you're able, yes."

"Oh good!" she says. "Yeah, I think I'll be ready at shift change. Three p.m.? Meet you outside?"

"I'll be there," I say, and she's off. She's one of the most senior staff we have now at this place, where the turnover is, quite frankly, pretty ridiculous. I try not to think what it would be like if she left. I throw myself headlong into the next patient, an emphysematous male, forty-seven, mild tachycardia, moderate diabetes risk. Suffering from light-headedness, like our friend Ben Dejooli was, but the culprit here is obvious, whereas Ben doesn't smoke and he's not overweight. I go on like this, room after room, and soon enough, work blurs my emotions, and I can pull the curtain across once more.

Before I know it, I'm waiting out in my old SUV for Caroline, and I'm putting my palms in front of the vents to try and dry them off. It's a balmy fifty-eight degrees according to the readout on the dash. A textbook New Mexico fall day. I see her walk out of the front doors of the Center, and when I tap the horn, she waves. I turn off the blasting air. I can see that she walks with a bit of tenderness, and I think it's from having to single-handedly roll that stage four lung cancer patient over during that code last week. I've been there before. You can throw your back out in those types of situations and have no idea it happened until you're in the shower that night and all of a sudden you can't reach the shampoo. My heart goes out to her. It's tough enough having to deal with a bloody code without also having it sit in the small of your back for the next two weeks.

"All right," she says, smiling and huffing slightly. "That's over."

I wonder if I should bring up the fact that her contract is up in about a month. It doesn't seem the thing to open with.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready? You act like this is some sort of war zone we're going into."

I laugh, and it sounds cavernous. I clip it short. "It's no war zone. It's a nice community. Parts of it, anyway."

"Do you know your way around Chaco?"

"I've been all over Chaco. I know it well enough."

"I've never been past the CHC."

"There's no reason for you to, unless you like to gamble. Also there's a great Mexican food place off the main drive, if you're willing to look past the tracked up floors." I scratch at my collar. I'm nervous talking now. The words keep coming. "And a bar that's pretty friendly if you go left at the welcome center and drive for a few blocks. Dirt cheap. Called the Chaco Pourhouse."

She looks at me with this barely veiled expression of amazement, and it occurs to me that I've pushed the curtain pretty far back at this point. But that was the whole idea, wasn't it? Time to move forward with my head up? Power through?

"What, you don't think doctors drink?"

"Oh, I know doctors drink. I just wasn't sure about you."

"Well," I say, and I have no follow-up, so I shrug. She's already looking out the window. I'm dreading the silence, so I turn on tour guide mode.

"The rez has parts that people are supposed to see and take pictures of and experience, and then it has parts that are best left alone."

We're driving on the main drag, north, skirting the welcome center and cutting through the nicer neighborhoods to get to the council buildings, where the police station is.

"What's best left alone?" she asks, watching a huge murder of crows that is cutting a wide circle in the sky in sync, like a flock of homing pigeons. They seem to be scanning the ground like bomber pilots and calling out landing spots.

"You don't want to go too far north. You hit some of the track bars and the row houses, and then beyond that is a place called the Arroyo. Sort of a gypsy camp for the poorest of the poor Navajo out by this big depression in the desert. I've had a handful of calls come from there, working at the CHC. It's pretty hairy." I puff up a bit here. She seems like she's interested in the rez, and I want to show her that I know it better than most white boys.

She throws me a curveball. "I'd like to go there some day," she says.

"The Arroyo?"

"Yeah. The Navajo...they're tough, but they're also, I dunno. Kinda...wonderful." She's blushing now.

"I know what you mean," I say, and I say it sincerely. "I have this bracelet."

"What?"

"I wear a bracelet. A young Navajo girl gave it to me. She was a patient of mine, back when I was a resident working at CHC. She had a goiter, very treatable but something that was literally ruining her life. It was a simple thyroid issue. That's all. But it was big and ugly, and it ostracized her. Had for years."

I still remember the day that girl gave me the bracelet. She hardly smiled. She walked up to me, set it in my hand, then she turned around and walked away, and I stared at it until my eyes started to water. That's what is running through my head, but that's a little too much, I think, for the moment, so I say, "She gave me a bracelet. I wear it under my cuff."

I take one hand from the wheel and wiggle the cuff up a bit to show her, and I suddenly feel like a child holding up a piece of noodle art, so I tuck it back in and clear my throat. I've worn it for years. It probably looks like a matted piece of string to her anyway.

"That's incredible," she says. "I had a woman come back with some food she'd cooked for me. I remember how good that felt. Also I had a grandmother cry once and shake both of my hands pretty vigorously after I discharged her. I'm hoping they were

tears of gratitude. I'm almost a hundred percent sure that they were."

I look at her sidelong and can see that in her mind she's actually revisiting those tears and reaffirming her diagnosis. I laugh. I can't help it. She looks at me and smiles. She knows I'm laughing with her.

"That's pretty amazing," I say. "Nobody ever cooked for me before."

"You really care about them."

I nod. "I don't think I meant to. But it happened. Still, places like the Arroyo, or the strip out by the tracks, those places I don't care for."

Before I know it, and before I want it to happen, the Chaco Police Station is around the corner. It's hard to miss. A big, long barn structure built out of salmon-pink adobe composite. A big, chrome disk stands out front, like a quarter balanced on edge. A memorial to those officers who have lost their lives in the line of duty over the years. As we pull in to park I can see that she's nervous. She's staring blankly at the front entrance.

"Ready? Remember, it's no big deal. I'm just checking on some files, and you came along. We'll see what we can see." I shrug.

She nods.

CHAPTER 7

BEN DEJOOLI

When I agreed to write up a report on Joey Flatwood for the Feds I knew it would be like raking over a scar that still aches. I don't do well remembering how Ana disappeared. I've tried very hard to remember my little sister as she was, running around the house, handing me odds and ends that she thought were little pieces of treasure, singing or humming to herself. The Division of Public Safety already has a formal report on the night in question, but it was written by another officer. I wasn't a part of the force yet. Essentially, what those agents asked me to do was write up a report as if I was the officer who answered my own emergency call.

I'm not a good writer. I'm good at listing facts and observations. I can pick apart a crime scene better than anyone I know, but when it comes to telling people *why* I think a thing, or *why* I did what I did, I'm at a loss for words. I'm the type of cop who acts on instincts, for better or for worse. Most of the time it does me good. Sometimes it ends up with me passed out solo at the Arroyo in the dead of night. What can I say? I've had more than my fair share of misreads, but it's the only way I know how to work. Maybe this is the reason I've essentially been running the same beat route for years. Danny passed on the chance to become a detective. He hates the desk. Says the beat is in his blood. They never even asked me, and I don't think they intend to, all things considered. I'm reminded of that every now and then when the kitchen quiets.

I have a picture of Ana on my half of the desk. Two pictures, actually. One is a five-by-nine of her sitting on Gam's lap when she was seven. Dad took it. I can see Mom smiling at them just in the corner. Ana is just about to start wriggling free, but Gam's holding her close with just a hint of a smile on her face that says she knows Ana's about to make a run for it. Ana has this gleam in her eye. She was always wanting to run. But I suppose all kids are like that.

The other picture is her fourth-grade school photo. Wallet sized. The last one she ever took. It was the picture we gave the cops. It sits in the corner of the same frame. She fooled Gam that day and convinced her to let her dress herself. She's wearing a shiny purple windbreaker with three bows in her hair, and her smile runs ear to ear.

I turn back to the blinking cursor. I start with dates. That's easy enough. I could be dead asleep and if you told me to name a date, any date, I'd say Tuesday, August 1, 2006. When I'm dead and gone you can ask my grave the same thing, and the wind'll whip the desert dust up and you'll hear it speak: Tuesday, August 1, 2006.

I start writing a bullet point list of the worst series of events in my life.

- *3 p.m., I come home for a late lunch and find Ana on the floor of the living room. Grandmother is asleep in her room. Mother and Father are out. Ana does not move when I walk into the house. I know something is wrong because Ana has a congenital heart defect.*

Had. Ana *had* a congenital heart defect. I could write how all of her life I had half an eye on her. Worried sick about that tiny cough and about the breathless way she would come in from playing out back, wondering if she might be dying where she stood. We'd been in and out of the hospital countless times. Each time she cried, and each time another dime's worth of dread of the place dropped into my pocket as well. But I don't know how to write these things. So I don't.

- *Ana was non-responsive when I shook her, but she was breathing.*

Barely. I had to lick the back of my hand and put it on her lips to make sure it wasn't just wishful thinking. But we had prepared for this. We had plans. We ran practice drills. I called 911. First responders took Ana to the CHC, where she was admitted in critical condition. The doctors were able to stabilize her, and after eight hours she was upgraded to stable condition. Eight hours in which I sat in a tiny waiting room with Mom, Dad, and Gam, convinced that the last time I would ever see Ana alive was when she was shooting away on a rolling bed surrounded by medical staff, the double doors swinging shut behind her, in and out of phase. I didn't know then that later on I would actually wish it had worked out that way. Opened and closed. Like those doors. I don't know how the doctors saved her. Shocked her or shot her full of something that got her heart back in sync and going again. I didn't care. All I cared about was that she was okay.

We moved Ana to ABQ General as soon as she was able to be moved. There they ran her through a battery of tests, again and again while we waited and watched from behind glass. An eternity later, an old, fat white man who we were told was head of pediatric medicine came out into the waiting room, stood with his hands behind his back, and told us that she needed a heart transplant. Like we could pick it up at the supermarket. Without a transplant, she would not survive the year. Until a transplant became available, she would need to stay at the hospital.

And so we waited.

Ana was a high profile candidate. Young. All of her life in front of her. Otherwise perfectly healthy. She had the whole dwindling Navajo Nation angle too, and the government likes to trumpet how much they care about us. We were told there was a very good chance she'd find a donor.

Ana was weak and slept a lot, but she understood what was happening. She was willing to climb any mountain if it meant she could have her run of the backyard again. What she didn't understand was why it was taking so long, and why she couldn't leave her bed. It was tough on all of us. At first all four of us stayed at her side, all day and all night. But when days dragged to

weeks, dragged to months, we started doing shifts. One at a time. People did a lot for us. For the Navajo, blood runs deep. Gam's friends, the real old school Navajo, came to pray and perform a modified Blessingway. Our neighbors cleaned our house and took care of some of the bills. IHS insurance covered everything at the hospital, thank God, but we weren't working as much, so people organized fundraisers to help us cover daily costs. The hardware store paid Dad time and a half for every hour he worked. We were inundated with food. And throughout all of it, Joey Flatwood was there for me. He cooked me food (which was not good) and snuck in beer (which was delicious). He brought me books for when he couldn't be there, and conversation and games for Ana when he could be there.

And then, eventually, he offered to sit with Ana when one of us needed a break. For any time at all. Thirty minutes to go smoke a cigarette. An hour to go take a drive. Even a whole night if we just wanted to take a breather. He was happy to.

Ana knew Joey. He was my best friend. He'd been around her since before she could remember. She trusted him as much as any of us did. And the hospital drags on you after a while. It's like the fluorescent lights suck the moisture from your skin. So we let him in.

Joey sat in Ana's room while Dad went outside for air. And there it was. That's all I know. I wasn't there that night. I was at home applying for jobs. Thinking about if I should go to college. Thinking what it would mean if I did go to college, off the rez. How I wouldn't be looked at the same way again around here. Just like my mother. It's strange to think of now, on this side of things. I chose not to go to college, and I was still cast out anyway.

How do I put this in a police report? I can't, so the next gap in the report is about a mile wide.

- *Father returned from his shift at Chaco Hardware to find Ana gone, and Joseph Flatwood non-responsive on a chair near her empty bed.*

But he wasn't non-responsive like Ana was non-responsive when I found her. He looked like the floor had shifted under him.

His eyes were open and staring at the wall across Ana's empty bed. Dad shook the hell out of him. Said he slapped him. Joey wouldn't be brought back from wherever he was. He just kept staring. Never blinking. When I got there, after Dad called me out-of-his-mind with panic, I slapped Joey too. More than a slap, to be honest. It was a full-bore knockout-button uppercut, straight to that shutdown switch to the right of the chin. When he dropped to the floor, it was the first time he shut his eyes in over an hour. Before then the nurses had been giving him drops.

He was never the same after that day. He sat in the Chaco jail for a month without speaking a word. As the chances we'd find Ana grew slimmer by the day, he sat. The police told me all he did was stare at the wall during the day and sleep at night. If you could call it sleep. They said he did a lot of screaming at night. They said if you didn't put his food in front of his face, he wouldn't eat it. It took them nearly four days to figure that out. In those first four days he didn't eat anything.

- *Subsequent examination of the security camera footage over the time frame in which Ana went missing showed nothing out of the ordinary.*

There was no recording of what happened in the room, but there didn't need to be. Her room was on the ninth floor of ABQ General, and it had one window and one door. The window was intact. The camera in the hallway showed that the door never opened. Yet Ana was gone.

- *An anomaly in the footage provided us with the only plausible explanation.*

It was weak. I knew that much, even then. It was basically what they call a "break line." It's when the camera misses some frames. It looks like a stutter step. Like the camera blinked. The Chaco detectives told me that there was a chance that Ana was snatched in that blink. I know. I didn't believe it either.

They dusted the room. They talked to every single worker on the floor at that time. They pored over every piece of camera footage, from that hallway on floor nine to every other floor in the place. Elevators too. They questioned state police outside of the

Chaco border about crossings that day. They did everything. All we had was that stutter step. Either she'd been taken in that second, or she'd disappeared into thin air. ÷Disappeared into thin air' doesn't look good on a police report.

- *It was determined that Ana had been abducted from her hospital room at 3:28 in the afternoon.*

The nowhere hour. The forgotten slice of the day. Nobody ever asks what you're doing at three in the afternoon.

- *Subsequent analysis of her monitoring systems showed a malfunction in the machinery.*

Malfunction is a bad word for it. The machine didn't work at all. According to the beeping box, she was stable, then erratic, then gone. It seemed to have reset itself. Nobody reported any bed alarm or crash alarm. It was as if at 3:28 in the afternoon the machine had never been attached to Ana in the first place. Her IV line hung limply from a saline bag, the needle and tape still attached.

- *Nobody reported seeing anyone other than Joseph Flatwood enter the room, and once he was there, he never left.*

When I got to the room and found Joey blank, there was no trace of my sister. It was so undisturbed, without even a scent of her, that I was convinced they'd moved Joey into another room. Maybe if I'd sat with him right afterwards. Worked with him somehow instead of snapping and popping him in the face. Maybe if I'd convinced him to tell me what he'd done while it was still fresh, maybe I could have gotten something out of him. It's Triage 101. Every Chaco cop takes the course. The quicker you stitch a wound up, the less chance there is of a scar. I think the Chaco cops left everything split open too long. It's part of the reason I joined up afterwards. I didn't want it happening to anyone else. I'm not one to puff myself up, but I guarantee you if I had been behind a badge that day, I would know exactly what had happened to Ana.

Instead I was a terrified eighteen-year-old boy. I remember I kept running places. Up and down the halls. In and out of the front door. Around the parking lot. I yelled for her like she was a lost

puppy. I screamed her name until my voice was hoarse and the police threw a blanket over me in the dead heat of August and sat me in the back of a cruiser. I didn't have a chance to look clearly at anything. And even if I'd had the sanity, I didn't have the ability. I wouldn't have known what to look for. But knowing that doesn't make it any easier. I felt like a kid who can't reach the phone when his mom is choking. When time is of the essence.

- *That day I start to see crows.*

I actually write this. I write this in the report before I know what I'm doing, and after I write it I stare at the letters for a moment as if they'd been spelled out on a Ouija board. I sniff. There's a tingling in the back of my throat. Like a drip. It smells like sulfur. My head throbs once, expands and then compresses back. I look out of the skylights above, and it's almost like I'm expecting to see the crow. The big crow with the red shine to him. The one on the car. The one in the sky on the drive back from the hospital. The one that lives in the corner of my sight. But there's nothing but broken blue sky. I can't look away. It's like I can feel the big thing, right out of sight, perched on a branch and staring at me through the wall with unblinking eyes. There's a pressure in my head, a slow-building whistling. I grip the edge of my desk as I delete the words. Nobody needs to know that.

"Hey." Danny Ninepoint kicks me under the desk. "What's wrong with you these days?"

I blink. The bubble pops. Only the soft throb of a headache remains, but I've lived with that for months now.

"It's just this report." I flick my hand at the computer. "I don't like going back to this."

"Well, pull it together. It looks like you're the hot buck at the dance this week," he says, nodding his head to the door.

Two white people are at the front desk, and I recognize both of them. It's the doctor from the hospital and Caroline, and they're looking right at me. It takes all I've got not to swear under my breath or flinch like a spooked dog. Last thing I need is to give any one of the fifteen bored cops within earshot more ammo to use against me.

"You want me to go talk to ÷em?" Danny mutters.

"Nah," I say. "Maybe..." Maybe what? Maybe they're here on business? The doctor has been round before. He's conferred with the detectives once or twice on hard cases where a Navajo ended up in the hospital. But Caroline? It's funny how her name comes to me like a letter dropping through a mail slot and plunking on the floor. Her name, and her hand on my shoulder. I remember them both quite clearly.

Like it or not, the doctor is coming towards me, walking like a stork. Out of the corner of my eye I see Danny shake his head in exasperation. I think he's tired of the parade too.

"Officer Dejooli?" the doctor asks, all business. Five or six cops turn to watch.

"Yeah," I say, defeated.

"I found a nurse who's willing to make a statement," he says, evenly.

"What?"

"The drunk driver. He came in to the ER a little over a week ago under police escort. Sorry it took so long. I want to nail that bastard as much as anybody, but it's been crazy at the hospital all week."

It takes me way longer than it should to realize that he's making all of this up to get me to talk to Caroline. He's so steady that for a good five seconds I actually think I may have processed a drunk driving case and forgotten about it.

"Right," I say.

"She's right over there. I have some other business with Sani, and I thought I'd bring her down. You know. Two birds and all that."

The cops all go back to their work. This guy is good.

"All right. Thanks."

And just like that he turns and lopes off towards the big offices. I clear my throat, smooth my uniform, and take a step towards reception before Danny hands me a notepad.

"Might want this. If you're taking a statement and all."

"Oh. Thanks."

He nods, his head already back to the reports.

Caroline smiles at me as I walk up to her, and it's not the smile of a girl who is supposed to be meeting someone for the first time.

"Hi," I say, glancing at the front desk. "I'm Ben DeJooli. I'll take your statement, if you're ready."

"I am," she says, and she clasps her hands demurely behind her back, but not before she brushes them on her pants. That's a telltale sign of clammy palms. She's nervous as hell.

"Right this way," I say, and I lead her to one of the empty conference rooms on the main level. She follows a half step behind. I flick on the lights and shut the door behind us, then I turn and just watch her.

At first she tries to be nonchalant, but she can only meet my eyes for about five seconds at a time. Then she screws up one side of her face, and for a horrible moment I think she's about to cry. When she looks up at me again I can see that she is almost as surprised as I am to find herself where she is. She looks around the room like she's lost.

"Is this about me?" I ask, quietly.

"No," she says, shaking her head vigorously. "Doctor Bennet had some files to give one of your people." She pauses and her eyes widen, as if she's insulted me. "I just thought I'd come with him to..."

"To..."

She looks up at the ceiling, giving up.

"To see if you'd ever gone to get that scan, except I know that you haven't because I could see that the order was never fulfilled. So what I really came to ask was why the hell you didn't go. There. There it is."

She's trying to stare bullets at me now. Her hands are on her hips. She's still wearing scrubs from work. Black pants that fit her like a tarp and a blue top that looks like it was cut from paper. I think she's wearing clogs, too, and I know that sounds bad, but it's not like that. If anything it was sort of cute. Maybe more than cute.

"You came all this way to tell me to do what the doctor said?"

"Yes," she says, point blank. And that's when it finally hits me: maybe there's really something wrong with me. My whole life nobody has done anything like this on my behalf. Something as good as a girl like her coming out here to see me has to have a flipside. Everything has a balance.

"You think I'm really sick? I...I've been fine. I haven't passed out or anything since."

But as soon as the words come out of my mouth I know I haven't been fine. My head has been hurting. Now that I think about it, I don't think it ever stopped hurting. I can't remember when it didn't hurt, even just a little. It's become background noise, that's all.

"Yes," she says, softly this time, and her eyes sweep over me, over my head and arms and the skin of my hands. "I do think you're sick," she says.

"What do you think I have?" It almost doesn't come out because it feels like I have a fistful of sand in my mouth.

"I don't know. Could be a lot of things."

"The doctor said you thought it was a tumor back at the hospital—"

"I don't know," she says again, but I can tell that's exactly what she's thinking. I'm not gonna lie, the more I think about it, the more it seems possible. When you pass out and come to in an ambulance, your brain automatically leaps to the worst of the worst. You're dying. You have something fundamentally wrong with you. But when Caroline and Doctor Bennet told me to get the scan, something in me rebelled. It's more than just how hospitals mess with me; I refused to believe it could happen to me. Cancer is so huge, so faceless. Something that you assume attacks without mercy. A dark spot inside you that sucks you away. It's not a headache. Not a momentary spate of dizziness. And yet, here Caroline is, trying not to look like she's pleading with me.

"Look, I'm right in the middle of a big case here. When it's over, I'll try to get to that scan. I promise this time."

It sounds weak, I know. To promise to try? This is exactly what she doesn't want to hear, and I can tell that her mind is

tumbling over itself. But just when she looks about to come back at me there's a knock at the door, and it stills her. It's Bennet. I open the door, and he looks briefly between Caroline and me.

"I'm all set," he says. "Did you get what you needed?"

Caroline scowls, then frowns. Then she sort of deflates and shrugs, and that hits me. Bennet looks at me plainly and then nods.

"Well, you did what you could," he says.

Caroline brushes past me, and the two of them are gone in a blink. I stand in the empty conference room for another full minute, staring at nothing, trying to probe my own brain for parts of it that might be killing me. Like I said, I know I'm not *fine*. But am I *dying*? There seems like there should be a lot of ground between those two.

I end up staying at the station long after Danny and most everyone else on the day shift goes home. The night shift is half as strong, personnel-wise. On the rez there are basically two hotspots of activity. One is around ten in the evening, which the night shift takes on with fresh eyes and ears, and the other is at rush hour, about five in the afternoon. There's an old tongue-in-cheek saying around here. All of your calls essentially come from the same type of Indian: he's pissed off after work and starting shit and then drunk after dinner and starting shit.

Nobody around Danny's and my desk is scheduled for night shift, so I have a bit of space. Since nobody talks to me, I don't have any distractions, either. The shift change just sort of happens around me while I'm writing up the profile part of the report for the Feds. This is the part I've been dreading the most. Here is where I'm supposed to talk about Joey himself. I rub at my face. The only way to get through this is to just write whatever comes to my mind.

Joey was no saint, I write. He was the only man I ever met who gave me the guts to go places that scared me and to do things I was afraid to do. He used to say that we were clipped at the knees in life just having to live at Chaco, so we owed it to ourselves to own the place. He said we'd be the rat kings. Joey

never would admit it, but outside of Danny Ninepoint, I never met a man more proud to be a Navajo.

I met Joey when we were thirteen years old, in those first days of middle school when kids hammer out the pecking order, and we decided to stick together. He lived at the Arroyo with his grandfather on his mother's side. His mother died when he was young. He didn't know his father. But his grandfather was a good man. A Navajo of the old ways. He hunted and trapped for food. He had a small herb garden in the window of his camper. He would capture water from rain, which he prayed for, and he would eat rabbit and prairie dog, which he also prayed for. He butchered them in the old way, too. Giving thanks. Never taking anything for granted. When we could, my family would pass cuts of beef and cans of food to Joey, for the both of them. His grandfather was too proud to take handouts, but Joey was more practical, and he had a soft spot for Dinty Moore stew. We ran together all throughout our teenaged years.

Looking at that last sentence, it hardly seems a fitting way to describe seven years of raising hell, chasing after cars and girls, drinking when we shouldn't and smoking when we shouldn't and what we shouldn't, usually on Joey's lead. Cigarettes that made us sick, and a couple of times peyote, that made us sicker. Swearing to watch each other's backs. Swearing in blood, smeared on our hands, dark like mud, cut with Joey's grandfather's knife, which had seemed like a sword then, and, in all honesty, probably would seem like a sword now, too. It was a huge goddamn knife. I wonder if Joey took it with him. The only one I've ever seen like it is Danny's scalp knife, which makes sense, since he has a lot of the old ways in him too.

I write, *Joey's grandfather died right around the time Ana's heart condition took a turn for the worse.* Looking back on it now, it was a subtle turn, but it was a turn nonetheless. She wasn't gaining any weight, she wasn't growing, she seemed to be shrinking, if anything. While the rest of her classmates and her friends were pushing their way up the hill into puberty, it was like she tripped and slowly began rolling backwards. But her eyes were

always bright and winking, if a little softer than usual, and she laughed and ran, if a touch slower. I worried myself sick over her, playing out terrible scenarios in my mind, trying to imagine a Ben Dejooli who had no sister. I know now that I didn't give Joey what he needed then, as a friend, as a blood brother. I was selfish. His family was all gone. I still had mine, but it was going, and I wallowed in it. I don't even remember his grandfather's burial. That's how muddled I was.

We offered to take him in, have him live with us in our house, but he politely declined. He was seventeen, after all. His grandfather's camper and all that came with it, sparse as it was, was his now. Knife and all. And he knew his way around the Arroyo. He was a man now.

Still, that was the beginning of the change in him.

Joey became obsessed with death. Our conversations, whenever we met up, eventually turned to death and dying. Which I suppose is normal for a kid who has just lost his only family. Still, this went on for an entire year. Joey was there when his grandfather died. Their camper wasn't big enough for him to have been anywhere else. He said he went in his sleep, but I often wonder if his passing wasn't...uglier somehow.

I believe that this was part of the reason he offered to start watching over Ana.

The main reason he offered was because he could see the toll the wait was taking on me and on my family. But I've always felt that he was unnaturally comfortable there. In the hospital, around Ana, who was dying by degrees. I don't mean to seem like he was eager or creepy about it, not like that, but he did settle in quickly. He took one shift a week at first, just a couple of hours. He did construction day-work that started early, so he would come hang out with Ana in the mid-afternoon to give one of us a break. At night he'd go back to the Arroyo.

And there's another thing that's been bothering me, although I'm not quite sure why. Before he was banished, Joey lived in the spot where the smoker had parked for his vigil. Joey and the gambler would have been neighbors. The gambler probably had

that spot for decades. He would have seen Joey grow up. There's a good chance Joey and the gambler were friends.

Something about finding these connections where they shouldn't be bothers me. The gambler and Joey should have nothing to do with each other, but they do. I just don't know how yet. I feel like I'm just outside of understanding, like I'm jumping up to get a peek through a window in my mind, looking for a glimpse of Joey or Ana, and instead I find the gambler watching me. In my mind's eye he's not dead, though. He's just silent. And staring at me dressed in dull gold and holding a turquoise crow tightly in his hand. And he thumps his fist to his heart...

I jump in my seat as a gust of wind kicks up and bits of desert sand pepper the outside of the station. The windows themselves seem to pop and settle, and the old fan that circles slowly above the main floor squeals angrily. The handful of other cops at their desks look up as well, brought out of their work, or their dozing. There is a feeling of resignation in the main room; the late night storms of autumn always signal that winter is close behind. Fall is the best season in New Mexico. It's warm and colorful, and it stretches itself like a cat, lingering in the sunny spots as long as it can. Winter is the worst. It's not cold, not exactly, but it's not warm either. It's somewhere in the damp between. The colors fall flat. The desert trees and bushes seem confused, like they don't know if they should shed their leaves or gut it out until spring.

Profiling Joey has put me in a bad frame of mind. I'm feeling twinges of the same sort of sick helplessness that tinges this entire series of events a drained sepia color in my memory. It's time to wrap it up.

The last time I saw Joseph Flatwood was the day he was banished. At the reading of his sentence.

We were on the south edge of the reservation. He had his camper on the 'out' side of the Chaco line, and representatives from the tribal council and tribal court stood on the inside. I insisted that I go, too. I wanted to see him break down. I held out hope that he might finally give me something, some precious grain of information that would let me know what had happened in the

room during that camera blip when Ana disappeared, but he said nothing.

He remained silent as the court read its decision. He looked at the ground the entire time. Although I did notice that he was crying.

I feel it's important to note this in the report. He looked at me, too. I stood off of the road with Gam, who also insisted on coming. He looked right at me and his eyes were screaming something that I couldn't quite understand, but his mouth was an unwavering frown, like a horseshoe. I almost called out to him. I was either going to scream at him or plead with him, but my grandmother sensed it first and gripped my shoulder like a vice, stilling me.

And then it was over. Joey Flatwood was no longer a Navajo in the eyes of the council. The voice of the people had spoken. He was cast out. There was no great clap of thunder. No driving sheet of rain or swelling of wind, but it did feel like a cord had been cut. A musical chord in my heart, like the string of a guitar. It twanged and thumped in my mind, and then it was still. Joey never stopped watching me, even when the cops led him across the threshold, even when each man and woman turned their back upon him, one by one. I was the last. Gam had to physically turn me. I'm not sure I could have done it otherwise.

Eventually I heard him shuffle away. Heard him get into his camper, and the engine roll over slowly, struggling to life. And then he pulled away. There was no peel out. No skittering of the desert dust underneath his wheels. It was a slow, quiet rolling away. When I turned around again, his camper was a dot on the horizon, but his eyes, silently screaming at me, brimming with tears, they stuck with me long afterwards.

You could say that they never really left me.

I have to wipe at my own eyes, which I do quickly and brusquely with the sleeve of my jacket. For the first time since it happened, I find words coming to me that I never turned to before, either out of fear, or out of anger, or sadness, or all three. For years I had assumed he knew something but wouldn't tell me. Surely he knew. He was there, for God's sake.

But what if he knew something but *couldn't* tell me?

The thought triggers a massive wave of pressure in my head, and I'm forced to lay down on my arms on my desk. I sit like this for several minutes, breathing deeply, trying to get my eyes to focus correctly again. Watching my breath fog the desk. I'm not sure if I black out again, but if I did it was only for a short time, and, thankfully, I'm not the only cop sleeping at his desk at this hour. When I sit up I do it slowly, blinking heavily. There is a sour taste in my mouth and a whiff of matches in my nose.

By the time I pull myself together enough to finish my statement, it's nearly one in the morning, and by then I'm sure of two things.

The first is that Joey Flatwood saw something terrible that day in Ana's room.

The second is that Caroline was right. I need to go get that goddamn brain scan.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

CAROLINE ADAMS

Well. That was a complete disaster.

I've been going over the trip to Chaco in my mind frame by frame; stopping and rewinding, slow motion, pausing here and there. It's three in the morning now, and I'm more convinced than ever that not only did I not convince Ben to get scanned, but I also made a complete ass of myself in front of him, and later in front of Doctor Bennet, and in general in front of God and everybody. It would be good if I just ran away. I could probably get to Arizona before my car gave out. I haven't changed the oil in a year. I haven't done anything in a year, really. And just like that, bits of my anxiety snowball into each other until I find myself in the bathroom thinking I'm going to throw up. I don't, of course, but I do stare at myself in the mirror until my nose bumps the glass, trying to find any trace of color like I saw on Ben and on Doctor Bennet. But whatever I can see on other people I can't see on me, so I pee, then get some water and get back in bed. I listen to the storm blow against the wall and let my regrets wash over me like weak little lake waves.

I think it's time I was honest with myself. I think it's time I call this what it is. I have a stupid little juvenile twelve-year-old girl crush on Ben Dejooli, and it's infuriating. I want to be rid of it. I think that's why I went to the station, to purge myself of this. This isn't normal for me, I promise. I don't want to give you the wrong impression. I don't pine. I'm not a piner.

Ben has every right to think I'm a lunatic. He should have called the cops on me. Except he is a cop. He should have called himself on me. That would have been great. But not in any sort of sexual way. Just in a sort of escort-the-crazy-cat-lady-off-the-premises type of way. And I don't even have any cats. I've often thought I should get a cat. My apartment is pretty small, but I think a lazy cat would be fine. Or an indoor/outdoor cat. Although an outdoor cat on the Albuquerque outskirts would stand a one-in-five chance of getting destroyed by a coyote every time it left the apartment. If I got a cat only to have it eaten I would need therapy. I probably need therapy already.

These are the things I think about at three in the morning.

I really hope he gets that scan. I hope because I want him to start fighting the cancer that I somehow already know is in him. Just like I know that something was in that room after that horrible code. I just know it. I want him to get the ball rolling. He's dying, and it's time to get to work.

How do I know? I can see it. I can see what is wrong with him. That's what the colors are, some sort of visual representation of what is going on inside of people. It's like how you can see when a patient is yellowed by jaundice; he has a color to him. Actually, it would be like if a patient turned yellow from jaundice and I was the only person in the world who could see it. That's a bit more accurate. Just to make sure, I asked Doctor Bennet on the drive home if Ben looked darker, kind of reddish, and he looked at me like I was joking with him.

"He looked okay to me," he said. And then out of nowhere I started sobbing.

I haven't cried since my first year on the floor. I didn't cry when my mom called and told me that my dog died. I didn't cry when a tiny dove flew into my window and I could see it flop dead to the ground two floors below on the sidewalk. I didn't cry when I had to work Christmas last year and couldn't go home and I sat in my apartment and drank out of a jug of Carlo Rossi wine watching the Hallmark channel with nothing but a ficus with a droopy star for decoration, like something straight out of *A Charlie Brown*

Christmas. That was a cryable moment if there ever was one. But I didn't then. And I did today. God in heaven. And in front of Doctor Bennet, too.

Of course, he played it off perfectly. He was so kind. He patted my knee and said it's okay and let me wheeze it out while I stared out of the window and wished the radio was on a little louder. When I said I was sorry he said there's no reason to be. He's had his fair share of these days too. He didn't even call it a breakdown, which is what I'm pretty sure it was. And the fact that he was so kind to me made it even worse, of course.

I have to get ahold of myself. In general. I have to allow for the fact that some people just want to die. And there's nothing I can do about it. If they want to die, they want to die. And I think Ben maybe wants to die. He was red. He was this blackish red that was just *wrong*.

While we're on the subject of my mental breakdown, I might as well come clean with you and say that I think I've been seeing these colors in some form for much of my life. I know this now. I've been *seeing* but not *noticing*. Now I'm noticing. It's kind of like how I *saw* wedding bands on people's ring fingers all of my life, but only really started *noticing* them once I hit my mid-twenties. The colors have always been there. In a way, this is a good thing. One of the first tests we give people who think they have an abnormal growth is the longevity test. Is this new? How long have you felt the lump? How long have you had that mole? Has it always been that size? If the answer is "for a while," we can relax. If the answer is "I don't know," we nod and tell them to keep an eye on it. What we don't want is changes. And this strange color filter I have is no change. What is a change is that the colors are stronger now. By the day. And they are trying to tell me something about the person who shows them.

I do a lot of internet research over the next couple of days. Especially late at night when I can't sleep. I pride myself on my internet diagnosis skills. I'm an RN by degree, but I'm a full-blown wizard-status doctor on the internet. The closest I can come to diagnosing what I have is a condition called "synesthesia" where

people associate colors with things like letters. Each letter has its own unique color. Except that's not really what I have. I see colors around people, and they don't define the people, they help describe the person at that moment in time.

One piece of information pretty much hits the nail on the head. I stumble across it around four in the morning, right about when I usually berate myself for still being awake and make myself lie down and stare at the dark ceiling, stubbornly willing sleep to come like I've put myself in time out. That's when I find this thing called 'aura sight' at the bottom of the internet.

I know. I agree. I had a good laugh about it too, even at four in the morning. Telling someone who works in healthcare that they have a psychic ability is liable to get you laughed out of the room. We don't have time for this nonsense. We're big people doing big people things. There's a "joke" that goes around the cancer floor. What do you call a cancer patient who uses a "healer" instead of a doctor?

Dead.

Not really a *ha ha* joke, but you get the point. We barely sniff at homeopathy. You can imagine what we think of this psychic crap. But that doesn't change the fact that aura sight comes pretty damn close to whatever I have. The good news is I think I've ruled out that I'm dying. The bad news is that I've ruled in that I may be a kook.

Thankfully I wasn't scheduled to work the floor on the same day as Doctor Bennet until four days after our little excursion. By then I'd gone through all the phases of over-analysis, and my internal pendulum had settled firmly into a depressed resignation that at best I'm just abnormal. When I next saw him on the floor, it was during another hectic night shift and I'd forgotten completely about Chaco and everything else in favor of trying to remember which meds I'd given to a particularly challenging bone marrow transplant patient and at which hours. In that respect my work can be a blessing. You don't get time to mope.

"Are you feeling better?" he asks me, speaking softly in the break room. He sat down next to me during my granola bar

supper. Or breakfast. Or whatever you call a meal you eat at four a.m. I look up at him and see that he's still blue. I blink and rub at my eyes. Still blue. A faint, soft halo of blue smoke that seems to puff off of his shoulders and head. It's his blue. I know that now. It's genuine and caring and a little sad. I don't know how I know that, but I do. You'll just have to trust me.

"I'm fine," I say, and I'm sure it comes out sounding snippy because I'm exhausted and working when normal people are in deep REM sleep. His smoke twitches a little and darkens a shade. I have an irresistible urge to lighten it up again. Get it back to the color of his eyes.

"I never got a chance to really thank you for what you did," I say. "For taking me. Making excuses for me to be a nosy little snot. For not freaking out when I was...freaking out. In the car."

He smiles. It's like a crack in the clouds. It's working.

"No worries," he says. "I know what it's like to want to see a patient make it. Especially a Navajo. There are some real train wrecks on that reservation. You and I both know that. This Ben guy, he strikes me as a good man. I can see why you like him." He smiles again, but it's a little forced this time and his color twitches. Then his phone buzzes, and he lets out a big breath as he pops it from his side and eyes it.

"Work calls. See you around?"

"You know it."

He taps the table, looks desperately like he wants to say something, taps the table again, and pops up and out of the door.

I don't see him the rest of the week. I don't see anyone outside of the nurses who are scheduled to work my side of the unit, my patients, and my pillow. That's the way night shift is. Weeks when I work nights I'm like a vampire. When I'm not at work, I'm shut in my apartment in a pharmaceutically induced black hole of sleep with the shades drawn against the harsh late-fall sun and my noise machine humming. There's a little note on the front door of my apartment that says "Do not disturb. Night shift in progress." The landlord and even my neighbors' little kids know what it means. I am a zombie if awoken. I slept through a

fire alarm once. And one other time I woke up during a fire alarm, and I'm told I actually shuffled out to the main foyer with the rest of the complex, though I don't remember it. I came to in the shower with my underwear on. I must have thought it was time to get ready for work.

At any rate, the point is that the few people I do know, know better than to try and get ahold of me when I'm on nights, because I'm a groggy mess. That's why when my buzzing phone wakes me up I know it's not a good thing, since in my state it would have to have been buzzing a long time. Multiple tries. I paw at it, grab it, and bring it close to my face. I see two screens. Both of them say I've missed five calls. It's from the hospital. This cannot be good. I steady myself and click answer.

"Hello?"

"Caroline! Thank God. It's Owen."

It takes me about ten seconds to put together that Owen is Doctor Bennet. He's Doctor Owen Bennet. I wonder if I'm dreaming.

"Are you there?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sorry, I..."

"You're sleeping, I know. And I feel like an ass, but I don't work with you for a week and I had to try and call you."

"What? Why?"

He pauses, then says, "It's about Ben Dejooli. I've had some news..."

CHAPTER 9

OWEN BENNET

I'm sitting in my apartment, and I'm cursing my tenacity, cursing Navajo stubbornness, and drinking bourbon.

I'm not sure *where* I went wrong, but I know I went wrong. I know it because Caroline ended up crying in my car, and since then the one time I saw her she looked at me like she was in a daze, or seeing me for the first time, or something. I don't know if it was me or Ben Dejooli or what, but it was something, and now everything is ruined.

I take another swig. Who am I kidding. It was me. A doctor who has worked out here for the better part of a decade should know better than to try and push the Navajo into anything. That's rule number one. There's white man time, and there's Indian time. Indians work on Indian time. If you want to work with them, you'd better work on Indian time too. It was a rookie mistake, thinking I could make her feel better out at Chaco.

What on God's green earth am I thinking here, anyway? What is my end game? What, in my wildest fantasies, do I want to happen? Somehow I sweep Caroline off of her feet? Convince her to stay here with me in my two bedroom apartment in Albuquerque? Maybe we clean out the second room of all of the useless gadgets I jam in there and we have babies and they grow up with Navajo kids and everyone dances the rain dance and we all live happily ever after? Is what I'm looking for basically the first Thanksgiving? I thought I was past all this. I have my practice,

more or less, and I have my cause. The problem is now I have a girl. Or a dream of a girl.

I'm suddenly disgusted by the way I live. This happens sometimes. It's like a bout of nausea or a wave of vertigo. It passes, but when it happens I hate everything I surround myself with. I have no idea how to spend money. Or save money. I stuff it places or put it into stupid projects. I open investment accounts and play the markets like I know what I'm doing. I buy ridiculous gadgets like massage chairs and hydroponic vegetable gardens and memory foam pillows and microwaveable slippers. I use them for a day or a week or a month. I invest in things no sane man would invest in. Small pink slip companies from Australia that are getting into uranium mining. Drug companies that I pick at random from the complimentary pens one of their reps drops off on the floor. I have a jar full. All of these things I do. Some of them make me money. Some of them don't. I don't care. I have plenty of money. I'd have plenty of money if everything went tits up. We used to say that you could earn like a prince and live like a king in Boston. It was better than New York that way, where you had to earn like a god just to live like a man. Well, in ABQ you can earn like a man and live like a king. Especially if you have nobody to spend on except yourself.

I take another swig of bourbon. It tastes terrible. Now, you see? This is something I could legitimately upgrade. There is no reason why I should be making a quarter million a year and be swilling plastic bottle bourbon at three a.m. in my apartment. I shouldn't be swilling any bourbon at three a.m., actually, but if I'm gonna swill, it should at least be something decent. In a house.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression. I'm not a drinker. Not a *drinker* drinker, anyway. Dad was a *drinker* drinker. Not abusive or anything, just a booze hound. That is possible, believe it or not. I only allow myself late night drinks when I have the next day off, which, if you knew my colleagues, shows a remarkable level of restraint, comparatively.

I'm going through stacks of charts. I go through a record review for every patient I have. After that I usually go to bed, but

this Caroline thing has me a little off. So I go through more bourbon. Sometimes when I can't sleep I do what's called a 'dead review,' where I whip through past records in our system and pull out everyone who has died and move their files into inactive status. I get the morgue records and cross-reference them with our hospital system. There are generally a lot of overlaps. This is the definition of busywork. I am fully aware that I am doing this so I don't have to think about Caroline crying in my car because she's most likely in love with Ben Dejooli.

It's interesting when you flip through the Chaco Health Center files. I find myself lingering on pictures of the Navajo. One of the first things they teach residents that are going to CHC is that your bedside manner with the Navajo needs to be different. Clear and direct doesn't always go over so well. You have to be much more reactive; let them take the lead. Especially with the old guard. And the old guard is mostly what shows up at the Center. I'm struck by how flat their expressions are. Flat like a lake. Calm. Expansive.

There's one man in particular who gives me pause. His name is Oka Chalk. He looks haunted. He has the kind of lined, tanned face that you would instantly associate with an elder Navajo, but his eyes look like the eyes of a young man. Of a young warrior. I remember seeing him off and on at CHC for blood pressure issues related to drinking. His chart says he asphyxiated on his own vomit. The report notes drug paraphernalia on his person at the time of death, but the toxicology came back inconclusive. Positive on alcohol in the system. Well above the legal limit, but nothing that would kill a seasoned drinker. Curious. But with no living relatives and nobody to follow up, his case was open and shut. Like far too many of the Chaco cases.

I pull him from the active files and mark him deceased. On to the next. I do this for an hour until I grow weary and slightly depressed. The bourbon is swimming in my head. The night has whispered by me, and the sky is opening up to the sun. In the distance, a flock of crows stirs as the first rays hit the bare tree where they rest. They shuffle and stretch their wings like a single organism, twitchy and black. One of them caws loudly. A sharp,

brief sound, like the scratching of a record. I should really be in bed. This is bad, even for a day off. I know I'll never be able to sleep long enough through the day to make up for this the rest of the week. But something in the call of the crow sobers me and draws me back to my computer.

I flip to the active files and pull up Ben DeJooli for the tenth time. I reload his chart. The scan fulfillment status goes from *N/A* to *processed*. I take the last swig of my bourbon and cough a little. I pull out my phone and call the hospital.

"Radiology, how can I help you?"

"This is Doctor Owen Bennet. I was hoping to get the results of a scan that went through."

"One moment."

The hold music sounds particularly ridiculous to me. The bourbon still burns my throat. I find I'm tapping the hem of my jeans rapidly and standing in front of the window, staring at the crows.

"This is Diagnostics. What's your patient number, Doctor Bennet?"

I recite Ben's number from memory, forcing myself to slow down. I'm not quite sure why I'm acting like a student waiting for his board results. I've done this countless times before. But in all those other times there was no Caroline involved.

"Doctor Bennet?"

"Yes."

"I'm loading the file now. You should have access momentarily."

"Thank you."

I hang up and squeeze my phone. I make myself wait for an entire minute, then I refresh my log-in on the system. Ben's file is there. And it's bad.

I see two separate causes for outright concern. The first is in the front left lobe. Three inches in diameter. The second is in the rear left lobe, one and a half inches in diameter.

I am speechless.

Multiple instances almost always indicate metastatic activity. This is not benign. The tissue surrounding the sites are in necrosis. These look like late-stage glioblastoma multiforme tumors. We'd need to radiate the sites to reduce their size before we even thought about operating.

Caroline was right. Ben Dejooli is dying.

A sound tears me away from the scan. It is the crows. They've all taken flight at once in a massive black cloak and are sweeping towards me. Right towards the window, all of them shrieking at once. They look as though they will collide with the window, and I find myself backing away, into the kitchen. I even throw up my hands before they swoop up and over the building, their calls dropping away as they gain altitude. I sit down again, my heart racing. I take out the phone once more, and this time I dial the contact number for Ben Dejooli. It's barely five in the morning, but he picks up.

"Hello?" he asks.

This is always the worst part. The part before you bring a man's entire world down around him.

"Ben?"

"Who is this?" he asks, wary.

"Ben, this is Doctor Owen Bennet, with ABQ General. I have the results of your scan."

He pauses.

"It's bad, isn't it," he says, very clearly. No one has ever said this to me before. It throws me for a loop.

"Yes. I'm afraid it is. We're going to want to get you on a treatment plan immediately."

"Like radiation?"

"Yes. And chemotherapy. In preparation for surgery. But first let's schedule a consult. I'll be there to explain everything."

He is quiet. I can only wait.

"I can't do that," he says.

"Ben, I don't think you understand..."

"I understand. I'm a dead man."

"No. Not if you choose to fight."

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't, it's my opinion you have at most a couple of months. Maybe weeks."

"Shit."

"Yes. Shit. But there are options."

"Chemotherapy? Like, the chemical kind?"

"Yes. We would radiate the tumors initially, here, at the hospital, then put you on an aggressive chemotherapy regimen with the aim of shrinking the tumors before surgery."

"Tumors? Like, more than one?"

"Yes, I believe there is clear evidence of two, and maybe one more potential site."

"Shit."

I'm standing at the kitchen counter and I hang my head. I feel like whatever buzz the bourbon gave me left with the crows and now my head weighs a hundred pounds. "I wish...I really, *really* wish I had better news, Ben."

"I can't go back to that hospital. I don't do well in that hospital."

"Well, you're gonna have to, if you want to give yourself a chance."

"No, you don't understand. I can't. And not just because of... it's also because cancer here, at Chaco, it doesn't go over well. I...it just...for the Navajo it's a mark of death."

"Not if I can help it, it's not."

"Can anything be done here? At home? At my home? In private?"

Now this is an interesting question. I rub at my face and try to get my brain working the way I know it should. We do have off-site programs for chemotherapy. And the hospital likes to appear to bend over backward for the Navajo community. I bet I could get a request for offsite delivery pushed through, given Ben's position as a policeman. I am aware of more about the stigma of cancer among the Navajo than Ben would think.

"I could probably get the chemotherapy off-site. But the initial radiation has to be done in a lab. Can you give me that? If I can

get you the treatment at home?"

He pauses. "Yes. I can do that. I suppose. It's either that or die in a couple weeks."

He says this with such a cavalier tone that it chills me. It occurs to me that he has exhibited none of the usual traumatic overtones. His voice is calm and clear. No tears. No wavering. He is responsive, and not in shock. It's not unlike the discussions I have with other doctors about swapping shifts. Straightforward. Practical. I jump at the opening.

"I'll call you back within the hour, okay? Stay by your phone."

"All right."

I move to hang up, but he speaks again.

"Hey, doc?"

"Yes?"

"Who would give me the chemotherapy? At home?"

"One of our oncology nurses."

"Can I request one?"

I already know where this is going. I can't help but laugh. It's a strange, desperate laugh. Thankfully I cover the mouthpiece first.

"Caroline Adams?" I ask.

"Y...yeah."

I shake my head, but I say, "Yes. I think I can make that happen."

"Thanks."

"Ben, we can beat this. I've seen people with stage four diagnoses beat it before."

He pauses again, and I think that maybe I've finally gotten through to him. I picture him holding his head, or covering the receiver while he gathers himself, steels himself for the battle. But after a minute he speaks again, and his voice is as even as glass.

"Yeah. I guess we'll see."

I get this uncanny feeling he's trying to let me down easy.

As soon as I hang up, I call the hospital on the off chance I can catch Caroline, but they tell me she was released early and went home from night shift two hours ago. I nearly curse out loud at the poor charge nurse, but I catch myself, thank her, and hang up.

Then I stare at my phone for another ten full minutes as the sunbeams creep into my living room. Dust motes swirl about my table and my head. This is insanity. I had plenty of chances to disassociate myself from this. Let Ben be Ben and Caroline be Caroline. I know they want each other. It's like they reach towards each other when they are together. Even an analytical robot like myself can see that. Where along the line did I think it would *help* my chances with Caroline to throw her into close quarters with Ben? A terrible thought creeps into my brain, and the more I try to shut it out the stronger it becomes.

Don't worry. He'll be dead soon anyway.

And the sickness that washes over me immediately afterwards tells me something else: I do not want that. I desperately want this man to live. I want this man to live because keeping people alive is what I was born to do, but mostly because I know it would make Caroline happy. And we come back to the common denominator. And me, staring at my phone. I know she's sleeping by now, but every minute that passes is another minute of wiggle room for Ben Dejooli to back out. With the Navajo, you better strike while the iron is hot. God knows when you'll get another chance.

I pick up the phone and dial her number. Again, and again, and again. By the time she answers I'm so far beyond embarrassed that it's become a battle of wills between me and the ring tone. When she picks up, I let out a little hoot. "Caroline! Thank God. It's Owen."

She's groggy. For a second I think she's hung up on me, but she hasn't. I apologize profusely.

"I've had some news..." I say, and in the excitement it comes back to me that I'm about to tell her that Ben has late stage brain cancer. I pull the curtain across, and my face slackens. I take a breath.

"Ben got the scan. His results just came in."

She clears her throat. "You wouldn't be calling me at home if it was all clear, would you," she says, and her voice is thick.

"No. You were right. I would diagnose it as late stage GBM. Maybe stage four."

She exhales slowly, and I picture her in her bed slumping over like a deflating balloon. I think she's gearing up to shed the tears Ben wouldn't, so I jump in again.

"He wants to fight it," I say, and as soon as I do, I know that isn't entirely true. But he's willing to give it a shot, at least.

"Really?" she asks, echoing my doubt.

"I'm going to order off-site chemotherapy. Given his circumstances, I'm sure it will be approved."

"That's good of you," she says, and she means it.

"The reason I called you is that he requested you administer the regimen. You personally."

She makes a series of glottal sounds then says, "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

I've never heard her swear before. For some reason, it makes me smile. It is in no way emphatic, more like someone cussing in their sleep.

"No. But he needs an answer right now, and I need to get him in the books or he could run. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Yes you know or yes you'll do it?"

"Yes and yes. Just yes all around."

"Okay then. I'll get it ordered up. We'll start as soon as possible. I'll get the schedule to you when you wake up."

"Let's do it," she says, and I have the strange feeling that she's looking at herself in the mirror. Self-affirming.

"Talk to you soon then."

"Doctor Bennet."

"Owen. Please."

"Owen. Thank you. All of this, it's been a mess up and down, and I've totally overextended my welcome on basically every facet of it to the point where I'm even starting to annoy myself these days."

"Caroline. I wanted to do it. I'm with you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she says softly. "Thank you. So much."

"Let's get him healthy, then we can thank each other. Sleep tight."

I hang up the phone and stare at it for a minute, wondering what just happened to me, to Ben, to Caroline, to all of us. Then I move over to my couch and collapse into a sleep that lasts until the sun starts to set again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

BEN DEJOOLI

I'm a mess after the scan. If you want to know what my darkness looks like, my own personal hell, imagine an hour-long brain scan with the specter of death hanging over you, and you'll come pretty damn close. I thought it was bad coming to in an ambulance on its way to the hospital. I thought it was bad sitting and waiting to be discharged. None of those discomforts held a candle to this.

I used to feel sorry for the Navajo who balked at modern medicine. I understood why they might not feel comfortable visiting a hospital, of course, but to throw the whole thing out the window was just reckless. I still have a healthy respect for modern medicine, even after everything that happened with Ana. I saw how the doctors helped her, relieved her suffering during the bad times. But the machines and the implements and the sounds; it's not hard at all to see why a Navajo would distrust these things. They are sterile and plastic and metal. Basically anti-Navajo. And, let's be honest, they can be terrifying.

Take the CT scanner, for instance. It's a big white tube, like the mouth of an enormous bloated fish. The techs slide its tongue out and strap you on it, and then the fish eats you in slow motion while its guts churn and rotate and clank and beep and motors spin around your head in the murky light inside. Faceless voices tell you to be still. Sometimes they tell you to close your eyes. It feels like you're hiding in a closet while something terrible stalks the room outside. They give you a stick with a button on it and tell you to push it if you panic, but then caution you not to push it

unless you *really* panic because it'll screw up the whole scan and you'll have to do it again.

I think I *really* panicked in the parking lot. But I gritted my teeth during the scan. I was there. I would finish.

When it was all over, I practically ran outside. I took the stairs, not the elevator. I never wanted to be boxed in in anything again. In the parking lot the sky was robin's egg blue, and I just breathed for a full minute, staring up and blinking. I thought I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life. Then I moved quickly to my car. NNPD move in and out of ABQ General all the time, and I didn't want to be recognized.

I think I get an inkling of what's happening at my house before I even pull into my usual spot on the side of our street. I'd noticed a thin stream of white smoke from a little ways off that gave me goose bumps, but I was still shaken up and focusing on driving. The smoke is like a thin pole the color of a cloud. It's streaming into the sky, and it looks to be coming from my side of the duplex. I throw my truck in park and run into the house, but inside all is quiet. I push through the living room and kitchen and out to the backyard, where I see Dad staring at Ana's pyre while a small wood fire is crackling in our old outdoor pit. He turns when the screen door slams after me. He is wearing leather breeches and is shirtless. His eyes are red, either from the smoke or from the liquor he holds in his hand. I know that in his own way he is trying to purify himself. For what is what worries me.

Dad says, "Your grandmother..."

For a terrible moment I think she's dead. It would be in line with the path that seems set out for me these days.

But then he says, "She is at the Arroyo. She has told me to bring you there."

Rather than put me at ease, this whispers along my back, and I shiver. Dad walks up to me in big, uneven steps and looks at me questioningly. He smells of campfire and whisky. It is not altogether unpleasant.

"Is she okay?" I ask.

He takes my hand the way Mom did when I was young.

"Yes," he says. "But are you?"

My spine pricks again. This is about me, not about Gam.

"We should get to the Arroyo," he says, and he walks, bare chested, to the passenger's side of my truck. He opens the door and plops himself inside, waiting.

Gam used to go to the Arroyo often when she was young. She told me she lived there for a time when she was learning the Navajo Way, which I took to mean a polite way of saying when my great-grandparents were on hard times. But she hasn't been back there in years. In fact, a couple of times she's gone off on the Arroyo as the dregs of Chaco. Once she even spat when I said Danny and I had the Arroyo rounds that week. I don't know why she would be there now, but I don't like anything about it. I hop up behind the wheel and fire up the truck.

The entire way there, Dad never speaks. As the Arroyo comes into view, the sun is setting. A bowl of heavy red light spills just over the edges and into the pit, but the light is retreating and night is moving in. I pull in where my memory tells me to, where Joey Flatwood used to live, and next to where the gambler lived and was mourned. But before I can stop, my dad taps me with his hand and shakes his head. He points beyond the Arroyo, into the rolling desert left of the setting sun. I turn to him, but he doesn't look at me. I know what's out there. That is where the hogans are.

"The hogans?" I ask. Dad nods.

"Why is Gam at the hogans?" I ask, but I know why. There is only one reason you go to the hogans these days. My palms start sweating. I flip the truck in reverse and pull back out along the main path, but where it curves towards the west I cut out along a sparse, rutted trail. The truck bounces and creaks. I slow to a crawl and keep moving forward out into the desert.

There were six hogans when I was young, evenly spaced in a long line, each separated by a good distance. Now perhaps four are usable. They are squat, rounded structures made of wood and mud, just tall enough to walk in and big enough for four or five people. Each has one door cut into it, facing the east, where blessings come from. In the center of every roof is a smoke hole

where evil is expelled. Even the Arroyo kids don't mess around with the hogans. There is something about these things; they forbid it. Years ago, the six most prominent families in Chaco each had a hogan and used them regularly for ceremonies. Blessingways and chants, or just a place to gather and sweat together. As the families fell apart or mixed with others, or just got lazy, some of the hogans went the way of the dust and mud of their build. These days, the big ceremonies, the Nightway dance with all the fire and the whooping that the tourists love and things like that, all of those are performed at the cultural center in a makeshift hogan. But these: these are the real deal. Or they were, at least, once.

The hogans blink onto the horizon like beads on a table. The sun cuts across the tops of them and lays there like a red blanket. I can see that the one farthest along the line to the left is leaning haphazardly, slumped and drunken. Abandoned for a generation. But there are crows there. Lots of them. They stir with the noise of my truck and then settle again. All of them are facing me. I turn to Dad. I have this childish need to point them out to my father, like that will make them go away. I wonder when they began to frighten me. I steel myself. It's easy to lose your head when you go beyond the rez, into the deep rez, and then into the desert.

Dad points at the hogan dead center, where I see more white smoke, a single, continuous string, like the trunk of an aspen tree, pouring from the smoke hole and spreading into the sky. That's where Gam is.

When I pull up, Gam is waiting for me. She is staring at me, dressed in a heavy, poncho-like dressing gown, and she wears a beaded kerchief on her head that gathers her long gray hair. At her waist is a buckskin bag. It's the bag that seals the deal for me. If it weren't for the bag, I'd say she was out here to teach me something about my ancestors. But that's an old buckskin bag. One of a handful of things in her room she told us never to touch. That's a Singer's Bag. Gam is here to do work, and I think she's here to do work on me.

When I walk up to her, she is quiet and watchful. She looks at me like I stumbled out of the desert behind the hogans. Like she didn't instruct Dad to bring me here.

"Hello, Dejooli," she says, in Navajo. She's not using my first name on purpose. Ben is a white man's name.

"What is this, Grandmother?" I ask.

"Evil is upon you. We must treat with the Holy People to expel it. Find alignment once more."

"Evil? Name the evil."

"You are sick. In your brain."

I straighten at this, come up from where I was talking at her eye level. Gam knew I passed out. She knew I ended up at the hospital. But the way she says this to me makes me think she knows more. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the crows at the abandoned hogan shuffle themselves about and then settle once more. Before I can question her, she speaks again.

"You have been marked by the white man's medicine," she says.

"Grandmother, I went because I gave my word that I would go. That is no reason to call a Blessingway."

I see two others making their way around the hogan, blessing it with pollen. One of them is big and square. His long black hair reaches the middle of his back, and his dark arms are like cable cords. He wears leather chaps over a breechcloth, and the beaded strap of his scalp knife swings about his knees. It's Danny Ninepoint.

Gam waves away my words. *"This is no Blessingway,"* she says, and her voice chills me more than the setting sun. *"There is another mark on you. A mark that runs deeper than the white man's poison."* She reaches into her buckskin bag and pulls out a handful of black ash.

"Come," she says.

In a Blessingway, the Singer essentially calls upon the Holy People to pay a visit to the hogan and bless the patient, but as far as I know it doesn't involve black ash. Another of the Holyway ceremonies does, though: the Evilway.

This is an exorcism.

Gam turns away, and I follow her toward the hogan openmouthed. It's like I can't turn away. Dad and Gam enter the Hogan, Dad at a stoop. Gam barely needs to duck her head.

"Wait, Gam, hold on just a second," I say, in English. My Navajo deserts me when I panic. Gam doesn't hold on. Gam doesn't stop. She enters the hogan and begins preparing. I stare at the mouth of the hogan, a faint glow now visible from the small fire that will mark its center, until Danny comes around my way and stops in front of me.

"You want to wear your shirt?" he asks, so matter of fact that at first I have no idea what he's talking about. It's like he's asking me to pass the salt.

"Danny, what is this all about?"

"Your family says you're sick. And that something is coming for you. I think so too." Now that he's up close, I see fine scratches around his eyes and bigger scabs raking down his cheeks.

"What the hell happened to your face?"

He waves off my question, but his hand is marked too, like it was peppered with buckshot.

"Domestic dispute by the Boxes. The guy was hopped up on amphetamines. Fought like a bear. Bardo and I took him down."

Without his customary NNPD polish, I can see that he's weary. He looks like he's been chasing ghosts of his own. Bardo's partner retired last year. I wonder, not for the first time, if he's been picking up my slack and covering for me when I've had to make these hospital trips.

"You should have called me, Danny. I'm your fucking partner."

He waves it off again.

"If I'm sick, I need a doctor. Not a chant. This is a waste of time."

"You don't believe in the power of the Chantway?" he asks. He's not accusing, just curious.

Of course Danny believes. Danny believes as much as Gam believes. They're both from the same deep end of the Navajo pool.

"No, I mean, I do, I guess...I don't know. But this is ridiculous. How much money did this cost?" Calling a Chantway is not cheap. They require certain officiates and certain sacred objects and preparation time.

"She brought in two Arroyo men for the sandpainting. Nobody else knows. She has prepared all day."

"An Evilway? I mean, *really*?"

Danny nods.

I shake my head in disbelief. "That takes what, a day and a half?"

"Two full nights."

"This shit isn't fair to you. I know you've been working twice as hard on my account."

"I took care of it. Got Bardo and Yuska to cover our beat. Said we needed to work some things out. No big deal. It happens all the time with partners. Don't worry about me. This is about you."

My hands drop to my sides.

"Now. You want to wear your shirt?" he asks again.

I unbutton my shirt. "No, I don't want to wear my fuckin' shirt," I say, but the words have no fire behind them.

Danny takes a pinch of pollen from the buckskin sack at his waist and holds it up to my mouth. I open, like a toddler. He tosses it in and mutters a prayer I can't quite make out. Then he takes a second pinch, bigger this time, and plumes it on the top of my head. I hold back a sneeze. He nods, then continues around the hogan, consecrating. I go through the door and inside. I barely have to bend, either, but if Danny's coming in, he's coming in on hands and knees.

The hogan is hot and already hazy. A small fire made of new wood is burning in the center. It's not much bigger than a dinner plate, but it gives off a lot of smoke and not all of it escapes through the smokehole. Two old men I vaguely recognize are pouring thin streams of fine, colored sand into a mural that stretches in a rainbow around the far side of the fire. When I walk in, they look up briefly and nod. One is so old I can't tell if his eyes are open or not.

There are five figures in the mural, each drawn in a subtly different combination of simple, angled shapes and alternating patterns. Their bodies are long ovals in three colors and their arms are represented by patterned white lines and dots like Morse code. Each character stands on a thick, charcoal black line. I've been to a handful of Chantways in my time, both for the tourists and for the Navajo, and I can tell you that trying to decipher the sand paintings is like trying to learn another language; I can get the general sense, but the specifics are beyond me. Here, it's a good bet that at least four of the figures are the Holy Family: the Sun, the Slayer Twins (those were always my favorite as a kid), and, of course, Changing Woman. I think she's the biggest one. But this fifth one on the far right that stands apart from the Family, I can't say I've ever seen anything like it before. It's a figure all in black, made entirely of charcoal grains. Its eyes aren't sand, though; they're lumps of turquoise rock. I can't say why, exactly, but I don't like it.

The basic idea of a Navajo chant is that you want to call attention to yourself. You want the Holy People to notice you. To come on over and bless you or your family or business, or, with the Evilway, to set things right in you. I'd be lying if I said I hold by all of this. But all the same, I'd rather not call the attention of that last fella on the right if I can help it.

Gam throws me a breechcloth. I stare at it, then at her. She sighs and turns around. I strip down to nothing and affix the breechcloth over myself. When she turns around again, I hold out my hands.

"Now what?" I ask, in Navajo.

"Now we wait for the end of the sand painting. In the smoke."

She flops to sitting in a heap and carefully arrays her Singer's Bag in front of her. She pulls a plastic baggie full of twigs, herbs, and blackened wood from within it and empties it into a nearby pestle. She begins to slowly grind the concoction together. When it's a rough powder, she takes a handful and tosses it into the fire. There is no hiss or bang or colored fire, just more smoke. She adds water from an old quart jug to what remains in the mortar and

keeps grinding. The sulfur smell comes on strong, but I can't tell if it's because of whatever she tossed on the fire or if it's just me. I blink rapidly, and my eyes begin to water. Neither the sand painters nor Gam take any notice of me.

I feel movement in the smoke and see Dad. He carries a crude mask made of sewn buckskin, like a leather ski mask with tiny slits for the eyes. Feathers have been sewn in at the sides and hang heavy with beads. I think I recognize it from home. As a kid I stumbled across it in the closet looking for where Mom might have hidden my slingshot from me. At the time, it scared the shit out of me. Still sort of does. Dad sits next to me and begins mixing a bucketful of ash with water and earth. Another movement of smoke, and Danny Ninepoint appears. His eyes are hard and determined. Almost manic. I can tell he's sort of getting off on all of this. Danny always loved this stuff. In his hand he carries another mask, like Dad's, but his is adorned with horsehair and woven brush around the neck. Neither of them look at me. Both stare heavily into the fire, unblinking.

"The fifth painting..." I say to Gam, if for no other reason than to break the heavy silence. She nods, still grinding. *"Who is it? Turquoise Man?"*

Turquoise Man is a strong Navajo figure. He stands with a Navajo for life. Makes him invincible. Gam sucks at her teeth. It's her way of saying *yes and no*. Gam starts to remove things from her bag. Some of them I recognize. I see the miniature bow and two ornate chant arrows. I see the bull roarer and a bunch of unravelers made of string and feathers and herbs wrapped over themselves into rough balls. There's an old bison-hoof rattle and a smooth, curved stick. But then there are other things: a wooden contraption that looks sort of like ancient brass knuckles that sprouted crow feathers. A big bone, maybe the shoulder blade of a bison, grooved and dyed dark black. A shard of obsidian the size of my hand, and then, finally, and I sense most importantly, a box made of bone, about the size of a deck of cards. This she holds with two hands and carefully sets at her feet, closest to her. Then she presses her balled fist to her chest, right at her sternum, and

grimaces. I've been to an Evilway before, once, years ago. But I don't recall seeing the box. In fact, I've never seen the box before, not at any Chantway, or at any ceremony.

"Is this an Evilway, Grandmother?" I ask.

Gam sucks at her teeth.

I try to ask more, but the smoke is making my head spin a bit, and before I can speak Gam gets up. She reaches into one of her pockets and pulls out a fistful of cornmeal. She moves to each of the four cardinal beams of the hogan and rubs the cornmeal along it with a single, deliberate stroke. She holds up an oak twig in her other hand and begins a prayer song that I partly recognize and partly don't. It's beautiful, rhythmic and crooning and insistent at the same time. This is the opener. The call that lets the Holy People know we are here. It could be the smoke, or it could be just my imagination, but somewhere in the back of my head I get this strange, creeping sensation, and I picture the fifth figure, the one in black, sitting on some other plane and opening one bright turquoise eye.

The smoke is heavy now, but I feel like I'm the only one affected by it. I look around, and the two old sand painters are chanting along with Gam, putting the final touches on their work. Dad and Danny are sitting on either side of Gam, who has returned to her mortar and pestle. Dad is focused on the ashes, and Danny stares into the coals with wide eyes that are shot through with red. The smoke is as white as bone, and it's pouring through the roof like it's the spout of a kettle. Things are wavy for me. I've never had a high tolerance for anything, really. Not alcohol, not weed back when Joey and I used to smoke whatever shit hash we could buy off people in the tracts, none of it. It never stopped me back then, but it was just the way it was. Joey used to give me a lot of grief for it, even as he'd carry me home.

Both of the old men stand as one and survey their work like two regulars gossiping at the bar. They point at certain parts, nodding. They both turn to the black figure and nod silently. They move behind Gam and sit next to each other and pick up her chant in soft echoes, like the walls of a canyon. Gam nods at Dad and at

Danny, and they both rise, Dad with the bucket. He sets it in front of me, and both men grab globs of ash paste and begin coating me with it.

I stand with my arms out at my sides as they coat me with black. This is in keeping with the Evilway, but even my smoke-addled brain can see differences. Gam takes the obsidian and brushes it the length of her left arm before pricking her palm. A bead of blood rises, and she moves over to the black figure and presses it upon its chest. Her hand comes away grainy with charcoal, and she touches her chest again with that same grimace, like something burns there. When I am covered head to toe in ash, Gam, still chanting, comes to me with a palmful of feathery ash. She steps up to me, then away, and blows the ash over me. Then she asks me to lie down by the fire. It's just as well. I realize that Danny Ninepoint has basically been propping me up for the past five minutes. I look at him and see that he seems addled, too. His eyes are glassy and red, but his grip is as sure as stone. He looks eagerly from me to Gam and back to me. Dad is bobbing with the chant. He is not with us, I can tell. It's like he's staring at Ana's cairn again in the backyard.

When I lie down, Gam gives me her bowl. I look in and see a black, watery mixture. I'm not really sure at this point when I stopped humoring everybody and dove into this headlong, but I'm still not about to drink something that looks like pond water without knowing what's in it. Gam lifts it up to me, and I take it and lift it back up to her and try to ask what it is, but my mouth isn't working right. My words sound mealy and thick. Still, she gets it.

"Struck wood and struck ground."

By which she means it's wood from a tree hit by lightning, and the ground around it. Lightning is bad news for Navajo. Powerful, and bad news. In some corner of my brain I know that whatever that lightning hit must have some psychoactive effect, since Gam threw some of it on the fire and now I'm feeling like I'm sinking into the pine mat they set me on. The rational part of me, the cop part, tells me to knock that poison onto the ground. But the other

part of me, the grandson, the son, the brother....tells me to grab it and to drink it. So I do. It tastes like mouthwash. The rest of the ceremony I experience in flashes.

It seems like I've only blinked, but I can feel things on me now. I look down at myself, and I can see that there are several of the items in Gam's Singer's Bag. The unravelers have already been partly unraveled at my feet and shins. There are black feathers at my knees. The hoof rattle sits over my groin, and the carved bone on my chest. Altogether they couldn't weigh more than five pounds, but I could no more move them right now than fly into the night sky. The chanting is still ongoing. Always ongoing. I recognize certain words like *path* and *sky* and *wing*, but the rest is too much for me to make out. I fade again.

The next time I come to is horrifying. If I could move, I would run. I see the Slayer Twins as soon as I open my eyes. They are leaning over me, like some bizarre doctors mid-operation. A quiet part of my mind whispers that these are the masks I saw earlier, that this is Danny and my father, but the rest of me refuses to believe it. The rest of me sees the twins for who they are: *Naayee Neizghani*, Monster Slayer, and *To Bajishchini*, Born for Water. It is them. I know it as surely as I know that I am truly ill. I know it as surely as I know that the white man's scan will come back with a death sentence. These things hit me with such force and clarity that they are impossible to deny.

I watch as they shoot the chant arrows over my body. They travel slowly, but I can feel the air moving around them. Their fletching parts the smoke. The chanting gets louder. I fade again.

The third time I come around, it's like I've left the hogan altogether. The singing might as well be the sound of the wind or the rain. It isn't so much a thing being done as it is a thing that has always been, like air. I can't see the Slayer Twins anymore, nor can I see the old sand painters. All I see is my grandmother. Her eyes are closed, and she is finishing the unraveling. I can't see what she is removing from the unraveling, but at intervals she tosses things into the fire and each pops like a nut. The motion is one with the

chant: the singing, the pop. I feel as though I have sweat and dried, and sweat again. Like I've broken a string of fevers.

Gam takes my hands and places a pair of painted sticks in them, presenting each to me, all while singing. Each time she looks in my eyes, I can see the concern there, the sadness. In the quiet corner of my mind I know that she knows I have cancer, even before I know. Even before the doctors know, or the scan shows it. Does she really believe she can chant cancer away? Something in her eyes tells me no. Something in her eyes tells me what this Chantway is truly about: it's about opening a path for the fifth figure.

In the thick, roiling smoke of the hogan I sense the chant reaching a climax. It's a slow build, but Gam's pitch is rising and the intervals are shortening. This is when I see her pull out the small bone box that she kept close to her. There is a tightening in the air, a pressurizing, and I know that this is the reason she chanted in the first place. To present whatever is in this box to whatever Holy People have been called to this hogan, and to present me with it, to link me to it. She shows the box to me and looks me in the eye very clearly. She is making sure I am grounded for this, not floating away on whatever smoke and potion is coursing through me. I manage a nod. The sulfur smell is stronger than ever. I get this morbid thought that maybe the smell is my brain burning, or dying, or freezing, or whatever the hell a tumor does to you, but these thoughts don't bother me like they should. They've been muted. It's like they are being whispered to me.

Gam lifts the bone box up in the center of the hogan, and she flips it open. She reaches inside and pulls out a crow. A turquoise crow. It looks exactly like the turquoise crow that the gambler had at his vigil. She brings it down to my level, flying it over my body from toe to head. She presses it briefly against my dry lips and then over my eyes. The cut, the size, the style of the crow in flight, all of these are the same as the gambler's, but there is a thick vein of white marbling in the right wing of Gam's, and the coloring is so pure it's almost blue. This is a different crow, and yet it is not.

I try to speak to her. Try to ask her how it can be that she has the same totem as the gambler, what it means, why crows haunt me at every turn, but nothing comes out.

Gam places the crow totem on my forehead. It rests there like it was nesting. It's almost like it burrows down an inch into my brain. Everything on me feels so heavy. I just want to sleep. I want to let the crow carry me down and leave me buried miles below the earth. Just when I think I'm sunk, the pressure pops. The chanting, which was feverish a moment ago, is quieted. Like wind over the mouth of a cave. And that's when I see her.

It's Ana.

She is at the door to the hogan. The moonlight pours in from behind her. Then the sunlight. Then the moonlight again. She ducks inside, which I think is a very strange thing for a vision to do, because I know that this is a vision. A stray thought brought forth from my brain, borne from smoke and herbs and sweat, that's all. It has to be.

But it's still Ana. I call her name, but my voice only roars in my mind. I can see her turning from me, and it's like she's embarrassed. Like when I caught her drawing on the walls once with her crayons, and she turned away from me and hid them under her shirt. *Ana*, I said then. *Ana, what did you do?* And she turned away. I walked around her, and she turned back the other way. *Ana, did you draw on the walls?* A shrug. A small smile forming in the corner of her mouth. She turns like this now, in the hogan.

Ana? Why won't you look at me? You're my Ana. You're in my head. I just want to see your face.

There's that small smile, and then she turns to me. But it's not Ana anymore.

It starts as Ana, but then her warm brown eyes melt. They turn to black, and their color melts downward in two long triangles. Her soft brown coloring bleaches, fades to white in front of me like it's been baked in the sun for millennia, until what I see is a small girl with the face of eternity on her. Of Black and White. Of Absolutes.

And then whatever she is speaks to me.

Do not be afraid, my brother. All things pass.

This Ana that is not Ana, this creature, it passes from my toes to my head, and it grasps the crow totem on my forehead and yanks it out like a root.

Then all is black.

When I wake again, it is because Danny Ninepoint has poured a bucket of cold water on me. I take a huge breath, like it is my first, and then I sneeze three times. I roll and pop my neck and blink water from my eyes. Ash is running all down my face and into pools around my head.

"Welcome back," Danny says. Then he walks out of the hogan.

I sit up, calming my heart, placing myself. Everyone is gone. The sand paintings are gone. The men are gone. Grandmother is gone. There is a stale smoke smell coming from everywhere. The early morning sun creeps through the eastern door, lighting dust motes like flakes of floating ash. I sit up, and my head feels like it's twice the size.

"Take your time," Danny says from outside.

I have to crawl out of the hogan. When I do, I collapse onto the desert floor and start shivering like a dog. Danny sweeps down with a blanket.

"What day is it?" I ask.

"Dawn of the third day. Monday."

"Shit. We gotta get to work."

"Why do you think I'm here, honcho?" Danny looks at me with a straight face, but his eyes are smiling.

"What the fuck happened in there?"

"A lot."

"Danny, did you see Ana?"

"Your sister? No. But I saw other things." His eyes turn glassy for a minute, manic. That and the scratches on his face combine to make him look a bit like a junkie. It looks out of place on a man like Danny.

"Did you see Ana?" he asks.

"Sort of," I say. Danny nods. He's the only man I know who would take this as a reasonable answer. He helps me up and into my truck. He takes my keys and drives me home, where I take a five-minute shower and slam a cup of black coffee. As I'm getting into my uniform, I get a call from Doctor Owen Bennet. He tells me I'm dying.

I can't even act surprised.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

CAROLINE ADAMS

I'm ripping down the highway with a bag of chemical poison in the back seat of my car. The pump and pole rigging sits next to me in the passenger's seat. It's secured with the seatbelt and shifts about awkwardly as I change lanes. There's no good way to move rigging. It only breaks down so much. It's like trying to pack a lamp.

The chemo itself is a sack of clear liquid, like a bag of water, but the plastic is thick and heavy. It's wrapped in a protective sheaf and secured in a bright red cooler with yellow biohazard symbols all over it. The cooler is locked in three separate places with plastic ties. I am terrified of it. You'd think after four years of chemo certification I'd get over it. You'd be wrong. The second I start to take it for granted is the day I drop a bag on the floor and rupture it and clear out the entire wing and have to go through a flushing regimen that I've heard is not fun *at all*.

Under normal circumstances I'd be going five under the speed limit, hugging the right lane, hands at ten and two, no radio on. Mom would certainly be proud. But normal has pretty much gone out the window here in the past couple of weeks. I've never given a chemo regimen off-site. I don't even like giving chemo at the hospital. But when Owen told me that Ben asked for me personally, I was all over it. I can't stop thinking about Ben, and what scares me even more than carrying a quart of cell-destroying liquid is the thought that Ben might change his mind. So instead of my usual careful driving, I'm going fifteen over the limit on my

way to Chaco and praying I don't see a cop. Then I laugh out loud, because I am going to see a cop. And you can forget ten and two: my palms are so sweaty that I'm alternating them in front of the vents. As for the radio, I'm listening to a Top Forty station blaring pop music, because if it's quiet I start to think too much about what I'm doing and what it means that he asked for me personally. I need to save that for three a.m. Right now I need to do my fucking job.

Once I pass the welcome center and the CHC I'm totally lost. Owen seemed to know his way around here by heart. You'd think that after five years of shifts at the CHC that I would know my way about too. Guess not. I'm in over my head, but I don't care. I bust out my phone, but the GPS coverage isn't so good. Doesn't surprise me that these backstreets might be among the last to get digitized, but eventually I hone in on Ben's place.

Ben wanted to start treatment at his house, on his day off. He was fairly short on the phone. It took some time to figure out a schedule that worked. Where he could be alone. Apparently his grandmother is around the house most of the time, but she has a card game on Tuesday afternoons. He thought it best that nobody else was around. I said whatever he could do I would make work for me, and here I am. Before he hung up, he said thank you, and he sounded so genuine, and even a little scared, that I knew I'd make Tuesdays work.

His place is one half of a split duplex that doesn't look much bigger than my apartment. Still, outside of the main strip to Wapati Casino with its manicured desert foliage and squared landscaping and quaint houses of adobe and Spanish tiling, which even I know is for show, his place is one of the nicer I see within blocks. It's clean and simple and tended.

Ben is on the lookout for me. I can see him at the window. The curtains ruffle, and he opens the door even before I can park my car. When he walks out to me, he checks both ways down the street. I feel a bit like the ugly stepsister, and I think he knows it as soon as he comes up to me because he pauses and looks down for

a second. I can see him make a conscious decision to stop being embarrassed.

"Hi, Ben," I say.

"Thanks for...for coming."

"It sucks," I say. He laughs, thank God. His coloring is better, less angry red and more like the red of a sunrise, but there's still a touch of black to him, a representation of what's frightening him. It's not a natural color. If I was to hazard a guess, I'd say it was a visual representation of the cancer. There's something else, too, about the way his coloring shows itself. It's simmering, like a heavy soup about to boil. He's putting on a good show, but he's pretty freaked out. About the cancer, sure, but it's more than that. Something has happened to him that has rattled him deeply.

"You knew the whole time," he says.

I shake my head. "Nah, I just...I get these feelings sometimes, and I...It's just hard to unsee them once I see them."

"It's funny. You and my grandmother. Between the two of you I don't know why I even needed to get that damn scan." He looks up at the sky overhead and then around at the sky behind him. I follow his gaze. Nothing but blue. Not even a cloud.

"We should get inside," he says.

He carries in the rig while I shoulder my tote bag and then carefully pull the chemo crate out of the back seat. He eyes it warily as we walk up the front steps. I wish I could tell him it's not as bad as it looks, but it is.

The front room of the house doubles as a living room and dining room, actually probably triples as a living room, dining room, and TV room. It's neat and clean and uncluttered. He's moved a well-used recliner, the green seat cushion worn to white, to an opening in front of the mantel. I set the crate down like it's full of eggs, and he tries not to stare at it while I set up the rig. Meanwhile I try not to stare at everything that makes this place his home, starting with the pictures. I see the grandmother and father in one. The three of them and what looks to be his mother in another. There's one picture in the center where he looks like a teenager and he's with a young girl. They have the same color

eyes. They practically beam out of the picture frame. I look over at him as he ponders the crate and see that his eyes are soft now, no such smile behind them anymore. He sees me looking, and I panic a little and my fingers slip on the screw that tightens the neck of the rigging. To cover it up I ask him about her.

"Is that your sister?"

"Yeah," he says. "Ana. But she's been gone almost six years now."

My face flushes, and I'm sure I look as red as a baboon.

"I'm so sorry," I say, which is such a stupid thing to say, that phrase, because even if you are sorry, so very sorry, even if you're genuine, you sound canned. Just looking at a picture of that little girl, I know I would have fallen a little in love with her if she were around and smiled at me like that.

"Me too," he says, and he looks from the picture to me. "It's all right, Caroline. I'm the one that's supposed to be nervous here." He gently takes the pieces of the rig from my fingers, which feel like sausages. "I can set the rig up. I've seen a lot of them in my day. You can...do whatever needs to be done with that thing." He nods over at the chemo crate.

"You have any scissors?" I ask.

"Down the hall in the kitchen. In the big drawer."

I walk into the kitchen. It's spotless, but it has a well-used feel, a subtle layered smell of spices and oils that makes my stomach growl. I slide open the big drawer under the microwave and find the scissors, then turn to go. But I pause when I see a second room, off to the right. It looks like it was a small sitting room, but it's been converted into a tiny bedroom. I crane my neck, making sure to keep behind the refrigerator enough so Ben won't see how rude I'm being, and I see that the room is almost monastic. The floor has nothing on it. There is nothing on the walls. The bed would only accommodate two-thirds of me and is pulled hospital-tight. There's a beautiful Navajo blanket folded lengthways across it, but that's about all of the color there is to see, except for something on a small shelf above the bed: two painted sticks crossed over a worn leather pouch. The pouch is open, and the

opening is facing me. Something is glinting there. It's a cold, white glint. A box of some kind. I feel myself take a step towards it, and as soon as I do a shadow drops down over the window, and I have to stifle a scream. I stumble back into the open drawer, and my butt slams it shut with a loud bang.

It's a crow, on the windowsill. And not just any crow. It's the biggest crow I have ever seen. It looks prehistoric. As it settles, its coloring seems to blur and change in the dull light of the fall sun. At first it's black as night, and then it looks shot through with red, then black again. For one terrible minute I think it's in the room, but it flaps its wings and they brush against the outside of the window with a raspy raking sound.

A cold, whispered dread falls over me, the same type of feeling I had after that lung cancer patient bled out on us, when I was cleaning his room. There's a subtle movement in the air where there shouldn't be. I almost scream again, but this time it's no jump scare. It's because the crow is looking at me. Looking right at me with an eye the size of a golf ball and as black as marble. The fact that it doesn't make a sound, not even a squawk, makes it somehow even worse. It's just perched there, on the ledge, taking up the whole sill, its head turned flush right against the window. I can see a flat, sticky disk where its eye is pushing against the glass. Its beak taps once against it with the sound of a cracking knuckle.

Then Ben is there beside me.

"Caroline? Everything okay?"

The spell is broken. I take my first breath in what feels like minutes. I look from him back to the window, but the crow is gone.

"I'm sorry, I...I thought I saw something."

He looks through the window himself, and his coloring darkens to a deep clay. It's not fear that he is feeling, but it's close, something like a mixture of dread and inevitability.

"What did you see?" he asks, but I can tell he already knows.

"It was a bird. A big bird."

He nods. "I've been having something of a bird problem lately."

I cock my eyebrow at him.

"Kinda hard to explain. C'mon, let's get this over with." He nods back towards the front room. When we get back there I notice he's held my hand for the short walk. I'd like to think it's not because he thinks I'm a snoop that he has to keep tabs on. I file it away. Prime three a.m. material, right there.

Back in the front room, I open my tote and pull out my yellow chemo gown. It crinkles like a bag of chips as I pull it on. It has matching gloves, too. High fashion in the nursing world.

"What the hell?" Ben says.

"It's standard, don't worry."

"Is that to protect you?"

"Yeah, in case something happens when I start your line."

"To protect you from getting it on your skin?"

"Exactly."

"To protect you from what you're about to put in my bloodstream?"

"That's right." I nod, then realize he's incredulous. I pause before saying, "Look, this is strong stuff. But you need strong stuff. Know what I'm saying?"

After a second he nods.

"Plus, I think hazard yellow is a pretty good color on me. No?"

He cracks a smile that is a shadow of the one in the picture, but even a shadow works for me.

"All right," I say, "let's get this show on the road."

I snip the four protective ties and open the crate. The hood bag is inside another bag labeled Cytotoxic, which I pull out like a lunch pail.

"This is Avastana. You know what it does, right?"

"Yeah. They told me it'll wipe me out. I'll puke my guts out in the short term and lose my hair in the long term." His tone is as dry as bone. I can't tell if he's joking. I never know what the doctors tell these guys, and although Owen is the best of them, docs by nature are dorks who often have a hard time not explaining things like they're a textbook. I figure I should run it down for him in plain English.

"Basically cancer is just cells that are changing way too fast. This stuff kills those cells. It also kills any cells that look like those cells. Other fast moving cells, things like hair cells that grow fast, or mucous membranes that are naturally active. That's why your hair will most likely fall out. You'll also probably get abrasions and sores in your mouth and lower GI."

"My ass?"

"Yeah. Your ass."

"So this is the red button."

"What?"

"The nuclear option."

"Yeah. You could say that."

He sits down in the old chair and deflates for a second before pulling himself together. He is getting quite dark. And not just in the coloring that only I can see. "That's pretty much what the doctor said."

"Doctor Bennet?"

"Yeah."

I nod and pull up a fold-out chair that was propped against the couch. I pop it open next to his armrest and sit down by the hanging bag next to him. It's like a big chemical sprig of mistletoe. I grab his hand, and I'm not ashamed to admit that the spark of pure, rich clay coloring that I see float from him makes me feel good. It makes me feel like a nurse.

"I'll be right here, Ben. You and me. All right?"

He squeezes my hand and looks into my eyes.

"You and me," he says. "Okay. Hit me."

I prep his vein. Every nurse judges a man by his veins. It sounds weird, but when you spend as much time fretting over hitting veins for lines as we do, and studying how best to hit veins, and reading about where we have to start lines on people when we can't find their veins, you learn to appreciate a nice, fat, dark vein. Ben's veins are crazy prominent on his arms. They look like earthworms. A blind nurse could start a chemo line on this guy. I hit his forearm vein on the first try and have to stop myself from whooping. He doesn't even flinch. I flush the IV, tape it down, and

turn to the pump. I program a drip level and pull the clamp. That's that. I turn back to him and find he's been watching me the whole time.

"Now what?" he asks.

"Now we wait. It's a two-hour infusion."

"Two hours?"

"Yeah. You want a book?"

"Nah."

"I brought some cards, too. Or I could turn on the TV for you if you want."

"Nah," he says again, but he's tapping his foot. He looks a shade yellow. Nervous.

"When do I start feeling like shit?" he asks.

"With most people it's an hour or two after the infusion."

He nods, and his foot tapping intensifies. He follows the line from his arm up to the bag, and he's fixated on the pump drip like it's an hourglass. Without even meaning to, I rest my hand on his bobbing knee. The pallid mist fades away from him like vapor in the sun. Part of me feels guilty at knowing how I affect him. A small part. The rest of me is elated.

"Talk to me," he says.

"Talk to you?"

"Yeah, I...whenever Ana or I had to do hospital things, we would talk to each other. Whenever she had tests. We'd talk nonstop."

"Okay," I say, nodding. "Okay, uh. What would you like to talk about?"

"I dunno. Anything."

"What's your favorite color?"

"Red," he says, with a slight smirk.

"I knew it. All right, now you."

"Okay. What are you doing here?" he asks.

"Sorry?"

"I mean on the shithole outskirts of New Mexico. You have family in Albuquerque?" He traces the line from his arm back up the bag, his eyes wide.

"No, no family in Albuquerque, or anywhere near it. My family is from Iowa."

"So why here?" he asks, turning back to me.

"I got a grant from the government. They gave me money to go to nursing school. In return I gave them five years—twelve hours a week at the Chaco Health Center."

"Like the army," he says and starts to laugh. He nods to himself. "Dealing with the Navajo *is* kinda like a war."

"It's not like that. I had a specified term in an underserved community. It could have been anywhere. HUD areas. Inner city hospitals. Rural clinics. Anything."

"And are you glad you were sent to Chaco?"

I nod. I don't even have to think. "I knew it was the right decision the day I got a tupperware full of food from this old Navajo woman. She was a patient of mine during one of my rotations. She took the bus out to ABQ General. I don't even know where she got on."

"Had to have been in Grants City, just south. No bus system in Chaco."

"That's what I figured. She hitched her way out of the rez and then took the bus into Albuquerque just to give me food."

"I bet it was awesome."

"Oh my God. You have no idea. Best chicken I've ever had in my life. And I was new then, too. I hadn't had a home-cooked meal in months. I didn't even have pots in my apartment yet. I literally cried while I ate it all."

We're quiet for a moment, but it's a comfortable quiet. The house settles around us in the late afternoon cool.

"And then you came," I say. I don't really know why. I have this dangerous and peculiar tendency to panic around men I like, but when I do, I also have this liberating side effect of throwing caution to the wind. I think I've been in a low-grade panic since I got that call from Owen telling me Ben wanted off-site chemo and wanted it from me.

"Me?" Ben says.

"Yeah. You. You take the good with the bad when you work at the CHC. There's plenty of both, I think, but the good is quiet while the bad is loud. The bad shows up on my patient rounds late at night half-dead or detoxing. That's loud. That has a loud color. But you, you're good. And you're a quiet good. And you have a nice color, and I bet it'd be nicer if you didn't have such a mountain on your shoulders. I can see it weighing you down. I'm rambling now. I'll shut up."

For a second I think he's going to make me explain myself and my weird Technicolor Dream Vision, and then he'll laugh me out of his house and straight into therapy. But he says nothing. It's wonderful. It's wonderfully Navajo.

"All right. Your turn," he says.

"What's the deal with the crow?" I ask. I don't even skip a beat. Neither does he.

"I wish I knew," he says. Then he looks up at the ceiling like he could see through it to the sky. "All I know is that recently I've been seeing a lot of crows. But I think they've been around longer than that. You know? I think it's kind of a thing I've had for a long time around me but I'm only now coming to see it."

"Tell me about it."

"What?"

"Nothing. Keep going."

"I mean, it's late fall. This is when the crows gather. It should be normal. But it's not. "

"Because of the big guy?"

"Yeah. The big guy. And I sort of feel like they're always gathering around me. Does that sound crazy?"

I think for a second. A couple of weeks ago maybe it would have sounded crazy. Not anymore.

"No."

He lets out a breath. "That's good."

"But why? Why are they following you?"

"I think it has something to do with a gambler. And this place on the desert boundary called the Arroyo. And Ana."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah. I don't know how. But it does. And..." He squints and drops his head and then blinks rapidly. I lean in closer to him.

"Ben? You all right? What are you feeling?"

"I just feel...I feel like I'm running out of time. I had this Evilway. It's a Navajo chant ceremony. I saw things. I'm not sure if it was good for me. I think it's speeding things up."

He's rambling now. Pouring forth. Like I've lanced a blister.

"I saw Ana. I saw her."

"What, like a vision?"

"Yes. But no. It was more. It was...terrible. She came in the hogan when..." He drops his head again, straining to remember. Then he pops up, his eyes bright with recognition.

"The crow. The totem. Or was that a vision too?" His eyes shoot back towards the kitchen, towards where the back room is. He makes a move to get up, and I have to settle him.

"You have to wait the infusion out."

He sits down again and swallows hard. "I feel strange," he says.

"I know. So do I. Let's keep talking."

So we do. Until every last drip of Avastana is coursing through his veins. We talk about our parents, his estranged but nearby, mine together but far away. We talk about paying bills and working late. We talk about night shifts and groggy mornings and old friends. He talks about a guy named Joey like a good friend, but in past tense. I don't want to make the same mistake I did with his sister, so I don't pursue it.

He looks weary when I eventually pull his line. I press a cotton ball to his vein, and he takes a huge, shuddering breath and closes his eyes.

"Weird to think of that stuff inside me."

"It's going to work," I say.

"I don't feel all that bad," he says. "Just tired."

"Give it a few hours."

"I thought you were supposed to make me feel better," he says, smiling up at me.

"I'm here to help you, not pat your head." But I pat his head anyway. Then the doorbell rings.

His color muddies. His smoke had been strengthening despite the chemo, moving to a stronger red, but it yellows with the knocking. His eyes snap to the door, then he looks at me. His eyes tell me all I need to know. Nobody was supposed to bother us. We're both silent, thinking the same thing: maybe they'll just go away.

The doorbell rings again, then someone pounds on the door. I wince at the sound.

"Want me to get it?" I whisper.

He shakes his head. "Help me up."

I take his outstretched hand with both of mine and pull him to his feet. He steadies himself and eyes the door with narrow lids. He sets his shoulders and moves over to the door. There's no window in the door—it's just a slab of wood—but there's a chain catch, and he slides it to before opening the door a crack. I hear a man's voice outside.

"Mr. Dejooli?"

"Yes," Ben says.

"It's Agent Parsons, with the FBI. I'm here with Agent Douglas as well. May we speak with you?"

"It's not a good time," Ben says.

"I'm afraid we must insist," the other, Douglas, says from behind the door. His voice is lower, just above a growl.

"Insist all you want," Ben says. "I can't talk to you today. If it's about the report, it can wait until tomorrow." Ben moves to close the door, but it thuds against a shoe.

"We found Joseph Flatwood," says Parsons.

Ben freezes.

"We need to talk with you," says Douglas, more forcefully this time.

Ben rests his head against the back of the door for a moment, then slides the catch free. He swings open the door and two men in drab suits and bad ties step inside. They have the instantly forgettable faces of government lackeys. They eye me with a

clinical unease. They take in the rig and the bag without comment. There can be no mistaking what's going on here, though. I'm still dressed like a chicken, after all.

"All right," Ben says. "What is it?"

The agents look at me, and then something unsaid passes between them.

"She's with me," Ben says. "Now out with it."

I flush. I staunch a smile. Agent Parsons gives me a pitying look before turning to Ben. "Flatwood hit another hospital. In Flagstaff."

"And you got him?"

"No. He got away. Again."

I try to see Ben's color. It's hard. He's hiding it well, something I suspect he is doing without thinking. The Navajo are very good at affecting a passive face when they want to.

"How?" he asks.

"We don't know. From the looks of it, he just...disappears."

"What?"

"He shoots up now, right on site. Right where he steals the drugs. He should be in a coma, but instead, he gets away."

"But you said you know where he is?"

"He drives an old motorcycle. We've had our eye out for it ever since a traffic camera picked him up in Portland. We found it outside of the hospital in Flagstaff, and we bugged it in case he eluded us again."

"Good thing," Ben says. Neither of the agents moves a muscle. "So where's he going?"

"East. Fast. His movements are erratic. He would be hard to catch, even if we wanted to."

"But you don't."

"No. We don't want to tip him off."

Ben puts his hands on his hips, and I can see that he wants to scratch at his stomach. His nausea would be knocking at the door right about now.

"I don't understand. What do you want from me?" Ben asks, and it breaks my heart to hear the hint of desperation in his voice.

"We know where he's going, Ben. There's only one major hospital on his route that's big enough for him to slip in and out unnoticed."

I go cold. "ABQ General," I say, before I can stop myself.

The agents turn to me briefly, then nod as if they were approving of the pictures on the mantel. "And he's almost there. We're just ahead of him."

"Well, catch him then. What are you standing here for?" Ben says.

Parsons smooths at his tie. Douglas scratches at his neck. Their coloring is hard to describe. It's flat brown. Almost dead. There's been very little movement until now, but at Ben's insistence a muted flash of mottled black speckles around both men. They're embarrassed. And angry about it.

"We have tried. Twice our people had him dead to rights. Twice he got away."

"You don't think you can catch him," Ben says, and I hear a hint of a smile in his voice.

"We think you might have a better shot," Parsons says.

"Me? You're kidding. What makes you think I could do anything?" He sounds incredulous, but I know otherwise. I can see it in how he sharpens, like a camera snapping to focus. He wants to see this Joey character. This friend I thought was dead. He wants it badly.

I jump in, before anyone can say anything. "Ben, you're going to be very sick soon. We don't know how you're going to react, but odds are it's not going to be good. You shouldn't leave this house."

The agents seem totally disinterested in me. Disinterested in everything but getting Ben to go with them. They're so *flat*. Like they're cutouts of men.

"I don't like them," I say. I cover my mouth for a second, then drop my hand before I look too much like a little girl. "I mean... what I mean is that if they have a tracker on him, you can get him tomorrow. Or the next day."

Or never, and you can just stay with me. And I'll talk to you. And hold your hand.

"He's getting violent," Parsons says evenly. "He assaulted two orderlies at Flagstaff Presbyterian Hospital. Hurt one of them fairly badly. He is extremely hard to take down. His strength is... outsized. We read your report. You can get in his head. Talk to him. Slow him down or distract him enough for our guys to take him down."

"Ben—" I begin, pleading.

"We don't have a lot of time, Mr. DeJooli. A matter of hours. And it's a little over an hour to get there."

I drop my hands to my sides, and my gown crinkles loudly. I already know I've lost.

"Okay," Ben says. "I'll go. Just give me five minutes."

The agents nod, then turn to leave. One of them, Douglas, turns to me and stares at me with the blank malice of a guard dog. Then he follows Parsons out. Ben and I are alone again.

"I have to go. You don't know about things between Joey and me. I... just have to go, that's all."

"You're gonna get sick."

"I'll bring a bag."

"Dammit, Ben," I say, quietly.

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't go if it was anything else. You gotta believe me."

I rummage around roughly in my tote until I find the anti-nausea medication I brought along with me.

"Here," I say, throwing it a little harder than I had intended. He catches it out of midair, and it rattles. "Take two. Then take two more in two hours. So on and so forth. It'll help, but it won't take care of everything. You're gonna feel like garbage."

He looks so grateful and relieved that I can't stay mad at him. I'm not sure it's my place to keep him anywhere if he wants to go. I can only say what I can say. I take off my gown and start packing things away while he dashes to the back. I hear him pour a glass of water and gulp the pills down, then I hear him cut left to his room. When he comes back out, he's in uniform. Hat and all. He pauses in

the kitchen and looks back at the side room where I saw the crow at the window. He takes a tentative step forward and seems to be thinking. I try to fade into the wall while still watching him. He takes a few slow steps and reaches up where the bag is with the sticks. He sets them aside and slowly reaches in the bag. His back is to me so I can't see what he's doing, but he stays like this for several moments, long enough to where I'm afraid the agents might ring the doorbell again.

When he turns around from the bag, he looks spooked. He tucks his shirt in and pats at his belt, but his mind is elsewhere. He takes his hat off and scratches at his head, then plunks it back on and walks back to the front room. By then I'm all packed up.

"Thank you, Caroline," he says, but he's dazed. His color is flashing faintly, like lights underwater. He wants to tell me something, but he can't. "I'll see you...when?"

"Next week. But call me if you feel weird. Or if anything. For anything, I mean."

He nods and holds the door open for me. He follows me out, and I watch as he gets into a big black Suburban. It turns around and takes off like a rocket, and I'm left outside alone, holding the rig and the cooler.

I almost drop everything on the street when a flock of crows that had stood silent watch in the tree nearby suddenly explodes into flight in a firework of black. They take off after the Suburban, and I can still hear their keening and squawking even when they look like a floating black ribbon in the distance against the sky.

CHAPTER 12

OWEN BENNET

We've had our fair share of bad apples visit the oncology floor. Cancer doesn't go away just because the person who has it is in prison. Cancer doesn't make a distinction between the girl next door and a violent offender. Cancer is cancer. You can debate the ethics of it from a taxpayer's perspective all you want, but the law, my oath, and my beliefs tell me that if a person needs treatment, they should get it. No matter what.

Usually you can tell a dangerous patient is on their way because the hospital beefs up security at the entrances and exits to the floor, and two guards are assigned to prep a room, do sweeps, and remove anything that could be used as a weapon. In other words, it's pretty obvious, and it sets the staff abuzz and generally creates a heightened tension that everyone could do without. It's tense enough on the onc floor as it is.

This time is different. Very different. But different because everything looks exactly the same. When I get to the hospital, it looks like business as usual. I'm the attending. I relieve the night attending. I get report. I review any material changes from the cases I prepped overnight. I get my schedule, I drink my coffee, and I start making rounds. Then I'm charting in the on-call room when the CEO, Dick Schwartz, walks in flanked by what looks like two accountants. Schwartz seems like he's about to keel over. In fact, he looks so peaked that I think he's come to check himself in.

"Hello, Doctor Bennet," Schwartz says. "Can I speak with you?"

Outside of the one day around Thanksgiving when he and the other C-level administrators hand out turkeys to everyone and shake their hands, I have never spoken with Dick Schwartz in my life. He has no reason to know my name. There are hundreds and hundreds of doctors in his employ. Now all of a sudden I'm the one feeling peaked.

"Mr. Schwartz," I say, watching as the other two check the hallway outside and close the door to the on-call room. I see a black shoulder holster under the arm of one of them. Not accountants after all. Schwartz pulls out a chair and positions himself so that his jacket doesn't rumple under him.

"We have a situation here," he says, and he clasps his hands together on the table. "Things are moving rather fast. I've only just been appraised of the situation myself by the agents here, but the gist of it is that we have a violent criminal on his way to ABQ General."

"All right. You want me to handle the transfer personally?"

Schwartz swallows.

"He's not being transferred. In fact, he's not in custody at all. Yet."

I furrow my brow. "I'm not sure I follow."

"This man, he targets hospitals for their drugs. He prefers oncology floors, for whatever reason." Schwartz looks at one of the agents, who nods. "Maybe because onc floors stock high levels of pain killers, but either way, we think he's going to end up here."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"That's just it. Nothing."

"What?"

The agent by the door steps in. "We need things to appear completely normal here. The suspect must not be tipped off in any way."

I clear my throat. "So...what, just let him roam the halls? I have a responsibility for the safety of my nurses and staff as well as the patients."

"If his other hits are any indication, you won't even see him. He's...very good. And to date he hasn't harmed anyone unless

approached first, although we believe he may start to attack indiscriminately if he isn't stopped. He does occasionally go into patient rooms."

"My God."

"The sickest patients, it would seem," says the other agent, with chagrin. "He likes the ones who are dying."

"What's he do to them?" I ask.

A nurse tries to come into the break room, but is blocked by the agent, who waves her off like a fly before turning back to me. "To date he's just stared at them," he says.

"He is a severe addict, doctor," says the first agent. "If what he steals is any indication, he will not be in his right mind."

"So are we supposed to keep him here for you?"

"No," he says, and he pulls a security camera still from the breast pocket of his jacket and hands it to me. It's of a young Navajo man, squat, with that peculiar, faded look of an addict. He looks like a man who was once strong and is now retreating from that strength, as if his skin doesn't quite fit right. He wears a black leather jacket and has wild black hair down to his lower back. His eyes flash vacantly in the camera exposure.

"This is him. If you see him, stay away. If you see any of your staff approaching him, intervene. But like I said, I don't think you'll see him. That is why we won't be notifying the rest of the floor. We think it would do more harm than good."

"How are you going to catch him? You are catching him, right? Not just escorting him from hospital to hospital?"

Neither agent bats an eye.

"Let us take care of that. All you need to do is stay alert and act normal. And if either Agent Douglas or I tells you to do something, do it."

I look at Dick Schwartz for help. I don't like the tone or the demeanor of either of these agents, but I get no help from Schwartz, who looks as harrowed as I feel. Something tells me this isn't the time to get into a discussion of liability. Something tells me nothing I can say will change a damn thing. This guy is coming

no matter what. But I make a mental note to step into Schwartz's office with a vengeance if we all survive this thing.

"How long do I have?"

"About fifteen minutes," Parsons says, as he reaches over and plucks the photograph from my hands.

"Thank you, Doctor Bennet," Schwartz says, but his eyes are saying *I'm sorry. These men will not be put off.*

Then all three of them sweep out of the room, and I'm left alone with the approaching storm.

I can only thank God that Caroline isn't working today.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

BEN DEJOOLI

The agents point out the motorcycle as it approaches. We're parked in the general lot, right next to a whole host of trucks and SUVs. We look just like everyone else, and there's no way that Joey could notice us or hear us in the car, but still we talk in whispers.

It's a beautiful vintage Honda 650. Round body. Black and gold coloring. It's the bike we'd dreamed of buying and restoring as kids, even down to the offset striping on the gas tank.

"That son of a bitch," I say. The agents nod, unaware.

First thing: that Honda doesn't look like the kind of thing a drug addict would be zipping around on. Drug addicts don't restore classic motorcycles. They scrap ÷em and hock ÷em.

As he pops over the hill and comes to a stop at the light before the turn off, I get my first good look at him. Sort of. He's in riding leathers and boots, and he wears a red kerchief over his face. It's pinned to him above the nose by a big pair of reflective aviator goggles. It's him though. He doesn't wear a helmet, and it looks like he hasn't cut his hair in the six years since I last saw him. It nearly settles down to his seat and is as black as night.

That's the second thing. He doesn't exactly look inconspicuous.

I have to take my eyes from him because I'm going to vomit again, but otherwise I'd be mesmerized.

I've nearly filled a second grocery bag with vomit. We tossed the first one out of the window on the highway. I think next time

I'll tell Caroline I need to take the anti-nausea stuff before she pricks me. I'm pretty sure the two capsules I took with water before I left are intact in that bag on the side of the highway. Still, it's not all bad. I kind of like how disgusted the agents are. These guys grate on me. They have less than zero concern about any of the human aspects of this sting, or whatever you'd call what's going on here. It's like they're getting orders beamed to their heads at the same time. Like rats on a mission through a maze, they're that focused. I feel like they'd eat through the walls if that's what it took.

Joey pulls into the general lot and coasts right up to the motorcycle parking at the front, maybe twenty feet from the double door entrance. He throws the kickstand out and steps off. He pulls down his bandana, and I get a good look at the face of a man I made sure was kicked out of Chaco forever. The man I threw from the Navajo Way. He looks terrible. He always had a squat body, but he doesn't fill it out anymore. His eyes are wide and bulging. His mouth is set, clenched, and his face is gaunt and angled to the bone. He doesn't look thin, not exactly. He looks worse than thin. He looks diminished. He looks like he's fading.

But he doesn't act like it. And that's the third thing I notice. Joey walks right into the hospital without even blinking. Not a care for the security cameras at every door. Not even a glance in either direction. This is not a man who is worried about the twenty-five-to-life he's facing if and when these suits pull him in.

The agents are on their earpieces, muttering. Parsons nods and turns to me.

"Ninth floor. Oncology. He's going up. It's showtime, Mr. Dejooli." He pops open the door.

"Remember," Douglas says, "if you can hold him, hold him. Shoot him if you have to. Just don't kill him."

Those are some pretty open orders right there. Back at the station Danny would call that "permission to start shit."

I nod. Then I'm off. I pull my hat down low, and I have to grin at the thought that I'm doing more to disguise myself than Joey did. When I reach the elevators he's already gone up. I push the

button a bunch of times and wait for an interminable thirty seconds as his elevator hits nine then comes back down. When it opens, it's empty.

When I reach the ninth floor, I don't see him anywhere. I stutter step onto the floor and look around. No Joey. I go up to the receptionist, who is nervously tapping a pack of cigarettes and checking her watch.

"Did you see a guy come up here? Biker guy? Dressed in leather?"

"When?" she asks.

"Just now. Like right now."

She looks at me sideways. "Nope. You're the only visitor in the last couple of minutes."

I stare at her long enough to make her nervous. "Anything else?" she asks sharply.

I turn around and go back out to the elevators. It makes no sense. He had to have walked by the front desk. I finger the com on my shoulder. "You sure he went up the main elevator?"

"Yes," comes the reply. I can imagine Parsons grinding his teeth.

"The front desk says—"

"He went in. He's on the floor. Now you see what we mean when we say he's tricky."

Tricky my ass. Something else is at work here. He's nearby. It's like I can feel him. The sulfur has been picking up in intensity, packing deeper in my nostrils. I have to go near the corner and hold the crook of my elbow over my mouth to keep from retching. When I stand up again, I waver a bit before snapping to focus. This chemo is nasty, but then again, I was warned.

I walk back towards the desk. Then right past the desk.

"Can I *help* you?" the receptionist asks again.

"I'm here to prep a room for an inmate transfer," I say over my shoulder. I can tell she wants to stop me, but I think she wants her cigarette break more. I pass through to the main hall.

The floor is laid out like a horseshoe, the front desk at the bow and patient rooms at intervals down either rung. In the middle are

a slew of computers and cubicles and lockers and whatnot for the staff. I shoot a glance down one side and don't see him. I cut across the middle to the other side, and I still don't see him. There's a fire exit at the far back, but it's alarmed. And anyway, I know he's still here somewhere. Ever since the Evilway, like it or not, I've been feeling more, seeing more, smelling more than I should be. Could be that I sweat out toxins for two straight days. Could be that I have a quart of cell-bleach in my system. Could also be that I'm dying. Whatever it is, if it helps me get this shit straight, I'll take what I can get.

I start down the near hallway, noting which doors are closed on my left and swinging my head right to clear the computer area. I don't see him, but when I turn around, the doors I thought were closed are open, and some of the ones that were open are closed. It's a funhouse from hell. I really don't want to start knocking on doors. At the end of the hallway, I find the pill case, right where the agents said it would be.

I also find Doctor Bennet, staring at it with wide eyes because it's swinging open like a rusty gate and with a circle the size of a fist cut out of it.

"Shit," I mutter, and Bennet looks up at me. His eyes get wider.

"Are you here for him?" Bennet whispers.

"Yeah. When did this happen?"

"Now. I mean just now."

"Did you see where he went?"

"No. I didn't see anything." He steps up and in front of the case as a pair of nurses walk by. He nods weakly at their passing greeting.

"What are you talking about? Which way did he go, Bennet?"

"You don't get it. I was watching the case. I've been watching it for twenty minutes. Nothing happened. I blinked and then this."

My eyes start to water. My face feels like it's burning. I try to hold my guts in, but I have to grab a trashcan quick, turn away, and puke. Thankfully I have nothing left in me now. It just sounds like I'm spitting. I turn back to Bennet, and he's softened.

"You shouldn't be out like you are. You must be in a good deal of pain."

"I'll be in worse pain if I can't catch Joey—"

And then there he is. I see him out of the corner of my eye, clear as day. Dressed in black with the red bandana pulled down around his neck. He's right there, twenty feet down the hall, staring at me. Except when I turn to look at him, he's gone.

"What? Do you see him?" Bennet asks.

"Sort of..." I say, turning back to Bennet, and then there he is again. Same spot. This time I stay still and don't turn to look. It could be that my eyes are dripping water, could be that I feel like I have a hotpot on my head, but he looks like a nightmare. His eyes are way too big, and his mouth is the same black circle shape as his eyes. The rest of his face has been smudged. Pasty skin coloring extends beyond the borders of where his face should be. And it's moving. All by itself. He looks like he's screaming, but he's not. He's standing still with his hands balled in fists at his side, and he's staring right at me. And now it's my turn to feel scared. Whatever this is, it's not Joey Flatwood. Not the Joey I knew.

Then something grabs Joey's attention, and he darts off sideways across the horseshoe to the other side of the floor. He's gone in a blink. It's like he steps through the walls. A second later, the bells and whistles go off. It's a code. I know that from the old days. Someone is dying. The Navajo people don't believe in coincidences. But even if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't believe this was a coincidence. Bennet looks at me. I nod. He straightens and rolls up his sleeves. I respect that. I respect a guy who owns up to what's coming.

"Follow the running," he says, and he takes off down the hall. We're joined by a bunch of other people in scrubs, and soon five or six of us whip around the bend and towards the blinking blue light above the room at the far end of the corridor. I put my hand on my gun. I feel like I'm gonna throw up again, but this time I'm not sure if it's all about the chemo. I strain forward and pull ahead of the wave, and I'm the first one into the room. There he is. He's leaning over the patient, his face inches from the old man's. His black hair

forms a waving tent over the small figure in the bed. He's speaking. Chanting something, but it's muddled. It's not unlike what Gam was singing in the Evilway, but it sounds like it's coming from a tinny speaker underwater.

"Joey, get away from the bed!" I say, and I pull my gun. He looks up at me with a jerk, and I'm expecting the vacant black holes and the dripping oil face I saw in the corridor, but it's just Joey. A rail-thin, walking-dead-man version of Joey, but Joey.

And then he's gone.

And I have people yelling at me. I'm spinning in a circle in the room, but he's nowhere. And then I'm being pushed away, and I see Bennet calming people down and pushing me out of the room, and calming some more. People are giving orders, and I hear the whining sound of that shocker pad revving. The nurses are crowded around the unconscious old man on the bed, and I'm just outside, looking in.

No Joey.

"I think I'm losing my mind," I say out loud, just to hear my voice, just to make sure I'm still here and not dreaming. I wipe sweat from my clammy brow, and Bennet comes over to me.

"I...I think I'm worse than I thought I was. I'm seeing things," I say. I feel like I want to cry. This must be what it's like to go insane: visual hallucinations so strong you swear on your family that they're true. I get this loopy thought that maybe I died during the Evilway and this is where I ended up, doomed to chase the man I banished forever. I feel at the wall, only half sure it exists. Then I collapse against it.

"I saw him too," Bennet says quietly. I look up at him, reach for him with my eyes like a drowning man would a raft.

"You saw him?"

Bennet nods. "Ben. Can you tell me what is going on here?" He speaks very slowly, as if he's walking a thin line of sanity himself.

"Wish I could. Holy hell do I wish I could. He's still here somewhere. I can feel it."

Alarms are still blaring in the room. Bennet pops back into the chaos and then out again to check on me. He shakes his head. No Joey. Then he steps on something with a loud crunch. He looks down. He's crushed a white pill to powder under his shoe.

"He must have gotten by in all the shoving," Bennet says.

"Can you go across to the other wing?" I ask. "I'll start at the back end of this one. We work our way forward. If you see or hear anything, or think you see or hear anything, you call out. You hear me?"

Bennet nods, takes one more look at the code to assure himself it's being taken care of, then trots across the horseshoe again.

I walk down my hallway towards the back fire exit. I walk slowly, with my palms held out and my hands open, like I'm trying to catch the air. If I can't see him, maybe I can feel him.

It's difficult to focus on your periphery. Impossible, actually. So my mind's eye watches my side view while I try my best to keep staring at the fire door straight ahead of me. Every time I hear a door open or close, I look toward it in a snap, but it's just the hospital moving around me, doctors and nurses and staff going about the day. I reach the far door. No sign of him. I spin around and curse under my breath.

I listen for Bennet on the opposite side, but nothing is out of the ordinary. A small cheer comes from the code room, and nurses and staff start to file out. Guess the little old man made it after all. At least somebody is getting a happy ending here. I slump and walk back towards the front bend. My mind tells me Joey is long gone, but I still sense something in my heart. I still sense that burning darkness that came from his eyes, but it's weaker now. I pause by the door to the little old man's room, still open. His little old wife is crying tears of joy at his side, her head not far from where Joey's had been, but this time he's looking back at her with rheumy eyes. They clasp hands, thin and frail like dried flowers, but there is life there still. They have another minute with each other. And another. His wife has this sort of delirious pitch to her voice, like when you're on the tables at Wapati and you're playing

on house money. It draws me a little closer to the room. It makes me smile. They don't have a care for anything but each other.

Maybe that's why they don't see Joey.

Because he's right there. In the corner of the room. And he's not some side-seen apparition this time either. No melting flesh, no dark pits for eyes. He's a flesh and blood man that I can see straight on. And he can see me straight on too. He sees me before I see him. Every cop instinct they drill into you for a time like this, when you get blindsided by something, goes right out the window. I don't react. I can't react. If he wanted to tackle me or bum rush me, he could have, right then and there. Joey was always bigger than me, and even down fifty pounds like he is right now, his eyes still have this fire to them. They aren't the eyes of a dying man. If he wanted to, he could give me a run for my money. But he doesn't. What he does do is lift a gloved finger to his lips and then move his gaze out of the doorway, beckoning.

He wants to talk.

I cock my head and squint. *You're fucking kidding me, right?*

He holds out his hands wide and bobs his head. *You know I could run if I want. You know you'd never catch me.*

It's funny how after all these years I can still read him like a book. No words required. I take a breath and purse my lips. *Fine.* Joey always got what he wanted when we were kids, why should things change now? I back out of the door and into the hallway. He follows me. We both stare at each other until we stop just a few rooms back from the far corner by the exit.

"I knew it was you," he says. And he's smiling. He looks like he wants to hug me, but he holds back. Instead he just takes me in. "It's good to see you, Big B."

His voice triggers an avalanche of memories I don't want to feel right now. Things like us screaming down the flood plain on our bicycles with the warm New Mexico night air whipping past our bare chests. I push back against them by focusing on the pack of morphine nodules I see hanging out of his bulging pockets. The audacity of this fucking guy.

"I gotta bring you in, Joey."

"You can't bring me in," he says. "I'm not Navajo, remember?"
He smiles a hollow smile that reminds me of the holes in his face I saw minutes ago.

"I'm not working for NNPD here," I say.

His smile drops. "Those bastard suits?"

"They're the FBI. They don't fuck around. They want you alive, but I think there's a big gap between ÷moving' and ÷alive' for these guys."

"Tell me about it," he says. "You can't trust them, Ben. You don't know what their motives are."

"Shut up, Joey. Just shut up and come with me. I don't want to hash out everything again. I really don't. I want to get you behind bars and then go home."

"They don't want me," he says. "Nobody wants me. You of all people should know that."

"Fuck you. Don't start with that shit. You brought this on yourself." I find myself gripping his jacket, balling the leather in my fist. "All you had to do was talk, you miserable piece of shit. That's all you had to do. If you didn't take her yourself, then tell us what you saw. You were in the goddamn room with her!"

He lets me grab him. He moves with my trembling arms. His face is sallow, his jaw slack, and I can see just how much weight he's lost. "Look at you," I say, and I push him back a step. "Instead of facing yourself, you've decided to wipe yourself out. You're a fucking coward, Joey. You're a coward, and I don't have room for this shit in my life anymore because it's destroying me too."

For a second, he looks like I struck him across the face, but he rallies. "You're a good man, Ben," he says. "A better man than I am. But you're such a cop. You see two points and work your ass off to draw a straight line between them. But this story is no straight line. I think you're coming to see that now."

"You're fucked up, Joey. Something fucked you up. You need help. You're an addict, man. You're knocking off hospitals and getting crazy. You've crossed state lines. That's why the FBI is here. And they don't give up."

Joey shakes his head. "Yeah, well, neither do I," he mutters.

"Let's just walk out of these doors and nobody gets shot, okay? That's what they want. That's what I want, too."

"Like I said, they don't want me."

"Well, what do they want?"

He reaches in his pocket with one gloved hand and grips something. He has it out and in his palm before I can blink, never mind draw my gun.

"They want this," he says.

It's a turquoise crow. Same as the gambler's. Same as Gam's. I can only stare at it.

"You've seen this before?" he asks. "Doesn't surprise me. Not with the path you've walked. Not with the path you have to walk still."

"Where did you get that?" I ask, my mind numb.

"I pulled it from the hands of a dead man in Colorado. Don't worry. I didn't kill him. But your friends in the suits did. I snatched it before they could find it." He smiles. "They were pretty pissed off when it wasn't where they thought it would be."

Part of my mind is telling me not to listen to the words of an addict on the run, but over the past weeks I seem to have put some distance between that part and the rest of me. A rift has opened, a rip in my fabric that started as an unraveling when Ana left me but that has been getting bigger every day and finally split down the seam in that hogan. I don't understand what Joey is saying, but I know he's telling me the truth.

"I don't know how many of these totems there are, Ben, but they want them all. Bad. And I think they'll stop at nothing to get them."

"But why? It's just a crow," I say, but I don't believe that, and he knows it.

"No such thing as *just a crow*, my brother. And they want it for the same reason I want it. Because they want to find Ana."

I step back. His words hit me like rocks. I feel bruised. I feel bile rise in my throat. The sulfur smell hits me with the force of a wildfire. My vision wavers and I hitch to the side, but Joey grabs me.

"You think I've been running this whole time—I know it. But I'm not running. I'm *looking* for her. The suits think they understand everything. That the more crows they get the closer they'll be. But they don't get it." His face is manic. His eyes glassy. "I don't either, but I'm getting closer. This shit?" He taps the vials in his pocket. "I hate this shit. But it gets me closer. The drugs, and the crow, and...and these places"—he holds out his hands to the hospital around him—"where people are battling death. Each gets me a little closer to finding her, Ben! They're all pieces of a puzzle, and they're coming together. But I'm running out of time."

"Ana?" I whisper. "Ana?" I say her name like a ward. I say it like I used to say it in my sleep before Gam would wake me and sing to me. An eighteen-year-old man weeping in his grandmother's arms.

My com crackles. It's subtle, but we both hear it. The agents are coming. I grab him by the jacket again, but my grip is weak. He pulls one leather glove off with his teeth and pries my fingers from him.

"I have to keep you here," I say, but there's nothing behind it. There's nothing in me anymore. Nothing but a rising sickness and the unsettling feeling of empty burning in my veins. He takes my fingers in his.

"I'm sorry, Ben. I'm so sorry," he says, and I have a series of flashbacks of him walking away across the rez boundary, him looking at me and weeping, but still walking away. "But time is short."

Then he takes the crow from his gloved hand and grips it with his bare hand, and he blinks out of sight. I look left and right for him, and I see him in flashes, like a man glimpsed through the crack of a door.

"Goodbye," he whispers. I feel the air part as he moves away. He's gone, and it's just me, sobbing against a wall. The fire alarm goes off. I turn my head towards the front, waiting for the agents, but instead I see Bennet, and he rushes to me as I slide down the wall. He saw the whole thing. Or enough of it anyway. It's written on his face. He's like a man who just woke up in a strange place

and is looking for anything familiar to grab onto. I think I'm the same way because when he kneels down to me we grab each other, and that's when the cavalry comes in. The two agents, sure, but another three as well, and a handful of state police for good measure, guns out, scaring the shit out of everybody.

Bennet does what I can't do. He stands up in the bedlam and screams like a foghorn, "He's gone! He ran! The fire exit! Quickly!" Then he throws an arm around my back. "Come on, man," he whispers. "With me."

Bennet parts the sea of agents and cops that runs around us, and he half-carries me into a darkened patient room. He helps me onto the bed, grabs a bucket, and slides it in front of me, and I lose my guts again. I puke red, and I see red. Then I see black spots, and then I'm out.

*

When I wake up, it's like my life is on repeat. I'm strapped to another damn machine, with another damn baggie dripping itself into my veins. Except this time I don't even have my comfy lounge, and the nurse in my room isn't Caroline. She's older, and when she hears me stir, she dials a number on her phone and bustles over to my bed.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

"Like hell. What's in the bag?"

"You're dehydrated. We're just giving you some fluids, that's all."

Then everything comes back to me, and I try to sit up. But this nurse is big, and she pushes a beefy hand down on my sternum.

"Easy there."

My head is pounding. Watching things hurts. Blinking hurts. I close my eyes and focus on not moving them under my lids, and that helps stave off another wave of nausea.

"What time is it?"

"It's just after six," says another voice, and this one I recognize. Bennet. I open my eyes a smidge and watch him

through my eyelashes. "Same day. You've only been out for about two hours. Thank you, Mary Ellen. I'll take it from here."

Mary Ellen shuffles out, and Bennet closes the door behind her before sliding a small stool next to the bed. I shuffle a bit in a sad attempt to sit up, but he shakes his head and stills me with a single touch.

"Rest, Ben. Your body has no idea what's going on."

"Neither does the rest of me," I mutter.

Bennet glances at the door and nods. "He got away," he says, his voice low. "The agents and the rest of them canvassed the place for an hour before that Parsons guy called them all off. He and Douglas left without a word. Kind of a pissy couple, those two."

I let out a breath that rattles my throat, but I say nothing.

"Now why do I get the feeling that you aren't all that torn up about the dangerous drug addict's daring escape?"

"He said some things to me. Some things that rang true."

"About that rock he held in his hand? That made him invisible?" Bennet finishes with a sad laugh and creaks back in his seat. He runs his hands up and down his face a couple of times. "I can't believe I'm saying this. I can't believe I just said that without tacking on ÷here's a referral to a counselor' or ÷that's a side effect of the medication'."

"The crow is real. I don't know what it does, exactly, but whatever it is, it's real. It happened. But it wasn't just that. We have a history, him and me, and now I'm starting to rethink it."

"Is that good, or bad?"

"Neither. It just is. But he told me to watch out for the Feds."

"Sounds like something a criminal on the run would say."

"Nah. I get it. I get what he's saying. I never liked those two stiffs. They always rubbed me the wrong way."

Bennet is quiet, but I know he won't disagree. I know they chafe him too. The way they have blinders on. They're too cold. Too calculating. It's unnatural.

"He said the Feds weren't after him. They were after the crow."

"If it can do what I think I saw it do, it could be very valuable. It's...miraculous."

"He told me it wasn't the only one. That the Feds are on a tear to find all of them."

And then it hits me: *and I know exactly where one is.*

"Where did they go?" I ask, my voice froggy. "The Feds. Where did they go?"

"I don't know. Like I said, they just tore off. Not a word."

If they knew about Joey's crow, they could know about Gam's crow too. Joey said they'd stop at nothing. Said they wanted all the crows, and something about Ana, but that was flushed from my mind. I had to get to Gam. I grit my teeth and push to a sitting position. I see an explosion of colors, and my head feels like a sack of sand is resting on it.

"What are you doing? You have to rest, Ben."

"No. I have to go. I have to get to my grandmother. I think she's in trouble."

"You aren't going anywhere tonight, man. Even if I let you, you wouldn't make it out that door."

My eyes water with pain and frustration, and fear. Magic crows, shadow-walking people, none of these things particularly scare me, but the thought of those two men knocking on our door and Gam opening it up to them terrifies me.

"Here," Bennet says, pulling his cell phone from his pocket. "Call her. Warn her."

We don't have a landline and Gam hasn't picked up a phone in years, but I give Dad a shot. The phone rings. And rings. And rings. His voicemail picks up and says his mailbox is full. Like it's been for years. I hang up. The look I give Bennet must be so pathetically terrified that it's catching. His eyes go wide, and his pale face blanches a whiter shade.

"Isn't there anyone? Anyone at all?" he asks.

My mind races, and somehow, like it's done for the past few days, it settles on Caroline. What was she doing after my chemo? She said she was going back to the CHC to log a couple more hours. If she's still there, she'd be minutes away from my house.

Bennet peers at me and nods slowly. He takes his phone back and flips through his contacts.

"I'll call her," he says. "But you gotta explain all this."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

CAROLINE ADAMS

I'm basically worthless at the CHC after the chemo session with Ben. I'm making my rounds, but I'm not really there. With the Navajo you really have to work sometimes to get them to open up, and I pride myself on working hard to do that, but not today. Today I'm like the dead-weight guy in the group project. Of the five of us from ABQ General who are scheduled here, I'm by far the most worthless. One of the nurses even ends up cleaning up after me when I forget a patient on one of my rounds. A nurse's worst nightmare. Don't worry, they were fine. Sleeping. Thank God, but still...

The day can't end soon enough. I feel drained. I'm not sure what to make of what happened at Ben's house, with him storming off like that with those weird men. To say nothing of the crows. I think it speaks to my mental state that I'm more worried about Ben getting into that Suburban than I am about the staring contest I had with a monster crow, or his thousand crow buddies that scared the hell out of me when I was getting into my car. The human mind is a strange thing. When something that out of whack happens, I think my mind flat refuses to let me dwell on it. Instead it pushes it to the back. I don't forget it. It's still there, sort of waving at me, but in its place my mind swaps in other things, stupid things. Like how Ben held my hand when the chemo was first dripping into him. How he looked at me. Monster crows from hell could be swarming all around us, ending the world, and I

would still be awake at three a.m. thinking about what it meant that Ben held my hand.

Naturally the days you want to end the fastest last the longest, and soon enough I'm regretting my decision to log a few more hours. I get a late admit: a young woman with severe cramping. She's been in before, around this time of the month, by the looks of her chart. A targeted birth control prescription would fix all this up, even I know that. But no, she's been prescribed a series of catch-all intrauterine devices to which she's reacting badly. Owen would have figured this out before she sat down on the exam table. I wish he was here. I don't feel comfortable talking to the attending on rotation here today, an older man. He means well, but he's from the school of physicians that believes nurses should be seen, not heard.

Anyway, the poor girl is in a lot of pain, and it's around six in the evening when we finally get her comfortable. By then I've let my charting pile up, and I'm late on my final rounds. I stop in the quiet end of the hallway and take a few seconds. I do this sometimes when I know I'm being a shitty nurse. I just stop it all and stand where there are relatively few people and roll my neck for a second. With this job, it's so easy to run and run and run, but you just can't do that because you burn out. And when you burn out, you stop being a nurse and become just another employee. And there is a difference.

On top of all of this I also have my grant fulfillment to think about. I'm weeks away from a clean slate. No loans. No debt. Nothing. Pretty soon the CHC administration will sign off on my contract and hand me my receipt, and if I want to I can get in my car and leave everything behind me. I can't quite imagine the freedom I'd have. It gives me a strange sense of vertigo to think about it, like I'm standing at the edge of a cliff. I have to admit, it's kind of intriguing. On the other hand, it would make me a tourist. I know this place doesn't need tourists. It takes five years at Chaco just to get your foot in the door with a lot of the Navajo. I've put in a lot of work. I don't want to admit it, even to myself, but my

decision on whether to stay or go is going to rest on whether Ben lives or dies.

My phone rings. I don't like to answer my phone at work because my hands are gross, and I don't want to touch it. It's usually solicitors anyway, but I'm still taking my thirty seconds, and I don't mind taking another thirty. I'm already gonna be here until seven in any case. Maybe it's my mom calling to say hi. Or that something terrible has happened. I pull my phone out of my front pocket. It's Owen. My pulse drops like a lead ball then bounces to racing. I get that feeling that you get when someone calls you at two in the morning: this isn't good, but I have to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Caroline! Thank you. Thank you."

It doesn't sound like Owen. It sounds like...but no. It can't be.

"Caroline, it's Ben. I need your help."

"Ben? Why are you...but what..."

"Please," he says, and that stops me. I can hear pain in his voice. I can almost see the black wisping off of him, coming over the line, and smoking out of my end of the phone.

"What do you need?"

"I need you to go back to my house. I'll explain everything along the way."

It takes five minutes and the promise of a double latte to one of the other nurses to get her to take care of the rest of my charting, and I'm out the door.

*

I pull back onto Ben's street, but this time the crows are gone. There isn't a bird in the sky, but somehow it feels worse for their absence. The street is deserted. No cars out front. There aren't even any porch lights on.

"Are you there?" asks Ben, still on the line with me. He's told me about Joey Flatwood and what happened at the hospital. Owen is with him and chimed in occasionally, and I think that's why I finally believed his story about the crow totem. I don't

believe in magic, never have, never will. Nor does Owen, I don't think. But I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I think death snuffs out a person forever. Who am I to say ours is the only plane of existence? Maybe this Joey guy, maybe he exists in a different way than we do. A way with its own rules and science and medicine. It's a stretch, I know, but I'm still secretly applauding myself for not writing both of them off as insane right off the bat. After all, I'm the one seeing colors. I'm the one that can see people's thoughts in their mist. For better or for worse, the three of us are thick as thieves in the nut house.

"Yeah," I answer him. "It's really quiet here. No sign of anybody. Wait..." I peer at the front door. It looks splintered at the lock. Uh oh. "Ben, I think the door's been forced."

I get out of my car and close the car door as quietly as I can. In the past ten minutes, it's dropped fifteen degrees. The sun has left this side of the street. I can hear both men speaking with each other on the other end. "I'm going in," I say.

"Wait, Caroline. Are you sure? They could still be there. Bennet is calling the cops. You should wait." He's a bad liar. Even over the phone. He wants somebody in there as soon as possible, and I'm the closest to hand. My mind is made up.

"If she's in there, she could be hurt," I say.

"Keep your guard up."

I put the phone in my pocket, still on the line, and push open the front door. It slides easily out, and then easily back when I make no move to go inside. Pieces of the jamb are strewn across the floor inside. I listen for any movement. There is nothing. I decide against announcing myself and slide inside, licking my lips and trying to work saliva back into my mouth. It's so still inside that a passing airplane rings loudly in my ears. A dog barks somewhere far away. Dust swirls in the low light where I'd set up the chemo rig hours before.

The place has been ransacked. A quick job. Upended drawers, flipped couch cushions. The picture of Ana and Ben sticks out from its shattered frame on the floor. I bend to pick it up, and that's

when I hear a sound from the back. It's not much, but it's definitely something.

I switch tack. Time to be brave. "Hello?" I ask, and it comes out in a weak squeak. The sound stops immediately. I right the picture on the mantle again and walk slowly around the glass and debris towards the kitchen.

"Caroline? What is it?"

I jump, but it's just Ben, over the phone. I reach in my pocket and end the call. There's that shuffling again. I round the corner into the kitchen proper, and that's when I see the blood. A trail of it in a dark red line, almost black, like smeared tar on the tiles. It goes from the little side room through a corner of the kitchen and then out the back door. I look out the back door and see a man there, face down, by a small pile of rocks in the back yard. He isn't moving, and he has no color at all coming off of him. I know he's dead. I move towards him, but as I'm about to push the screen open, I hear the shuffling again and snap my head right, towards where I saw the crow through the window earlier.

And I see the crow again. Only it's inside this time, and it's in tatters on the ground, next to an old woman who can only be Ben's grandmother. She isn't moving, but the crow is. Barely. Its wings have both been broken, and its head is at an awkward angle. But it's trying to move closer to the old woman. When I step into the doorway, it appraises me with one cloudy black eye and pauses. It blinks once, then goes back to its sad, flopping shuffle. It's terrifying, but it's in pain, and all malice that it may once have possessed has fled it. It manages to bump its sleek crown against the woman's side, and there it rests, like an old dog with its master.

The window in the room is shattered, and I see bits of feathers stuck to the jagged ends of the glass there. More feathers float lazily about in the breeze coming in. The bird still watches me, and then it squawks feebly. That's when the old woman stirs.

I step forward and pause again as the crow snaps at me and sort of gurgles. It hits me that this crow is protecting the woman. That it will die protecting the woman. And then I see the painfully

slow rise and fall of both the crow's streaked chest and Ben's grandmother's chest, and I know that when the one dies, the other will die too. It's their coloring. They share it. It's a beautiful, sparkling strand of silver, like a heartstring, but it's weak and gossamer and looks like it could be snapped with the ease of brushing away a spider web.

I kneel down next to the old woman, and I can hear that she's struggling to breathe. Her neck is mottled and bruised and crumpled. Her windpipe is crushed. Blood runs from her nose. Her eyelids flutter and creep open, and she sees me. She focuses slowly, but if she is surprised to find a strange woman in her room, she doesn't show it. She mutters something softly in Navajo that I can't understand. My phone is buzzing like mad in my pocket. I fish it out and answer Ben's call.

"Ben, she's been attacked," I say, the panic wavering my voice. "Talk to her." I put the phone by her head, and I can hear Ben speaking on the other line in a near wail, but she seems to take no notice of him or of the phone. She's looking plainly at me.

"Help is coming," I say. "Just hold on," and I grip her bony hand.

"Police," she says. Then she says a name that sounds like Dejooli.

"Ben? Yes, he is coming. He will come soon. You can talk to him here, see?"

"Police," she says again. Then something that sounds like *nine-pin* or

nine-point, and I am reminded of Ben's partner. The man who called the ambulance for him at the Arroyo.

"Yes. The police are coming. Just hold on."

The bird rests its head on her hip, unblinking, barely breathing, but watching keenly. Watching and understanding. It's such an alien feeling coming from a bird that I want to apologize to it too and tell it to hold on, help is on the way, but I stop myself. I've allowed a lot of stuff today, but speaking to a bird like it can understand me, even if it can, might be the straw that sends the camel to the nuthouse.

I pull down the collar of the woman's sweater, and I'm thinking how maybe I can open up that airway to buy her a little more time. The damage is severe. Her neck looks like a crumpled piece of tin. Still, I could get a knife and a pen. It might give us another ten minutes. Or it might kill her. I start looking around the room, and that's when I see the leather bag and the painted sticks from before, only the sticks have both been snapped in half and the leather bag has been ripped open. Next to it is a beautiful box that looks like it's made of ivory or bone. It's been snapped in two as well. The top half is upside down next to the bottom half, and inside is nothing but a handful of fine black sand. Some of it is scattered around the floor. I get the feeling that whatever was there is gone.

"I'm going to try to do something to your neck, to help you breathe," I say. I make a move to get up, but she holds me and eyes me with the same frank assessment as the bird. She shakes her head and squeezes my hand, and I realize that she is going to die here with me. The thought hits me with such force that I sit down on my rump next to her and sort of slump like an old doll. She pats me on the knee, her breath crackling like paper. She still watches me like she knows me. She is remarkably unafraid. Ben's pleading is softer, more diminished. There is a stretch of silence. He is listening, too.

"Who did this to you?" I ask.

"Police," she says, then she waves it off with a tiny brushing motion of her finger. I understand. It no longer matters. It is a thing that was done. What matters now is what happens next.

"The crow," she says. "Stone crow. He takes." I look back at the bone box. So there was a stone crow in there. Already I'm linking it to what Ben told me about Joey Flatwood. I know it was more precious, and far more dangerous, than any mere ornament or jewel. She pulls weakly at my hand, and I lean closer. She closes her eyes and speaks in lilting Navajo. It sounds like wind whistling through trees.

"God, I wish I understood you," I say, helplessly. "Maybe Ben can—" but she quiets me with the barest hint of a squeeze of my

hand.

"Wrong thinking," she says.

"What's wrong thinking?"

"The stone crow. Is important. But only guardians."

"Guardians? Guarding what?"

She drops my hand and snakes her own back up to her neck, and I think for a moment that she is looking for the source of her pain, for the source of her death. But then she slips her hands into her collar and grasps something on her chest. She carefully pulls it out, and in her hand I see a small silver bell hung around her neck with a simple leather strap. It is no bigger than my thumb. In a way it's no different from something you might see hanging on a Christmas tree, but there is a powerful weight to it that I can see with the same sight that shows me the colors. It is a weight so heavy that it is warping the faint silver strands that are what remains of her life, bowing them out and away like a powerful magnet. If we exist in one place, and Joey Flatwood another, and those that have passed from us exist on a third, then this thing that is a bell and not a bell cuts through all of those places like a hot knife through butter. I can see this just by looking at it.

Ben's grandmother sees what I see. She sees it in my eyes, and she sighs with a smile that says to me *I have chosen correctly*.

"The stone guards the silver," she says, and she hands it to me. I reach out for it. I am drawn to it, but before I can take it, she stills me with a look.

"No ring," she says, and her eyes focus to pins. I see that she has her thumb firmly on the tongue of the bell. The crow titters, and its broken wings twitch. They don't have much time left.

"No ring," she says again. "Never ring."

"No ring," I say, nodding.

She looks at me for a moment longer, and I get this feeling that she knows all about me. Knows everything I think and feel as surely as if I had lived with her in this room all of my life. She gives one final nod.

"Take," she says.

Very carefully, she transfers the bell to me. I slip the leather over her head. She lets up on the tongue last, and I clamp my own thumb over it. I feel like silencing that bell is, in all likelihood, the most important thing I have ever done in my life. I take it, and it doesn't make a sound. Physically it's actually quite light, but only because I expect it to be so heavy. It gleams a thick, milky silver color, creamier than normal silver, richer and more pure. It's also cold. Very cold. Tin-mug-in-the-freezer cold. It almost burns, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna take my thumb away from that clapper.

She nods appreciatively. Then she puts her thin lips together and shushes me.

"Secret," she says. "You, and Ben."

I nod.

She starts singing. Ben is still quiet on his end of the line, listening.

I don't know what it is she is saying, but I do know that it is a final song. A song of endings. I don't need to know the words to know that she is giving thanks. It is not sad, not particularly. It simply is, in the Navajo way. She closes her eyes, and I know she is seeing beyond herself now, bidding farewell to the path she has walked and welcoming the path ahead. It sounds like she is greeting an old friend, and when I see tears fall from the corners of her eyes, I feel that they aren't tears of pain or sorrow, but tears of joy. And I feel the same soft brush that I felt in the hospital after my patient died. The crow feels it too, because it twitches its silky black head and tracks the unseen movement of something terrible and beautiful walking through the door and over to this woman dying in front of me. The thing that walks in is the thing she sings for. The rhythm of her song slows. I press the bell tighter, holding it still with every fiber of my being, because it's burning in earnest now. It's calling out to whatever has walked into this room. It wants to be with this new thing, not with me. Perhaps it is even one and the same with this new thing. It wants to ring, but I won't let it.

I am not afraid, because I know in my heart that this thing, which I can only call Death, isn't here for me, isn't concerned with

me, may not even see me. But it is here for the grandmother. There is a soft breath of air, and the silver strands of color that are the woman's and the crow's break and float away. The song is over. Both are dead. There is another movement in the air, barely a flutter, and then Death is gone too, and I am alone.

I let up on my grip and look down at the bell. I lift my thumb, but there is no longer any tongue there. The clapper is gone. Now the bell looks more like a candlesnuffer. But I know I felt the clapper when the grandmother was dying. I know it was there. I think it's still there, where I can't see it. It's just waiting.

I slip the necklace and bell that isn't a bell over my head and tuck it close to my chest. It is still ice cold but not burning cold anymore. I would say goodbye to the grandmother, but I know that she is long gone. What is left on the floor is more one with the shattered glass and splintered wood around it than the flesh and blood she was. Ben heard the final song as well as I did, but he is talking now. Quietly. His voice sadly diminished through the tiny speaker of my phone. He is saying his own goodbye, and I leave him to it.

I hear sirens. They are close. I stand and gather myself, and that's when I remember the other body, the one that trailed the blood out of the back door. I follow it out into the back yard and come upon the man. I am expecting the intruder, but I know I'm wrong. This man has been stabbed. He has died clutching his stomach and trailing his heart's blood, but he is otherwise unscathed. He was not the one the crow died defending the grandmother from. As I bend down closer to his face, I see an instant resemblance. He has the same soft slope of the forehead and boxy cheekbones, the same soft brown skin.

Ben's father.

Did he come home and stumble upon the intruders? Did he try to defend the grandmother too? Whatever happened, when he was stabbed, he wanted to be here, out here in the back. I follow his path, the one cut short when he bled out, and I see that he is reaching for a pyre of rocks just outside of the lawn. To further

confuse things, he is smiling. It's plain on his face. Not a grimace, either, or a death snarl. It is a genuine smile.

When death came for Ben's father, he was happy about it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

BEN DEJOOLI

The Navajo are not sentimentalists in death. My mother seems to have forgotten this. She has been away too long. She wants a fresh cut pine box for both Gam and Dad and a ceremony with speakers and eulogies and suits and ties and tears. She fights with the people of the Arroyo, with whom Gam and Dad shared their final wishes for burial in the old style. She screams at them until I have to hold her back. I see reappearing shades of the blank horror that wiped her mind when Ana vanished. She is all too used to this type of thing.

In the end, she exhausts herself and sleeps for many hours, and the people of the Arroyo take my father and my grandmother away. I help. When they are laid on the cliff, the men who carried them along with me strip and burn our clothes and sweat in a hogan for some time. I think I pass out. I find myself in a small circle of campers later, by a fire, underneath a blanket with a diamond weave of stars above me. Nobody bothers me. Nobody speaks as I dress in the clothes that were left out for me, and I find my truck and drive back to my house. On the drive out, I see a flickering fire in the distance, and I know that the Arroyo men have burned the hogan where Gam held my Evilway.

There is nothing for me here anymore. I appreciate the purification rituals that the men of the Arroyo gave me. I know that they are simply trying to wash death off of me, but the truth is, I don't care if death finds me anymore. I would welcome death, now. A clean Navajo would never set foot in a house of the dead,

which is what my house has become. But I am not clean. No matter how much I sweat, I am marked. I know this now. I know this because the crows follow me.

The crows are bolder by the day. They hop from tree to tree as I walk. They soar high above me, cutting on the currents and then doubling back again to hover just behind me. They sit on the lawn of my boarded-up house with blood still staining the floor. They coat the roof like ink. They make the barren winter trees sway again with dark life. And they are completely silent. Even when I go to shoo them, they never squawk or titter. They are mourning, I think, much like I am. They are mourning the big one. The big red crow that Caroline found dead by my grandmother.

Or perhaps they are simply waiting. The way that their hundreds of black-tar eyes glisten in the hollow sun gives me a feeling like a pressure drop before a storm. Perhaps they are waiting for the thundercloud to break. Perhaps they are waiting for me.

My mom won't go near the house. She holes up at a motel off the highway while I survey the scene of the crime. By now the cops are long gone. Danny called me himself to take my statement. I asked if he wanted to walk the house with me, but he said he'd already been there and didn't want to see it again. That tells me it's bad. I asked him if there was conclusive evidence pinning it on the Feds. He was quiet for a moment, and I knew he was contemplating letting me down easy, but that's just not Danny's way.

"No," he said, simply.

Of course not. They would be pros. Still, I want to check it out. Danny tries to dissuade me, but ultimately he lets it be. He knows I have to close that door myself.

I step over the police tape and walk up to the front door as the sun is setting. It's been nearly three days since it happened, and this is the first time I've come home, although I can't rightly call it home anymore. I fish around in my pocket for my keys, and I'm surprised to find that my hand swims in my pocket now. This is a fitted uniform I'm wearing. Or it used to be. I pull out my hand

and study it like it's foreign to me. Bony, thin. My fingers remind me of my grandmother's. I can loop my thumb and pinkie around my wrist. I touch my neck and find bones there too, bones everywhere. I run my hands through my hair, and it comes away in feathered clumps. I clamp my hat down on my head like it's the only thing keeping the top of me from blowing away. Behind me the crows shuffle their wings.

I step through the doorway and flick on the lights. I see what Caroline described. The place was ransacked as they searched for the crow totem. There are evidence markers strewn about the living room: little tents with numbers on them that lead me through the house like some nightmare museum exhibit. Everything is shattered and strewn except one picture of me and Ana. The frame is broken, but standing. I step over to it and pick it up. Pieces of glass fall to the ground. I barely recognize myself. I remember when this was taken. It was after I graduated from high school. We had a party in the back yard. The picture was supposed to be just of me, but Ana was messing around and shouldered her way into the frame, pushing her face next to mine. The photo has been damaged. It looks like it was scratched up during the fall, because now there are two long gashes under Ana's eyes and her face is warped. She looks a lot like she looked when I hallucinated seeing her in the hogan during the Evilway.

I almost drop the picture in my hurry to set it down. It wobbles and falls flat on the mantle with a clatter that makes me jump. I stare at it a moment longer, half expecting it to move, but it doesn't. I chide myself. The world isn't falling apart, it's just me. The only bogeyman here is the one in my head.

I follow the evidence markers down the hall, into the kitchen, flicking on all the lights as I go, just like I would if I was coming home from work and getting ready to sit at the table and eat some of Gam's leftovers or maybe try to coax Dad into a conversation and have a beer or two before watching TV until I fall asleep. But not anymore.

The blood is like a painted track. Like a dragged brush that leads out the back door. It's strange to see a thing that was inside

my father on such lurid display here. It makes the murder doubly obscene. My father, for all intents and purposes, died when Ana left us. The spark that made him my dad went with her. The rest was just going through the motions. This blood would have embarrassed him. He wanted the perfect Navajo death: to leave like an old wolf, to walk out on everything and everyone without a word and sit down away from the world and die alone. Maybe underneath a tree or by a creek. His body left to nature. Burdening no one.

Sorry, Dad. Guess things didn't really work out for either of us.

Gam's room paints a picture. The shattered window, the broken bone box. There are black feathers everywhere, like little shadows. It looks like the forensics group tried to number them but gave up. Gam's quilt, ancient even when I was born, is strewn across the floor. I pick it up and fold it, evidence be damned. The medicine sticks that were used in the Evilway are broken and strewn about. There was a struggle here on more than one level. There is a dried pool of blood by the door and a spattering along the wall above it. A telltale sign of a flicked knife. So Dad was stabbed here. In this room. Somehow that brings me a measure of comfort. He was coming to help Gam.

The far side of the bedroom tells another story. There are individual droplets everywhere, and most of them are on the floor. Caroline said she found the big crow in here. If I were to guess, I'd say the blood pattern follows something that might drip from a beak.

A smudge of blood mars the linoleum where Gam's body had been. It has a Rorschach symmetry to it, as if it's been pressed, perhaps by a knee. I picture a man kneeling down here and strangling my grandmother. I trace the ground and find another mark, a streaking like dragged fingers that leads to where the bone box lies. I picture that same man, still bleeding, having finished the killing, resting his hand upon the floor not far from where I listened to Gam's final song.

There is blood on the bone box, too. It looks like there were clear fingerprints on the top of the box that were then smudged.

In fact, much of the blood evidence is smudged. Now that I look for it, it's clear as day. Almost methodical: a wiped mark on the window, and on the doorframe, and on the doorknob. A smeared streak by the door and again on the screen leading out back. A big smudge in the hallway, this probably a footprint with a tread that would have helped identify the killer, now just a dirty grease smear on old wood. Danny wasn't kidding when he said the evidence was scant.

When I step out onto the lawn, the motion sensors kick on, and I'm flooded in bright porch light. I cover my eyes, and I hear crows move like the rustling of a heavy curtain. I step under the tape marking off the back porch and try to get a sense of my father's final crawl.

He came out here alone. After the killers left. You can see the gripping, ripping tracks of his progress: small scratches in the dust of the brick porch where he pulled himself with his left hand, his right hand no doubt staunching his gut wound. There is a level sweep mark there, most likely from his right arm, its elbow jutting out.

There is still so much blood. It's like a railroad track. He knew he was going to die. He knew he had minutes left, and yet some deep ember inside him, not yet snuffed, called him outside to where he was always most comfortable after Ana disappeared. He came out here for a reason. I follow his ghost out to the lawn. The blood isn't as clear here. The dry winter grass sucked it up same as water, but there is a square marker where he died, right by the edge of the lawn, where Ana's cairn is.

Or was.

It's gone now. Knocked down. All the stones strewn about the ground. Where once there was a careful stack there is now a haphazard pile.

From an outsider's perspective, it would look like nothing but a pile of rocks among a dead winter garden. Easily overlooked. But to my father this was a holy place. He tended it from the day Ana left us. Building that tiny tower from the flat rocks in the backyard was one of the last things she did, and Dad was determined to

keep it as it was. I'd seen him out there in storms and in snow. In wind and in rain, checking on it, making sure it still stood. In the rare times when a few stones fell or moved, he was inconsolable. He drank heavily and repositioned it exactly as it was. That pile, a plaything to Ana, became her gravestone to him. And here it was destroyed, and not by any killer or evidence team or detective or cop. I think it was destroyed by him.

As if they hear my thoughts, a group of crows hops from the fence to the ground. They bow quickly to the grass and cock their heads, listening. But they watch me.

"What are you?" I ask.

No answer. They bow and listen.

"Help me," I say.

They start to step quickly on the grass like they're dancing. Then they stop and bow to listen. They do this several times, and then one dashes its beak into the earth, rips half of a worm from the ground, and swallows it as it watches me. Never blinking.

"Well, fuck you then," I say. It snaps its beak with the final bite and burrows into the earth again, flipping a small clump of grass away.

I turn back to the rocks. Now that I stare at them, they don't look strewn out of anger or sorrow. They look broken down and then piled again, like they're meant to fill a hole. I reach down and pick up a rock, and the crows freeze in their dance. One has a night crawler wriggling in its mouth, but still it doesn't move. I toss the stone away and grab the next in the pile, and the crows go back to work with me. I toss this stone too, and then I start digging, flipping stones away to get to the heart of the pile. That's where I find it.

It's a strip of beaded leather. The leather is worn almost to white and the beads are rubbed lumpy.

I know this strip of leather. I've known it for years. And I know the scalp knife it hung from before my father ripped it off the weapon and stashed it as his final gift to me.

I know who killed Dad and Gam, and it kills me too.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

OWEN BENNET

We kept Ben at ABQ General for as long as we could that night. Longer than he wanted, because he didn't have a ride until his mother was able to make the trip from Santa Fe. That was maybe the worst part of the entire ordeal for me. Worse than the insanity with Joey Flatwood—that's something you deal with in your own mind, and it makes it or breaks it. Worse than watching Ben hold the phone while his grandmother died—I've seen a lot of messy deaths. But watching him sit there in the waiting room, staring at the floor, for five hours like a forgotten child—that ripped me to pieces. Just the fact that he couldn't catch a ride. Such a stupid thing that hit home like a sledgehammer. Caroline was at the police station making a statement. I tried to give him money for a cab, but he looked at me like his mind was breaking, so I just let him sit. Maybe it was best that he went with his mom. No man should go home alone to that hell.

I didn't get much sleep that night. I started drinking bourbon again. When I met the sunrise I was no more settled than I was when I tried to hand Ben cab money. And then I had to go to work again.

It's funny when you go through something like that. Something big and shattering and life-distorting, and then after it happens you wake up the next morning the same as always. You put your pants on and eat your breakfast and get in your car and take the same route to work and you log in to the same system, and all the while you want to just scream at everyone, *How can*

you go on like this? The world is different now! But nobody knows. Nobody cares. People have their own problems. And who's to say a few of these people haven't come across some Joey Flatwoods of their own?

I spoke with Caroline that day, the day after Ben's life shattered to pieces, and she told me about what she'd found. About the crow and the two bodies and the robbery and the bone box. She told me that Ben's grandmother had a crow of her own. I asked Caroline what she said to her, if she knew who attacked her, or what. She said Ben's grandmother was too far gone. That she just sang her way out.

She's a terrible liar, Caroline. I think it's part of what I love about her. Probably because until right about now she's had nothing to lie about, but that night she saw something else there. I know it because when I asked about Ben's grandmother's last words she said they were "goodbye." Nobody's last words are "goodbye." Least of all a Navajo elder. I almost laughed. Fair enough. If she doesn't want to tell, she doesn't have to. I have enough trouble keeping the rational parts of my brain from mutiny with the information I already have. I'm swimming out beyond my depth here, so that first week after everything went down, I did what any sane medical practitioner does when they don't understand something: I researched the hell out of it.

I started with medical explanations for visual and auditory hallucinations of the sort that might explain why Joey Flatwood seemed to phase in and out of view. I looked for literature related to degenerative eye conditions, something akin to a temporary glaucoma-like symptom that would affect frontal vision but not peripheral. I mostly did this just to make myself feel better. To do some sort of due diligence. If it was a visual phenomenon, it would have had to affect Ben and me at the same time, and in the same way. And there's also the fact that Joey isn't an instance of ocular flashing or a visual blind spot. He is a person. A person who appeared and then disappeared. He was no hallucination. I saw Ben grab him by the coat. So what, then? Some illusion? A sleight of hand or a smoke and mirror trick? Everyone knows your brain

sees what it wants to see. And yes, maybe he could have fooled me. Or Ben. But both of us? And afterwards to elude the FBI and a platoon of policemen?

There was no explaining it from a medical perspective, so I flipped the table around and tried it from Joey's end, and from what I overheard when he and Ben spoke face-to-face.

The next night I start researching crow totems and invisible men.

I go down the internet rabbit hole into some pretty crazy conspiracy websites. Eventually I know I'm just clicking through this garbage to keep myself from calling Caroline, which I want to do more than anything. The problem is there's really no reason for me to talk to her. I'm not sure what I'd even say aside from rehashing that we all broke down last night and then tacking on a *wasn't that crazy?*

I have this absurd idea early in the morning of calling Caroline to ask her on a date. After another hour of pacing the apartment and delving deeper into the underbelly of the web, I decide to table that, thank God. Essentially I'd be hitting on a girl just after a funeral, like some hornball. It's not like me at all, but then again I'm not really myself these days. I'm increasingly coming to see that whatever happened that afternoon with Ben and Joey has fundamentally changed me. It is the sum measure of a path I took up when I volunteered to attend at CHC. I gained speed on that path when Caroline stepped on the scene, and then Ben. I'm usually not one for preordination, but this kind of trend is hard to ignore. The Harvard medical student Owen, the staunch atheist, would scoff at the Doctor Bennet sitting up until the dead of night thinking more and more that it's possible that out there somewhere is a man who can disappear into space.

I stumble across a chat room on the topic of ancient cabals. The usual tropes: old orders of men and women whose job it is to shepherd the interests of humanity, typical One World Order crap that doesn't hold a candle to reason. Even the new Owen Bennet refuses to believe that the big banks are financed by aliens intent on keeping the masses from acquiring super-technology that a

handful of privileged humans currently employ. That's a common theme in these whack job forums. But in my glassy-eyed state I recall a point of the conversation between Joey and Ben: Joey took his crow off a dead man. He said there are other crows. He said that the agents want to get them all.

I sleep fitfully, and I awake in cold sweats from nightmares I half remember. I start seeing things out of the corner of my eye that I know are not there. I keep a hammer underneath my pillow because it's the only thing I have in my apartment that resembles a weapon. I don't even own a good set of kitchen knives. By the end of the week, I've convinced myself I have to get off the conspiracy kick and back to the common denominator here: the Navajo connection. Ben's grandmother had a crow. Joey has a crow. The crow is turquoise, a powerful stone in Navajo lore. The crow functions as a totem, which is a Navajo token. I get out of the chatrooms and back to the academic articles where I've lived most of my professional life. This time I look up the Navajo.

I find an interesting bit about Chantways that invoke symbolism. The Blessingway and the Evilway and the Enemyway are the most famous, but there are others. Hundreds. Historians have no idea what most of them were like or what sort of function they served. The names of some of these extinct Chantways are all that survives. Names like the Hailway, the Mothway, the Dogway, the Waterway, the Big Godway, and then one that strikes me: the Ravenway. But that's where the line ends. There's no way to know what the Ravenway might have done, or been. It's lost to time along with the rest of the extinct Chantways. It's infuriating, because I have a feeling that I was getting close. Closer than aliens running JP Morgan, at least.

I stare at crows all the next day: out of windows, from my car. Daring them to make a move. But other than the fact that there seem to be an awful lot of them, they don't take any notice of me whatsoever. And as for the numbers, well, they flock in the winter, and it's just about winter.

A week goes by like this. Agonizing. Plodding. No word from Ben, and no word from Caroline. We aren't scheduled to work

together for some time. I just need an excuse to call her. You'd think *I'm in love with you* is a pretty good one, but that has the unfortunate effect of making things awfully uncomfortable if the sentiment's not returned. Call me what you will. You don't have to stare at the phone like I do. You aren't the one with his heart on the line.

Then, late Saturday evening, an excuse drops right onto my plate: Ben's most recent chart, filed by Caroline on the second regimen of chemotherapy she'd delivered just the night before.

Increased visual impairment.

Reported diplopia.

Noted word aphasia.

Noted slurred speech.

Bruising on right hip and right elbow from a fall.

He can't see right, he can't speak right, and he can't stand right. Ben is getting worse.

I dial the phone. Caroline picks up on the first ring.

"Owen," she says, and as soon as she gets my name out, she starts crying. I can tell by the lack of sound, by the clipped silence that comes when you cover a receiver.

"I saw the report."

"It's worse than that. He's...he's giving up."

"We need to bring him in to the hospital, Caroline. Full time. If he's to have any chance of surviving, he needs radical radiation therapy to shrink these tumors. I don't think he's responding to the chemotherapy."

"I know that. He won't go."

"He will when he collapses."

"That's what it's going to take, I think," she says.

"What is he doing that is so important? More important than his own life?"

"He wants them."

I almost ask who *they* are, but then I already know who he wants: the people he thinks killed his family.

"He's stubborn," she says. "He has to right the wrong if it kills him. He has to restore the balance. You didn't see his house,

Owen. You didn't see what I saw."

In the depths of all this insanity, it occurs to me that she is using my first name. It sounds wonderful coming from her. It sounds like she's been saying it for a thousand years.

"What did you see?" I ask.

"I...I can't say, really. I'm not sure."

So she's in shock too. The both of us adrift at sea, the mainsail snapped.

"Caroline, you have to listen to me. You need to convince him to come here, to ABQ General. You too. Both of you have to come."

"I think we will," she says flatly. "I just think it's gonna be when it's too late for him."

I swallow, and it hitches in my throat. There's no way I can make Ben come to the hospital myself. My entire career I've been fighting to get the Navajo people *out* of the IHS revolving door. It seems perversely fitting that this upending of my life should culminate in my trying to drag a Navajo back *in*.

"I wasn't crying until you called," Caroline says, with quiet pride.

"That's always nice to hear, when a guy calls a girl."

"No, I mean that I haven't just been sitting around crying the whole time."

"I know, Caroline."

"I just want to help him."

"Me too. I think it's...it's very important that we help him. However we can. Do you know what I'm saying?" I walk to the window and I stare out at where the crows massed in the tree before. It's barren, now.

"I do," says Caroline.

"You have to get him to come to ABQ. You have to try."

"I will."

"And be careful, for Christ's sake."

"You too, Owen."

She hangs up. God, I love the way she says my name.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

CAROLINE ADAMS

Usually I'm good with patients in shock. You know it immediately. It's the vacant stare, the ridges on the sides of the eye. Anxious patients have ridges around the forehead. Shell-shocked patients have ridges around the eyes. I have this theory that it's because they're running through slides in their mind and can't turn away, can't even blink. They may be quiet, but they're having a full-blown conversation with themselves in their heads. You can see it in the twitches in the bags under their eyes.

That's how Ben looks during chemo today. His house is still a crime scene, so I administer the regimen in a disgusting hotel outside of the reservation, past the casino. The kind of place a gambler would stay with his last forty bucks. This is where I meet his mom, Sitsi Dejooli. I arrive as he is in the middle of explaining who I am.

As soon as I walk in, I hear her go, "You have cancer?" in a shrill, panicky voice. Ben moves back to sit on the brown comforter draped over the lumpy twin bed. He looks pleadingly at me for a moment, then drops his head in his hands and gives a weak nod. His mother is a small woman, thin, like Ben, and with his frame. She has the dark hair of the Navajo, but it's cut short and pixie-like around her head. She wears trim, straight-legged jeans and two-toned leather boots with thick heels. She's standing in the middle of the room clutching her purse to herself with one hand and clutching the collar of her sweater with the other. She's quite pretty, but she has that look of an older woman trying too hard to

stay in her thirties. She also looks like she doesn't want to touch anything. Which I can understand.

"Cancer?" she screeches again. I get the sense she's been repeating herself. She looks at me toting my radioactive cooler like I'm here to rob them.

"This is Caroline. She's my nurse," Ben says. His face twitches. He's here, but he's not here. His color is roiling in black. It looks like clay mixed with blood. He must have seen something at the house that sapped him completely. He's barely there.

"Hi, Mrs. Dejooli," I say. She ignores me.

"No, this isn't right. You can't have...did you check with other people? How many opinions did you get?"

Ben never told his mother. Most likely never would have if his life hadn't fallen around his feet. I can see that he's not comfortable with her. He doesn't trust her. He feels like she's turned her back on him, on all of them. He thinks she doesn't love him. It all centers on Ana. I can feel this. I'm getting better at reading the colors by the day.

For what it's worth, he's wrong. Looking at this woman it's impossible not to see it. She's terrified of losing him. It's coming off of her in bursts of yellow, like popping gasoline bubbles. She wants to see him grow older. She wants to die before him. She's afraid of being alone. Which is pretty rich coming from a woman who left her entire family to carve out a new life for herself off the rez.

Ben looks over at me with unfocused eyes. He holds out a hand weakly to me, and I come over to him.

"Tell her, Caroline. I can't right now."

I sit down and hold his arm, much thinner now even than last week. I cradle it in my lap as I swab it with an alcohol pad.

"It's no mistake, Mrs. Dejooli. He has a late stage brain cancer. It's very real, and very serious."

She breaks down completely. She sits in a smoke-stained chair by the faded table in the corner and cries for basically the entire session. A couple of times she stops and looks up at me like I've betrayed her or something, then she goes back to holding her

head in her hands and wiping her face with a Kleenex. I'd had such plans. I wanted to tell him myself what I'd whitewashed for the police report. I wanted to tell him about his grandmother's last minutes. About what he couldn't hear over the phone. About her calm confidence and her strange words, and, of course, about the hollow bell that hung from my neck like a ball of iced lead.

But there is no place for that. Not with his mother here. Not with the way he's lying on the bed and taking the drip and staring at the flaking ceiling like he wants to float up and through it and away. I might as well set it and forget it. I think he's forgotten about me completely until I get up to use the bathroom and he grips me by the arm for a moment. I can see he's afraid I'm leaving him. He looks lost. Like he's floundering in the deep end of his life and is about to give up and sink under. I refuse to cry in front of his mother, who is, quite frankly, putting on a disgusting little show, heartfelt or not. Tears are not what Ben needs right now.

That's about all I get from Ben this time: that one look. I wrap up my stuff to leave, and he thanks me and hugs me with a creepy finality. He made some sort of decision on that bed. Some decision that is final.

On the drive home I'm looking for any excuse to turn around, and it's Owen who gives me one. My notes. I'd submitted them to the system in my car before hitting the road while they were still fresh in my mind, and they are blatantly indicative of a worsening condition. Ben looked so bad on the inside that the diplopia and aphasia and the bruising I noticed seemed secondary to me, but of course they were huge red flags. He is getting worse. He has to go to a hospital. He needs full-time care. I just needed someone with guts to tell me to go do it, and as usual, Owen Bennet is that man.

You have to get him to come to ABQ. You have to try.

I flip my car around and bounce over the median, kicking up dust and wincing when I hear the scrape of metal on rock, but I don't care. I'm going back to him, and this time I'm not leaving without him. I turn up the radio to drown out my mind, but I still second-guess myself sick. Nothing is harder than treating a patient who doesn't want to be treated. I've seen that look before, that

black look that settled over him. It's a look of pure despair that lives on the cancer floor, and you have to constantly chase it away or else it'll find a home in you. But I've also felt that tug before. That small tug that he gave me when he thought I was leaving. If you're completely gone, you don't tug like that. He has it in him to fight. If he's given up, I just gotta make him un-give up. That's all.

But when I get back to the hotel, he's gone anyway. And so is his mother. Or she's not answering the door. Either way, nothing stirs behind the shabby curtains when I slam the knocker down again and again until someone down the row screams at me to shut up.

I go back down and sit in my car in the dark and try to think. I check the clock. It's been a little under two hours since his chemo. He'll be feeling like warmed over crap right about now. There is no reason he shouldn't be on the couch or in a bed trying to sleep off nausea. It takes a lot to get a chemo patient to move. Last time it took the FBI and Joey Flatwood. This time it's gotta be something as serious as that. He looked terrified today, but there was also a cold fury deep within him, like a frozen black soup boiling at the edges of the pot. It had to have been because of what he saw at the house. That sort of scene would shock anyone, but it was more. He saw something else there. Something that he needs to deal with.

I take a deep breath and let it out, and it fogs the inside of my windshield. I grip the steering wheel. I know where he is, but I want to go back to that house about as much as I want this damn bell hanging around my neck.

It doesn't help that it's as dark as a pit around Chaco at night. On the side streets like the one where Ben lives (or used to live, anyway) the lighting is spaced way out. A lot of the streetlights are in disrepair, if they're there at all. There are bright orange cones of light every couple of blocks, but that only serves to make the homes in between darker than ever. His is the darkest of all.

It looks like everything that was once good about the Dejooli home has fled this place, and the bad that is left is seeping out from underneath. The other side of the duplex is black, too. As is

the neighbor's house across the street, and the one kitty-corner as well. It makes sense, since the Navajo really hate death and the places where things die, but it gives me the impression that Ben's place is slowly infecting everything around it. I check every angle before getting out of my car and make a lame attempt at protecting myself by gripping my keys so they extend between my fingers like cat's claws. Lot of good that would do me. Probably just make me lose my keys before getting mugged.

My footsteps on the concrete are the loudest thing around. I take to creeping, and if someone were to glance outside they might think I was the one out for trouble, but nobody looks. There's nobody here at all, that I can see. But I feel Ben. I can feel his coloring like a whiff of smoke on the wind, and he's terribly weak.

The house is boarded up and locked and taped over. I won't be getting inside through the front door, so I walk around, slowly. I keep my eyes on the sky for birds, and I strain my ears for any sound as I cut through an alley that leads through to the back yard. The gate there is open, and I pause. That's when I hear the retching. It's quiet, like he's trying to muffle it, but in this silence it's still clear enough.

I peek around the corner and see Ben on his hands and knees in the backyard near where his father died. His whole body tenses with the retches and the effort to keep them quiet. Then, a moment later, he collapses on his side and spits and makes this soft mewl that rips me to pieces. I have to pull back behind the house and sit with my head against the side and scrunch up my face not to lose it. I'm supposed to be helping him. There's no excuse for this right now, not even a breaking heart. I stand and smooth my shirt and then walk out back. Ben is still on his side and doesn't seem to hear my approach.

"Ben?" I ask quietly. He tenses and turns his head to me, but he's like a lamed animal. He can't quite turn the rest of his body.

"Ben, it's me. It's Caroline."

A faint trickle of the beautiful, rich red comes back to him. I rush over, get down on my knees next to him, and brush his

stringy hair from his watery, bloodshot eyes. The floodlight kicks on, and I can see just how bad he's become. His neck and head jut out like a turtle's from his hollowing body. He has vomit on his uniform.

"Caroline. What are you doing here? You can't be here," he says, but he holds on to my arm for dear life.

"Me? What are *you* doing here?"

"This is my home."

"Don't give me that bullshit. You need to be inside, warm, comfortable. With liquids and anti-nausea meds and ice cream and a terrible midnight movie playing in the background." Is that a hint of a smile? Maybe. I hope so.

"This one's pretty bad. Worse than the first one. I think I'm gonna stop this chemo stuff."

"No you're not. If you do, you'll die," I say, and I barely manage to keep my voice from clipping high at the end.

"Eh," he says. "I'm going to die anyway." He says this like he might say it's dark out tonight. "I think we both know that. It's just killing what time I have left. Which isn't much."

"We could try other regimens," I say. "Maybe...maybe you—" but he quiets me with a soft squeeze.

"Maybe nothing. I can feel it. And so can you. But I have to do something first. Here. And you need to go."

"No, Ben—"

"Yes. It's not safe for you. The people that I love get hurt, Caroline. Do you understand me? This thing begins and ends with me. Once I'm out of the way, it'll leave you alone."

Oh, I understand all right. I understand that I think that he might have said, in some roundabout, guy-like, obscure Navajo way, that he loves me. If I could see myself, I'd be leaking gold, darkness and death be damned. Talk about food for thought at three a.m. I'll be chewing on this one for years.

"Caroline? Do you understand? You have to go. He'll be here soon."

I shake my head again, and he tries to interject, but I stop him by putting my face right in front of his. "No, Ben. This didn't begin

with you. And it won't end with you either. Whatever is happening here, it's an old thing. Very old. And it's bigger than you and me."

Ben tries to shake his head. "He's got Gam's crow, but I got something of his. Something that is important to him. Something he wants back," Ben says, and he holds out an old beaded lanyard of some sort. I don't quite understand him, but there's no time to hash it out.

"Yeah well, I got something else important," I say, and my hand touches the cold metal resting on my chest. "And I need to talk to you about it—"

But that's when we hear the sound.

It's a strange whistling. Low, and in pockets, like the sound of a staff being waved through the air, followed by a small pop, like a ball hitting a glove. It's out on the street first, and then closer: *whistle, pop. Whistle, pop.* Then, impossibly, it's inside the house, without a door opening or closing. Both of us can hear it, low and muffled, but there.

Whistle, pop. Whistle, pop.

Moving from room to room. There's a haphazard crash then, and some rough shoving of furniture from Ben's grandmother's room. We can hear it loud and clear from the backyard because her broken window looks out on us.

We can see it, too. Or him, rather. A massive dark shape straightens and turns towards the window, and two black glints of eyes blink once then stare solidly at us. There is a flash of teeth, either a smile or a snarl.

"Too late," Ben says and shuffles back to sitting. His hand goes to his gun and there is one more *whistle, pop*. Then he's there in front of us. Like he stepped out of the air itself.

"Hello, Danny," Ben says.

Danny's a massive Indian in full war paint, his face dyed red from his forehead down to below his eyes, and his long hair is straight and as smooth as black water. He is shirtless despite the cold, but he steams like a bull, and all along his arms are spots and whorls of paint. He wears buckskin chaps and has bare feet, and in

his hand is a knife the size of my forearm. It flashes in the moonlight as he adjusts his grip on it.

"Ben," he grunts. As if he ran across us at the supermarket. His face is as telling as stone.

"Forget something?" Ben asks.

Danny nods slowly. Ben holds out a leather string of beads. Danny looks at it and laughs. It's a great, booming laugh. One that I can tell is seldom used, since it sets Ben on edge as much as it does me.

"No. Not that. I no longer concern myself with trinkets of this realm. They mean nothing to me."

"What?"

"Where did they put out your grandmother, Ben?" Danny asks, his voice quiet.

Whistle, pop, and then he's there in front of Ben. He shoves me aside with as much care as he would a curtain of beads. He grabs Ben, heedless of the gun, and pulls him up to his face, his feet dangling in the air. Ben's eyes are wide with shock. Danny's so close now that I can see that what I took for spotted markings are actually scabbed tears and claw marks. I remember the dead crow. The crow that didn't go quietly.

"I have no time for this, Ben. It calls to me. It is near. I must have it. I believe your grandmother was the Keeper. I must know where they put her out for the cliff burial. Perhaps the crows took it from her body." His eyes are full of madness, brimming in the darkness. He never raises his voice, but he speaks each word carefully and each one drips with malice.

And then Ben spits in his face. "Fuck you. You're insane. You killed her, and my dad, and now you want to desecrate her burial? You stole her totem, Danny," Ben says. He pulls his gun up and places it between them, right at Danny's gut. "But now you're gonna give it back."

Danny looks down at the gun with mild interest.

"Always fighting. A rookie, but a fighter nonetheless. You would have made the circle stronger. But you are dying, so you are worthless to me. Your grandmother was strong, too. She fought,

too, but she was old. No longer fit to be the Keeper. Your father was a loose end. Always at the wrong place at the wrong time."

He ticks each of them off like he's reading a grocery list.

"The gambler was unfit. Flatwood is too," he says.

Ben peers into his eyes with growing horror, looking for any light, but he can see as well as I can that there is none there. "You killed all of them," he says.

"Not Flatwood. Not yet. But I did convince you to banish him while I continued my search for the bell. He's an industrious rat, though, and he found a totem despite his banishment. But I will find him and take it. Then I will have three. Triple the power. Better to find the bell. It took me years to find my first totem with the gambler, and then your grandmother's dropped in my lap at the Evilway. Things are moving faster. More becomes clear to me every day."

"But why? Why?" Ben asks, and his color fades, guttering.

"We are the first people, Ben. And we will be the last. A Navajo must be the Keeper of the Bell. A *worthy* Navajo. Strong in the old ways. Not an old crone, or a hopeless addict, or worthless trailer trash like your friend Flatwood. Me. It must be *me*." His voice is a fervent whisper now. Like a muttered chant.

"Go to hell, Ninepoint," Ben says. And then he fires his gun.

Whoosh, pop. Danny flicks in and out of existence at the same time. Ben drops heavily to the ground, and a moment later Danny is standing just as he was, unscathed. He looks down upon Ben and narrows his eyes.

"You would have killed me?" he says, and his tone is tinged with surprise. "*You?* You would have killed *me*?"

Ben looks blankly at his gun, then up at Danny. He swallows and tries to kick away, but Danny is there, grabbing him by the lapel and jerking him up to standing.

"Fool. I have two crows. I am untouchable. And now I must kill *you*," he says. "It is only fitting. In the end, I'm just bringing about the inevitable."

It all happened so quickly—in the span of half a minute. The gunshot is still ringing in my ears, and everything around me, the

very black of the night itself, seems to sway and hitch. I wonder if I'm having a panic attack or passing out, but when Danny Ninepoint grabs Ben, everything snaps back into focus. I throw myself at Danny. I don't care how big he is. I don't care how strong. I don't give a shit who this man is, or about the crow totems or even about the bell. All I know is that nobody should speak to Ben like that. That condescending "*you*," as if he were less than human. Nobody should speak to anybody like that, but especially not to Ben, a guy who is ripping precious days from the jaws of death itself just to set things right, a man who cares nothing for himself and everything for those around him. That is the type of man who deserves the most respect. Buckets full of respect. Not a fucking "*you*?"

I catch his knife hand on the windup. He wants to slash across Ben's throat, but I grip him by his arm like I'm climbing a tree, and he hitches mid-swipe. I pull down his arm and try for the knife. I manage to turn it in his hand a bit and yank it free. I feel a quick, cold pain across my palm, then a terrible running warmth. The knife falls to the ground. He goes for it, but I grab at his face, flinging blood, dark and glittering in the moonlight, all over him, and press my bloody palm into his eyes.

"You bitch!" he says, and he backhands me. I stagger back. I feel like I took a frying pan to the head.

"Unclean," he says, wiping at his face. He mutters more, but I can't hear him. My head feels like someone poured boiling water over it. My hearing is wavering, and my face stings like fire. He picks up his knife again and wipes my blood off on his chaps. "I'll deal with you afterwards," he says, then turns back to Ben and points a finger at him as if Ben were a child. "You should have come alone." He steps towards him. Ben is watching me with blank shock, his hand loose around his gun. He sits like a worn teddy bear: slouched, tipping. Danny grabs Ben's hair and grimaces when a tuft of it comes off in his hand. Ben looks up at him. Then beyond him. Danny pauses.

That's when I hear it too. It's a tittering sound. And the wavering in my vision is back, but this time it's not from any slap

to the face. The entire night is moving.

"What's that?" Danny asks.

Ben's blank stare falls slowly back into focus. Then it's Ben's turn to smile.

"You're wrong, Danny."

Danny's face shows a crack of fear. Faint, but there. He looks around himself as if he's lost. He can hear it, too.

"What...what are you doing? What are you saying?"

"I said you're wrong."

"Why?" Danny asks, looking all around to pinpoint the source of the sound we're hearing, but it's no use. It's the night itself, oozing black.

"Because I was never alone."

There's a brief stillness then, an expectant hush when I can hear everyone breathing. Then, from out of the darkness, three sharp calls of a crow, and then the night explodes around us.

I didn't see any birds because there was nothing to see *but* birds. Crows everywhere. They painted the roofs and weighed down the trees. They bowed the wires and covered the fence lines. They'd sat still as stone upon the grass and the dirt, watching the three of us until that very moment, and then every single one of them flew right at Danny Ninepoint.

He's there one moment, and then he's not. But this time he doesn't disappear. The crows won't let him. They cover him like tar, raking at him and slashing and tearing, and only his screams can be heard. Then even his screams succumb to the rush of feathers, a sound like the shaking of a forest in the wind. I hide my head, I scream, I scramble to Ben. He holds me, and I bury my head in his arms as the black vortex rages around us.

And then it's gone.

When I look up, there is nothing but blood on the grass and feathers floating in the air. And there, on the ground where Danny had stood, are two small stone crows. One that had belonged to the gambler, and one that had belonged to Ben's grandmother. We watch in stunned silence as one black feather floats to the ground in front of our faces.

I turned to Ben. I want to kiss him. To tell him he's saved us, somehow, by calling down the night. He's figured it all out. I am in his arms. This is the perfect time for a kiss. This is textbook. This is it. If it's ever going to happen, it's going to happen now.

But Ben is crying. He is in a ball sobbing quietly to himself on my shoulder and saying their names over and over again. All of them: Gam, Dad, Ana, Joey, and yes, even Danny. All of them. So instead I just turn towards him and hold him.

And that's when the agents come.

They walk slowly into the floodlight, one after the other, stirring tufts of feathers with each step. They have eyes only for the crow totems. Each snatches one with greedy abandon, their eyes glimmering. As they touch the totems with their bare hands, they flicker a bit in and out of focus, and terrible grins spread across their faces. I'm beginning to think they don't know that we're here, but then Parsons speaks.

"Thank you, Mr. Dejooli," he says. "We'll take it from here."

Then both of them blink out of existence.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

BEN DEJOOLI

She saved me from the knife. From Danny's huge knife. The knife that's hung at Danny's side as long as I've known him. The same knife that Danny would casually click in and out of its sheath when things got tense on calls. He used to use the bone handle to crush beer cans at station BBQs. He once plucked a two-inch splinter from my palm with the tip of it. Caroline stopped that same knife from ripping my throat open. That's my first thought when I wake up in the hospital bed.

The second thought is that it was a lot of work on her part to buy me another couple of days. Don't get me wrong: the last thing I wanted was to get killed by my two-faced partner. When I go, I can count him being swallowed by a million crows among the top five most beautiful things I've ever seen in my life. Ana being another one. Caroline being another. I would have missed that sight if it weren't for her, but part of me wonders if she shouldn't have bothered.

The other two in my top five, in case you're wondering, are kind of like memory snapshots. One is of a sunrise. Danny and I were coming off a nightshift one warm summer night two years ago. I had the next two days off. We were driving the fringes, the northern border of the rez, just flying across the desert in the cruiser, and the sun was rising over the sand and it painted the whole thing purple. It doesn't sound like much, but it was. If you were there, you'd have thought so too. The way things ended up

with Danny doesn't change that sunrise. That picture. That's forever.

The second is a snapshot of a bonfire out at the Arroyo. It was a Saturday night, and I was with Joey Flatwood. Both of us were fourteen, tearing circles around the fire pit while our folks drank beers and talked and sang. I have this picture in my mind of us running around and around like a long exposure of light in the dark, and we're leaving these phosphorescent firefly trails behind us. Even when I banished Joey, even when I thought he knew what happened to Ana and was keeping it from me, nothing could ruin that picture either. That's forever, too.

It's funny how you take stock of these things when your life is coming to a close. You don't really do it because you're getting all sentimental, either. A lot of it is boredom. There's not a lot to do in a hospital bed when you're waiting to die.

I'm pretty far gone, now, I think. There isn't a lot of pain. The morphine drip killed all that, along with most of my hospital phobia. Funny how high-powered drugs will do that for you. So I'm not nauseous anymore and I'm not aching, but I am sort of being packed away. I feel like I'm being swaddled, slowly, from the feet up. I lose chunks of time. First it was hours, but the chunks are getting bigger. Half a day? A whole day? All I know is that the times between when I open my eyes are getting longer, and I suspect that when I actually die it'll be just that: the time between when I open my eyes will be forever.

I can't really talk anymore, but I can think, and I can listen. I know that people are here with me. And that people are coming and going. Caroline has been the most constant. She holds my hand and speaks to me about everything, and I suspect that she knows I can listen. I think she can see more than most people. Can understand more. It's like she can sense when I surface, even if I don't open my eyes. She whispers to me about the bell. She doesn't know what to do with it. I don't either. She says it's mine, by rights, but I don't think it is. I don't think it's anybody's. I don't think it even belongs here at all. I can feel it, resting on her chest. It has this dull hum that seems to get stronger as I get weaker. She

tells me that I'm flipping through the pages of my life. Setting the numbers in order. She whispers to me that she wishes she could be in there with me, flipping the pages. She wishes she could see it all. I can feel her tears, hot, falling on my cheeks, before she wipes them away. It feels good, to have someone cry for you. That may sound like an asshole thing to say, but it's true.

Mom is here too, although less frequently. I don't blame her. I think her mind is breaking. I think it cracked when Ana died, but now it's breaking. She'll have lost everyone, when this is all over. I think she's learning that it's one thing to push everyone away when they're still here and it's another thing to have them disappear altogether. She talks to me, too, although she sounds off. She talks about the day Ana disappeared. She says it was just like this. Over and over again she says that: *Just like this. Just like this.*

"It's happening again," she says, when I float back. She's panicky, and her hand is trembling as it holds mine. I want to help her. She was dealt a heavy hand of grief in life and she folded with it, gave up early on, but I'm not sure I can begrudge her that. She couldn't deal. Is that her fault? I'm not sure I could deal, either, if I was her. Maybe that's why I joined the force. Not because I was dealing with Ana's loss, but because I wasn't dealing with Ana's loss. I spent my days patching up other people's problems instead of dealing with mine.

I manage a squeeze, and she latches on to it. I open my eyes and mumble, "S'okay, Mom." Kind of a stupid thing to say, especially given that pretty much nothing is okay. But there's nothing she can do about it. I expect her to break down or something, but she doesn't. She gets real close to me and says, "Stay, Benny. Stay here."

That's pretty rich. I don't exactly feel like running these days, Mom. But she's serious.

"Ana didn't stay," she says. "You must stay. No matter what Gam or anyone says."

Gam's gone, Mom. Dead. Ana's dead, too. And I'm going. I hope she gets the help she needs, my mom. This is going to pretty

much destroy her. Is it bad that I take just a tiny measure of comfort in the fact that I won't be around to see it?

I get the sense that Caroline's right. I've been flipping through my book, setting the pages in order, but here at the end there are a bunch of blanks. The pages are there, the numbers are right. They're the end, but there's nothing on them.

Not yet, anyway.

Something is coming. Something has to happen for me to close my book. It's why I'm not dead just yet. It's why I can still hear them. I'd heard that right before people die, some of them get really lucid. Sort of come back for one last big push. I think that's what's happening to me. I think I have one last big push stored up, and I'm terrified to think of what it's for.

The people around my bed are like pieces shifting on a combination lock. Doctor Bennet, Caroline, Mom, they need to be here, I feel it, but one is missing, and when that fourth shows up, I know it is time.

Joey Flatwood.

It's late at night when he comes to me. I hear the *whoosh, pop*, and for one horrible minute I think Danny is back. I actually open my eyes. It startles me back to the surface, almost above the surface. *This is it*, I think. *This is the push. This is the end.*

Joey is stunned, looking at me. He's like a bull charging into the china shop only to find it's a butcher's. He reaches one trembling hand out towards me, and it hangs in the air.

"Jesus, Ben. I mean...Jesus."

"Hello," I say. It comes out a croak.

Caroline stirs in the chair next to me. Mom stirs in the makeshift bed next to Caroline. Doctor Bennet walks by the door. I know he's done that many times, many more times than he needs to, always with the pretense of checking my vitals or reading my charts, but I know it's more than that. I wish I had more time to get to know the good doctor. I think we'd have liked each other.

When Bennet sees Joey, he stops still, looks back and forth along the hallway, then steps inside the room and closes the door.

The gang's all here.

"This is bad," Joey says, staring at me as he walks over to my bedside.

"Well, it's not good, Joey," I say. I try to smile. My lips are goopy from Vaseline.

Joey looks from me to the other three, who watch him carefully, but everyone seems to know to stay quiet.

"No. I mean they're coming," he says. "They know about the bell. They think you have it."

"Who?"

"The agents," he says, then he freezes and pricks his ears. He looks over his shoulder at the door. He turns back to me, and I can see that he's genuinely afraid.

"It's here, isn't it? I can feel it, too. It pulls at the crow."

We are all silent. Bennet looks at me. I have to make a conscious effort not to look at Caroline.

"It's here," I say, at last. Then I ask him a question, very carefully, because I know a lot hinges on it. "Do you want it, Joey?"

He looks at me without blinking, and he works his jaw around.

"No," he says. "No, I don't think I do. I don't think anyone can have it. Especially not them. It's too...too much. Too dangerous. Too...everything."

"What is the bell?" Caroline asks quietly. Joey flicks his gaze over to her. He zeroes in on the leather strap around her neck, and I know he knows. I know he knows it's right there, with her. But all he does is nod. And right then I know something else, too: Joey had nothing to do with Ana's vanishing. Far from it. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that from the second I banished him, Joey spent every waking day trying to make sense of what happened to her, just like me.

"It's what took Ana," Joey says.

"What?" Mom asks. "What?" She's getting louder. Bennet tries to quiet her, but she ignores him. She runs to Joey, grabs him with both hands, and shakes him. "What are you saying? You can't just say things like that. You can't just come in here and say things like that." She slaps him, and he takes it. "What do you *mean*?"

she wails. She is unraveling. Bennet grabs her with both arms and pulls her away. I hear movement outside.

"I don't know," Joey says, and I see that he's crying. "I don't fucking know. It's all I've ever wanted to know. You have to believe me. Ben, please. I don't know how. I don't know why. But that bell took her away from me right before my eyes."

"I believe you," I say, and I sound stronger than I have in what feels like weeks. The push is upon me. The crest is here. "Joey, I really fucked up, man. I really fucked up, and if you never forgive me, I understand."

"It was Danny, Ben. Danny planted the seed. Danny brought the hearing. Danny pulled all the right strings, with the council, with your family, with your heart. He wanted the bell for himself. He knew I wanted it too. But I don't want it like he did."

"Nah," I say, and it's a sort of wail. The beginning of a cry. "Nah. I fucked up. I did."

There's a subtle shift in the air, and we all feel it. A *whistle, pop* from down the hall. There's shouting outside the room. They're here. Joey turns to me. His eyes are swimming, but his teeth are gritted.

"I want you to know, man. I want you to know that you never stopped being my best friend. Never. Not when you screamed at me at the hospital that day she disappeared. Not when you spoke against me in front of the court. Not when you stood and watched me cross that line out of Chaco. Never. And you never will."

Bennet locks the door. Joey looks at him. "Locks don't matter," he says, and just then there's a *whistle, pop* and one of the agents is there. It's Douglas, the bulldog one with the stained teeth. His face lights up, and his eyes are like tar-dipped coins.

"Here you are," he says, staring at me with wild, hungry eyes. He sniffs the air. "And it's here, too."

Joey steps between us, and I see Bennet position himself in front of Mom and Caroline.

Douglas snaps away, and then in a blink he's back with Parsons, who looks fresh from a conference call, as always. Both of

them stare at me, unblinking. They suck in the air as if mad for the scent of the bell.

"Where is it, Mr. Dejooli?" Parsons asks. He's like a schoolteacher giving an unruly pupil one last chance. But Joey steps in between us.

"It's not for you to have," Joey says. "You don't know what you're doing. The crows are meant to protect the bell. To keep it secret. And safe."

Parsons and Douglas turn to Joey as if seeing him for the first time.

"It will be safe," Parsons says. "With us. And only with us."

Douglas steps towards me, but Joey holds out his hand and stops him. Douglas bumps into it and stares at it like it's a tumbleweed bumped against a fence.

"Back off," Joey says.

Douglas looks back at Parsons, who cocks an eyebrow. Then both of them laugh. It's not a good laugh. It's the strange, low laugh of the far gone, and I know there is nothing we can say that will stop these two men. Douglas unbuttons his jacket with one hand.

"Don't do this," Joey says. "None of us knows what that thing can do."

"It's more powerful than any crow. More powerful than all of the crows," Douglas says, with strained patience, reaching in his pocket. "And if the crows can do this—" He grasps the totem in his bare hand. In a hissing blink he's behind Joey, right next to my bed. He reeks of sulfur, like a pack-a-day habit of the devil's own cigarettes. He grabs the sheets of my bed and throws them off, his eyes wild and probing. "—Then we must have it," he says.

There's another pop, and suddenly Douglas goes sprawling back into the door, splintering the jamb and throwing it open with his bulk. In his place is Joey once more. It's like Joey left us and then came back at a charge and checked Douglas straight in the chest. Parsons looks impassively at him. Douglas looks ridiculous, sitting like a child in the doorway with both legs out. He nods to himself and cracks his neck.

"I said back the fuck off, suit. Both of you," Joey says.

"Impressive, Mr. Flatwood," says Parsons. "I'll admit, you know your way around the crow. But then again, you've had more time with yours."

He doesn't sound impressed. He sounds pleased, actually. One look at Douglas confirms it. He's smiling, too, from the floor. They both look like prize fighters at the title bout.

"Last chance, Mr. Flatwood. All of you. Give us the bell, and we'll let you live," Parsons says, as Douglas stands and dusts off his jacket. "For a little while, at least," he adds, looking at me with a wan smile.

Joey starts to speak, but I beat him to it. "You aren't worthy," I say, surprising myself. Thinking of Gam. Thinking of Caroline. Gam carried it all her life and never said a word. Caroline carries it now, as it's supposed to be carried. As a burden. A quiet burden. I don't know exactly what this bell is, but I know that's how it's supposed to be worn: heavy and soft. As if he can hear my thoughts, Joey looks back at me and nods. It's a thankful nod. It's like he's come back. Like we've seen each other in the airport and hit the bar, and it's all the same. In my mind another page is written and numbered, and it has everyone here on it. I'm that much closer. I have minutes. Minutes until I'm gone. But there's one more page yet to write.

My words hit Douglas. He seems to me like the idiot of the pair. Proud. Quick to anger. His bureaucratic smile turns to a snarl. There's a puff of air as he slips out of space, and I know he's coming for me. For my neck. For my face. And I can do nothing. I am passing from this world, and if it's Douglas that does it or the poison cells in my brain—six of one, half dozen of the other.

Whistle, pop, and he's there, in front of me. But so is Joey.

Douglas brings his hand down, ripping through the air, trying to grab at my throat, but Joey stops him with a sledgehammer blow to the side that sends him sprawling again. Whatever plane the crows flip them to, it seems like Joey gets a running start before they flip back. Joey is not a big man and the drugs have drained him, but somehow he's hitting like a fire hydrant. Joey

doesn't even blink before he throws himself at Douglas again. Douglas tries to phase out, but Joey catches him. What happens from there is like a movie seen in snapshots, like frames have been removed from the reel of a fistfight. They dance around each other, pummeling each other. They flip in and out of sync, coming back bloodied and torn. Douglas reaches for his gun at one point, but Joey grabs him and phases both of them out before he can fire. This time the blood comes back before they do, spraying out like whipped washing, and then they are with us again, Douglas's head snapped back and his mouth split and Joey grazed at the shoulder. They blink out again, and a piece of a tooth is all that remains, clattering to the floor in their absence. I smile grimly. Joey always knew his way around a fistfight. I suppose an existential fistfight is still a fistfight.

But then there's Parsons. He watches the popping, whooshing, sucking explosions with a cold smile, like he's hanging over the pit of a dog fight, and then he begins to walk toward me, adjusting his tie, sniffing at the air. Bennet swipes at him, but he phases in and out and takes no notice. Bennet lunges forward again, and again comes up with air. Parsons stops at the head of my bed as calm as a Sunday morning while Douglas and Joey rip at each other like desert coyotes.

He is disturbingly gentle as he brushes my scrub top apart and pulls my palsied hands flat. No bell. He sniffs the air again, then he turns to Caroline. I try to scream at him, to lunge at him, to do anything. But my time is up. I'm being packed in. I can feel the weight upon me. The first words on the final page are being written, and I can see them in my mind. They say, *A crow flew down the hall.*

Which is insane, because we're in a hospital. And yet there is the crow. It passes across the open doorway at normal speed, but everything else seems to have hit a time pocket. No one else notices it, and I know that this is because no one else can see it. Then, in a blink, everything catches back up.

I look back at Caroline, who is gripping the bell under her shirt like it's pulling her down to the ground. Parsons walks towards her

like a golem. He reaches for her, but Bennet throws himself towards him, and this time Parsons doesn't phase out. He's done with dancing between our two planes. He's been snake charmed by the call of the bell, and he doesn't count on Bennet's reach. His haymaker staggers Parsons, who looks at Bennet as if he's just arrived. Bennet takes advantage and slams his shoulder into Parsons, pushing him away, battering him back, putting distance between the agent and Caroline. He's pummeling Parsons' face bloody, and I think for one glorious minute that we've done it, that we've beaten them. Then Parsons takes out his gun.

"Unworthy," he says, echoing the madness of Danny Ninepoint as he levels it at Caroline.

Bennet throws himself in front of the line of fire just as the gun blast echoes and we hit another time pocket. And on cue, there's another crow. This one makes a sloppy landing out in the hallway in front of the door, flapping and hopping to a standstill in the time it takes for the bullet to leave the chamber. The crow stares at me. The sulfur hits me like a smoke ring to the face. People are caught in mid-scream outside, but they are like shadows of themselves—bugs rolled in sap, caught in time. Then there is another crow. It flutters down from the top of the splintered door, much more gracefully than the first, and then another that seems to swagger into the room. This one ponders the bullet leaving Parsons' gun with a cosmic cloud of gunpowder—a misshapen lump of lead that inches forward even as it spins over itself, like a curve ball in slow motion.

If I could reach out I could grab it, I could pluck it from the air like a lazy bumblebee. But I can't reach out. There is a weight on me that I know has stopped my lungs, and I will never breathe again. That was the last one, the final breath. I've taken in all of the oxygen that will ever reach my blood. I can only watch as Bennet dives in front of Caroline with his eyes closed, and I can't help but admire him. What a strong, crazy bastard he is. I know he loves her. Loves her madly. I also know he is worthy of her. It's a slow motion game of angles and trajectories between him and the bullet, one that was written out long ago, and the crows hop up

on my bed to watch with me. They rest on my headboard and perch on my feet. There are many of them—first ten, then twenty, then thirty. They gather around and watch with me as the bullet, in a game of millimeters, misses Bennet's heart and rips into his shoulder. And then they all titter, like an applause. I want to jump up and hoot.

I turn towards Joey and Douglas, locked around each other's necks like lions on the savannah. Joey has him. I turn back to Parsons, who is frozen in an implacable look of dismay. We've been slowed by the thousandth now. His look is such that he knows that was the only shot he had, because I can feel the last page of this story being inked, and I know it ends with this: *Ana*.

Ana walks through the door after the crows. She walks with the same girlish bounce she always had, and the crows move aside for her. One sits on her shoulder and bows its head to her. She is pale, so pale, paler than she ever was before. And she wears a child's dress of black and lace that is resplendent one moment and tattered the next.

And she is smiling. And illusion, vision, demon, or nothing at all, when my sister smiles like that, I've never been able to resist it. I smile too.

"Hello, brother," she says.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I've come for you," she says. "At last."

"Am I dead?" I ask.

Ana cocks her head in such a perfect imitation of how she used to listen to us when we tried to get her to come in from the back, or eat her dinner, or close her eyes to go to sleep, that it's as if the years of her absence never happened at all.

"No," she says, after a moment. "Not yet. But I can wait."

She steps over to Bennet, the bullet still ripping the sinew of his shoulder. She grabs at the rippling air that marked its passage as if she could stop it, but her hand passes right through. And that's when I see that Caroline is with us in the pocket of time. She looks up at me with huge eyes. Blinking wildly, she takes a

staggering breath and touches her own face, as if to confirm it's still there.

"Am I dead?" Caroline asks.

Ana listens to the air again, and it chills me to the bone. Such a childish expression, like she's listening to a tin-can phone, but I'm terrified of whatever is on the other end.

"No," she says, nodding to herself. "Not yet."

Caroline stands heavily. She lifts her head as if it is yoked. Then she freezes. Very carefully, very slowly, she reaches down her collar and grasps the bell. She pulls it out and over her like it is a link of iron chains. She holds it out in front of her and opens her palm.

"The clapper. It's back," she says.

Ana nods cheerfully.

"It only appears when someone is dying," Caroline says.

"Yes," Ana says. "My brother is dying."

She hops up, scattering the crows, and she comes to the foot of my bed. Her little head barely reaches over the footboard.

"Is this really you, Ana?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

Ana listens to the invisible wind again.

"Yes, and no," she says.

"How?"

"Because I am Ana. But I am Death," she says, and she smiles. It's pure and young and good. But there is something in her eyes. Something just as natural as the smile, but far blacker. She walks around my bed, trailing one small finger, and now she looks embarrassed. She scrunches up one side of her face as if she's about to cry.

"I missed you, Ben," she says, nodding at the truth of it.

I start to weep, and I grab her to me. She lets me take her in. I feel as though I'm leaving my body. I know I have seconds left, but seconds stretch. I smell her hair. I kiss her forehead. I wrap my arms around her tiny frame, and she hugs me back, giggling. "Ana, why didn't you come to me before?"

"Silly," she says, smiling up at me. "Because you weren't dying before. I can only take the dead people away."

The air chills again. And when I look at her I see that the deep black is leaking from her eyes again, just like it did when I saw her in the Evilway, when the chant breached our two planes.

"It's almost time," she says, and the black leaks like tears from her, dripping down in triangles from her eyes.

"But how, Ana? How did you come to take all the dead people away?" It's all I can think to ask as I watch the child in her morph, turn darker, blacker, longer. But she still has that same puckish voice as always.

"I rang the bell that Gam gave me," she says. "That's how. She told me to keep it very secret, and if I felt like I was going away, to ring it. So I did."

Caroline looks at the bell in her hands, bowing down her arms with its unseen weight. Ana ponders it, then nods.

"That's it," Ana says. Then she laughs with a strange, unsettling darkness. "I saw her pick it up from my bed after I left it. Careful. If you ring it, you have to take dead people away too."

The page is almost done, the ink almost dry.

"Ana," I say. "Are you tired?"

She thinks for a second, then shakes her head.

"Are you lonely?"

She nods.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask, because I know now. I know what the bell is and what the bell does.

She looks at me for a second, then throws a fierce hug over me. I can feel her changing, feel her moving, but inside all of it is my little sister. The girl I've dreamed of seeing gives me the hug I've dreamed of getting. The one that I used to weep over when I woke up before it happened. It's happening now. She holds me. And she is warm, and small, and she is Ana. She is finally here. And she and I come to an understanding then.

"I'm ready to go now," she whispers.

And that's when I look at Caroline.

"Can I have the bell?" I ask.

She shakes her head vigorously, throwing tears left and right. "No." She knows, too. She knows what happens if I ring the bell.

She knows what I become. "No. You're going to live. You're going to get better. You're going to beat this, and we're going to live together and have kids and dance around the fire together and grow old and die holding each other's hands." She shakes her head again. "No. Absolutely not."

"Caroline," I whisper. "Look."

I turn towards my vital monitor. It's flat. No beats. Nothing. I am sitting up talking to her, and I am lying down dead at the same time. We've caught a window, but that window is closing. I listen carefully, and I can hear the flat buzz of the machines in the time outside of our time. I hear the alarm of the code. I see the soft pulsing of the blue light outside of my room. It's slow and subtle, but it is there.

"Caroline, I'm already gone," I say. "In a heartbeat I'll be beyond you forever anyway."

Caroline hears the sounds, she sees the lights. Ana looks curiously at us, her face melting further and further.

"Hurry," Ana whispers. "Please hurry. Or I have to take you."

"Please, Caroline," I say. "Ana isn't meant for this. She was thrown into this. She needs to go home with Gam and Dad."

"What happens to you?" Caroline asks, weeping. Snotting. She sniffs and coughs and cries, still holding the bell like it's a ten-pound stick of dynamite.

"What happens to me?" I ask Ana.

"You become me," she says, as if that explains everything. "It's a lot of work," she adds, knowingly. And in a blink her face has become that of a monster. Her eyes have dripped down to nothing. Her face is two strips of terrible black ripped through an orb of pure white.

"It's time," she says, and her voice is changed too. It is layered beyond itself into endless echoes. She reaches for my hand. For the first time in my life, I refuse my little sister.

"The bell, Caroline. Last chance. If I go with her, it's all over."

Caroline sobs, but she stumbles forward, her thumb in the bell. She falls onto me, and my hand grasps the bell. Our lips find each other, and we are given a kiss outside of time that lasts longer

than the lives of many people. It lifts me. It unwraps me. And then it is over.

"Goodbye, Ben," she says.

"Goodbye, Caroline," I say. "Go. Live."

The thing Ana has become grasps my hand with cold finality, but I ring the bell first, and the time that had been slowed truly stops.

In a blink Ana is herself again. She laughs and jumps and stretches—and she begins to fade. I am not afraid of this. I know this is what is supposed to happen. It's a one in, one out policy.

"Goodbye, Ana," I say. "Say hi to everyone for me."

She giggles and spins in circles and runs up to me and grabs me around the waist, but her grip is like the brushing of a feather.

"It's hard," she says. "What you go to do."

"I am sure."

"You'll do good," she says, nodding. Then she pushes back. "Remember," she says, pointing at the machines that blare and the flat lines. "You're gone too, Benny. When the bell rings again, you come to be with us."

She fades and fades. Soon she's just a smile. "Love you, Benny. See you later."

"Love you, Ana."

Then she has truly passed. In the silence, one of the many crows that nobody but I can see hops onto my shoulder and turns to look at me. He ruffles his feathers and stretches himself, and somehow he seems to grow, and grow, and shocks of red tinge his feathers until I recognize him once more.

"Hiya," he says.

"Hello."

"Time to clean all this up, I'd say," he says, nodding at the slow motion spectacle that is happening around me. Bennet is about to hit the floor. Joey and Douglas still spar for each other's necks. Parsons watches with cold fury.

"Ben? Where are you?" It's Caroline. "Ben?" But her voice slows, matches the pace of the world around us as she passes out of the pocket of time and we are gone to each other.

I stand.

All of my pain is gone. Everything that marked my understanding of the world is gone. In its place I have what I can only describe as a black map that is marked with pins of light. Millions upon millions of pins of light, more popping into existence all the time, but as soon as they do, they start to fade, each in their turn, by infinitesimal degrees. And I am there, with each of them. But I am here, too, completely. I am where I need to be, exactly as I need to be. Because I walk the map, and I tend to the lights when they are dim enough. I have been called Death before, but I already know that's not accurate. Better to call me the Walker.

Where I once lay, the covers softly cave. My body is not there. My body is gone. Nothing remains of me on the plane where these humans stand, screaming and fighting and bleeding. I am separate from them. Separate and alone. And yet I remember. I remember them. All of them. I see the agents, but I do not feel anger towards them. I mark their time. I can measure the strings of their lives.

I see my mom. She is screaming in madness, and her string is weak, fraying. I am troubled by this only in the sense that I know it is not yet her time.

I see Owen Bennet. He is bleeding, but he will survive. His string is stronger than he shows. Stronger than he knows.

And I see Caroline Adams and am shocked by the force of feeling that swells within me. The crow cocks his head at me, and the light brushes his beak such that it seems to smile.

"You don't lose everything of yourself," he says. "Kind of a curse, though, because you can't do anything with what remains."

"She's special."

"I'd say so," the crow says. His voice has a bit of a drawl to it. If you were to close your eyes and listen to him, you'd think a twenty-something beach bum was talking to you.

"Look at her string," I say. "It's beautiful. Colorful."

"I'll take your word for it. She does have that glow though."

"I have to save her. These men will hurt her."

"Can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Direct interference. Strictly off limits. Them's the rules."

"Rules? Horseshit." I take a swipe at Douglas, who's still moving at a snail's pace. My arms pass right through him.

"Told ya," says the crow.

"So she's going to die..."

"Not necessarily."

"What?"

"It's the bell they want. Not the girl."

"But I can't give them the bell."

"Oh, you can't let them have the bell. That would be a terrible idea. You're right. They suck. What you can do, though, is take it out of the equation."

I look at the bell in my hand. I see the clapper is fading, and my grip on it is slipping as well.

"Quickly now. Once the clapper's done for, it's back in their plane again. Those bastards will snatch it up, and that's all she wrote."

"What do I do?"

"If I were you, I'd take it out back and chuck it as far as you can."

"Out back?"

"Way out back, if you catch my meaning."

I think I do. I focus beyond the hospital room and grab on to the map of lights, but this time I also step into it. It's like opening up a heavy trap door at the bottom of my mind, and jumping in. The lights zip around me and spin wildly, and I start to scream. It's like falling in a dream, but endlessly. There's no waking up from this one.

"Stop flailing around, dumbass. Your little sister got it on the first try," says the crow. He's flapping his wings next to me, keeping steady with my head.

So I stop. And the lights settle around me. I see them for what they are. I'm floating inside a map of souls. The bell is still in my hand, but it feels lighter and lighter.

"Get rid of it, man! Throw it!"

"But where will it go?"

"Who cares? Not here!"

So I wind up and throw it. I throw it forever. It's like a golf ball in space. It sails and sails and sails, and then it's gone, like a coin disappearing into the ocean.

"Where did it go?"

"Somewhere else on their plane. Don't you worry about that bell. Worrying about the bell is my job. Frickin' thing has a propensity to show up at inopportune times. To say the least. The point is, I'll find it, and if I know these two scumbags, you bought your friends some time. Look."

The crow flips in the air with all the grace of a flying rag, but he manages to turn around and look back where we came. I follow him, shakily, like I'm turning around in close quarters on a bike.

I see nothing but the soul map. Billions of lights pulsing in an orb around my head.

"Where'd they go?"

"You tell me, bro. You saw their threads. You can find them again."

"How?"

"Hell if I know. I'm just the bird. You're the Walker. That's why you get paid the big bucks." The crow titters.

He's a wiseass, but he's been helpful so far, and even though he sounds flip, I get the feeling he really believes in me. I'll chalk that up to being related to Ana, who I can already tell he was fond of. I focus on the threads I saw back in the hospital. It's hard to picture all four of them, though, so instead I think of only one: Caroline's. It shimmered like a rip of sunset through campfire smoke, if the fire burned in every color of the rainbow: flare red, sparkler white, gas-rich blue, the green of flaming sap, and more—purples and pinks and so many shades of white I don't have the words to describe them, from soft to hard, all burning at a million degrees. This was her line of life.

And then I see it. I reach for it, and in a smashing blur I'm back in the room. Standing by the bed. My clothes ripple and still. I notice that the hospital gown is gone. In its place is a uniform, not unlike my NNPD getup: crisp slacks and a trim buttoned shirt, but

it's pure black. I don't wear shoes. I can see the veins in my feet, and in my hands. They are very thick and very clear, and they pulse black.

There are many crows still in the room, including the one that talks to me, and all of them turn to watch me. I hold my hands out to the one that speaks and show him the pale underside of my wrists and the black veins there. He shrugs.

"Comes with the territory. The soul map is a powerful place. It leaves its mark. Only you can walk it for that long and live. And me, of course." He preens his glossy feathers, and I see the red marks there more clearly than ever. "What do you think of your new threads?"

"Not bad."

"Ana figured you'd like ÷em. All right, get ready now," the crow says.

"For what?"

"As soon as the map closes, we're back on their time."

The window into the fiber-optic cityscape of the soul map is closing like water going down a drain. As it spins away, time catches up with itself. And then, with an audible pop, the commercial break is over.

And the agents scream.

They scream louder than Bennet does, because they know the bell is gone, and they see that my bed is empty, which can only mean one thing. They missed their chance.

"Where is he?" Douglas screams, frothing. He forgets about Joey entirely and runs to my bed, ripping up the sheets. He passes right through me as he throws the monitoring equipment aside. Joey looks at him with his hands still out, stunned and panting.

"You know where he is," Parsons says, his gun still trained on Caroline. I snarl, helpless to intervene. "He's right here. But he's beyond us, now."

Douglas takes a mad swipe around the room. I can't even feel the wind of his passing. The code alarm is blaring and people are running into the room and then out of the room at the same time, once they see the gun. Douglas tilts his head, sniffing, as if chasing

the noise. Parsons turns the gun on Joey, then on Bennet, keeping all of them at bay.

"I can still smell it," Douglas says. "The bell. But it's fading."

"Better than nothing," Parsons says.

Without another word, Douglas snaps out of mortal view, and a shade of him flits by me, only this time I think I can feel a touch of wind. Then he's out of the room, and then out of the hallway, and soon out of the building entirely. On the trail of the bell.

Parsons looks around at the mess and then turns briefly towards where Caroline has run to Bennet, who's bleeding on the floor. My mother is screaming in her madness. Joey watches him carefully, his hands still out, waiting for Parsons to shoot, but instead Parsons spits in disgust. He holsters his weapon, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Then he speaks to me.

"I know you're here, Mr. Dejooli. I know about the bell, not everything, but enough to find it again, no matter where it is. I know about the map, too. Is it beautiful? I can almost picture it. And one day it will be mine, with all of the power that comes with it. So don't get used to it. You may have rung the bell, but you're still a two-bit cop to me."

His flat, vanilla gaze melts slowly into a wicked smile. "The bell is out there. I can feel it. When I find it, I'm coming for you."

In a flash, he's gone. But I can watch him still. When he flits out of his realm, he's a shadow in mine, but he cannot see me. He is passing between our realms when he grabs the crow totem. He is neither here nor there. Soon enough, he's gone too.

The big crow is tapping his beak against the metal of the bed in mocking applause. "Hear that? He's gonna getcha! What a dick, am I right?"

He's joking, and I smile, but I'm still unnerved. Parsons and Douglas know more about where I am and who I am than I do, and it bothers me. Those two aren't just going to go away.

All around me the room has exploded into action again. Police and doctors and nurses swarm about, treating Bennet and shuffling my mother and Caroline out and under blankets and into locked rooms.

Joey becomes a shadow, and I know he's holding his crow and is invisible to those around him, but I can see him.

"Ben! Are you there?" he yells, but his voice is muffled and whipped, like he's screaming into a gale force wind. I can also tell that it's hurting him, flitting between realities like this, and suddenly I know why he was taking the drugs. They help with the pain of phasing out. Allow him to walk in shadows for longer than he should.

"Go, Joey! You'll kill yourself!" I scream, but he can't hear me, or see me. His crow shines like the sun in his hand.

"I'll watch over the doc and the girl! Don't worry! Those fuckers won't touch them!"

I can't help but smile at his bravado. Old school Joey, right there. The first flicker of it I've seen since this whole mess started years and years ago. As if he can sense me, he smiles too.

"I'm glad it's you, buddy. I hope you said goodbye to Ana."

I nod to him. He was right. He found her after all, even if he couldn't see her.

Then he's out of the room in a flash, and it's just me and the crows. I'm surrounded by people, but I can't touch them. I can't speak to them. I feel terribly alone. It's like the first soft pressure of a crushing weight that threatens to drown me, but then the big crow is there. He flies to my shoulder and settles there as if born to it, and I feel instantly better.

"It's not so bad," he says. "Ana was a good Walker, very good. But I don't think she was the one we need now. It's good that you let her go."

I turn to him, puzzled. "What makes a good Walker?"

"All in good time. We'll start simple."

"I can already feel that I need to be in places."

"People die," says the crow, shrugging his shoulders. "It's the one constant on this plane."

"Then I will go to them," I say.

The crow nods. It's a sort of excited bob that makes me smile again.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Don't know. I've had countless names."

"What did Ana call you?"

"Well, she called me a lot of things. Flappy, Blackie, Birdie, Dummy, mostly Birdie. When she got lonely and reached for me sometimes she'd call me Ben," he says quietly. "Or Chaco."

"Chaco," I say. "I like that one."

"Chaco it is then, chief."

The lights are calling me, they are fading, and they need me to tend to their end. I know I can do this. It's what I am meant to do.

"Well, Chaco. I think my time is done here."

"For now..." Chaco says.

"Then let's get going. We have work to do."

I reach out my black-veined hand and press through the air. A pinprick of darkness appears, and I swirl the matter that makes up this plane like I'm spinning batter in a bowl. The soul map whorls into view, bigger, bigger, until it is all that is in front of me, staggering and infinite.

"I like the swirl move," Chaco says. "Nice touch."

I gaze flatly at him. "Try to keep up," I say, grinning.

Then I'm off.

CHAPTER 19

THE WALKER

When I was dying, I spoke of life as a book, of our experiences as a series of pages fluttering to an eventual close. Now that I'm on the other side of it I can tell you that's not true. Not exactly, anyway. The idea that each of us has a book to write, and then once it's done we shelve it in the great library of existence, that's ludicrous. No story is separate. If you could see this map, this beautiful, glowing map, you'd understand that.

I've walked the map a bit by now, and I often catch myself thinking about how I could explain this to you, or to Caroline, or to anyone. The best I can come up with right now is this: you know those huge fiber optic cables that span the oceans like enormous ropes? Imagine one as wide as the sun, and cut it in half so you see the countless individual fibers pulsing with light. That's about as close as I can get to describing it. Your life isn't a book: your life is a string of light, wrapped up with every other string into infinity.

I walk these strings. I walk the rope. Sometimes Chaco joins me, but mostly I do what I do alone. When a thread is breaking, I'm called to it. The life it belongs to can see me then, although I don't know what they see when their eyes are opened in death. Sometimes they call me the names of people they knew, or loved. Sometimes they weep. Sometimes they cheer. The old are happier than the young. The old often cheer. The young are often heartbroken. I can understand. It's hard to let go of life. Even if it sucks, it's hard to let go.

I do not frighten them, for the most part. Perhaps they expect the cowl and scythe. They get me, instead. Or whatever their impression of me is. On a handful of occasions so far I have had people run. The first guy I actually chased, too. The old cop instincts kicked in, and I ended up running down a beach after the guy for half a mile before I remembered I could slow time. Good thing, too, because he was a young guy and I hadn't used my lungs for quite a while by then and was out of shape. In a footrace he would have kicked my ass. As it was, I pulled the fabric of time down a notch and walked right up to him. He screamed the whole time, screamed bloody murder with nobody to hear but me. These runners are the only people that I've seen so far that are truly afraid when I come for them. Everyone's afraid of death until they die, then the hard part is over. The ones who are *still* afraid when I come are the ones that know that whatever lies beyond me won't be good to them.

What lies beyond me? Wish I could tell you. I walk the rope, and I can't drop off the sides. But something does lie beyond me. I get whispers of it when I work. Rustlings from beyond the veil, and not all of them are good.

It came naturally, what I do. In a nutshell I clip the fading string of light and pack it away into the rope. Sort of like cosmic sewing. Left alone, the string will fade and weaken, but it will hold on. Like I said, life is pretty tenacious that way. Thing is, it's not supposed to linger once it's faded past a certain point. It's bad if strings linger. It upsets the order of things. It's unnatural, and its unnaturalness calls to me, tugs at me until I walk the rope and find it and clip it.

No scythe, either. Not even a pair of store-bought scissors. I use my fingers. Pointer and middle, I tease it out of them, and I snip it. There is no pain. It actually feels quite tremendous for the both of us, like finally sneezing after waiting what seems like a lifetime. After I clip a string, a seam opens in space, not unlike when I open the soul map, but it's red and it billows like a curtain. I can't walk through. I tried. Something stops me. All I can do is usher them through. Sometimes I hold their hand and send them

off. Sometimes I just point. Sometimes I have to shove. But they all go through the veil eventually.

I'm getting better at it. The first couple of snips were disasters. There was the runner, and then there was this young kid who wept and wept and wouldn't go through the curtain. The longer you wait, the bigger the curtain gets, until it takes up everything. This only scared the kid more, and I'm not ashamed to admit I panicked a little myself. I started getting pressed back, and the kid screamed until I basically tossed him in. Just kind of picked him up under the armpits and chucked him through. Not my proudest moment, but it worked. And like I said, the veil gets you in the end. It's just a matter of how you go through it.

At first I got backed up. Way backed up. Think about it. People die every second on earth, but there's just one Walker. It took me a while to figure out how to split myself. To be in many places at once. The key is to not think about it. Just let it happen, smooth your mind. The stoners we used to bust out by the Arroyo were closer to transcendence than I gave them credit for, because that's what it is I do. When I stop thinking of myself as being in one place, I allow myself to be in every place. I sucked at it for a while, still sort of do, but I'm getting better, thanks to Chaco.

Chaco's a strange thing. I'm learning about him just like I'm learning about everything else. Slowly, but surely. First, he's not a bird. Not exactly. There is only one creature like him, just like there's only one creature like me. I think the best way to describe him would be as a ÷thinning.' There are animals on the earth that are ÷thinner' than others. Animals that are just more aware of what is beyond the earth plane. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. Cats are probably the best example. When they sit and stare at walls, do you really think they're staring at walls? Nope. Crows are another. Sloths also, believe it or not. Elephants have some capacity for it, and wolves. There are others, too. Many of them. Chaco can take on any of their forms. He just likes the crow the best.

He's been helping me when he can, but mostly he's been looking for the bell. Or rather, waiting for someone to find the bell

and become the new Keeper. Chaco watches over the Keeper, just like Gam's iteration of Chaco watched over her and gave its life for her in the end, to protect her from Danny Ninepoint and allow her to pass the bell to Caroline. I was a little disappointed to hear that Chaco served the bell, not me, because I thought he was like my sidekick, sort of like every wizard has an owl. He put a short end to that line of thought though, by laughing his ass off when I tried to give him an order.

I asked him how all the crows killed Danny Ninepoint, if they weren't ordered to do something like that. He said they killed him because they loved Ana, and Ana loved me, and they knew Danny meant me harm. He said this like he was explaining that the sky was blue. Good enough for me. They came in in the clutch, and Chaco does the same. He almost always comes when I call for him, but I try not to call him unless I need him. But right now I need him. I need his help to get the crow totems back from the agents.

See, it turns out that just like there are thin creatures, there are also thin *things*. The crow totems are one of these thin things: they exist on more than one plane. In the case of the crows, they're on the earth plane most of the time, and on my plane when they're activated, but only briefly. We're talking seconds. And seconds I can't slow down. Chaco had always known it could be done, he just hadn't seen it, and it's no wonder, because it's hard as hell to get the timing right.

I couldn't tell you how long I followed those two agents. I stepped out of time for quite a while, practicing my grab while they crisscrossed the globe looking for the bell. Chaco tells me it's almost impossible to find the bell on its own, but once it presents itself to a Keeper, the race is on. For now, though, it's sort of dormant. He tells me they'd literally have to stumble across it.

Still, I can't even chance a stumble. Even a blind squirrel has a shot at a nut, and the more I follow them, the more it becomes clear to me that I have to keep the bell from them at all costs. They have strange ideas. Unnatural ideas. They have a sense of the map, and the veil, although I'm not sure how. They speak of forcing the veil. Of bending the map to their will. Cutting strings that aren't

fading and sewing fading strings back to strength. I haven't been on the job long, but even I know that stuff would spell disaster.

Chaco assures me these things can't be done. But I'm not so sure. He's the thinning. He doesn't deal with the strings or the veil or the map. I'm the Walker; I do. I learn new things every day. Just because I can't do something now, like cut a healthy string, doesn't mean it can't be done. It's just that I have the good sense not to try it.

I know if I can take their totems, it will at least slow them down. There are others on earth, as many as twenty that I know of, but most likely more, so the agents could theoretically get another pair. But it won't be easy. I know a little bit about who carries these crows. They call themselves the Circle of the Crow, and they're sworn to protect the bell. Joey is one of them, but there are others, and some of them make Joey look like a punk. Safe to say, the crows won't be easy to replace, even by a couple of lunatics like the agents. So I practice the timing, and I learn to find the subtle signs that the two of them are jumping. I learn to read the fabric of their plane so I'll know when the crow begins to part it. And I wait. I know I'll get one shot at this. I'm guessing there are ways to protect the crow even during the phasing. I don't want to tip them off.

When the agents meet up together to sniff out New York City, a big task that requires both of them at once, I know my time has come. They are walking down the street—prowling down the street, is more like it—and even the hard-eyed New Yorkers know to move out of their way. Humans have a sense of when not to mess with people that could get them in trouble. More than I give them credit for. They range from dull to Caroline-status, but everyone has at least something of what you might call a sixth sense. Everyone knows to leave the agents alone to their dark work.

Everyone except me.

I keep pace with them. Walking backward, keeping a measured distance. They know nothing of me. Not until they phase out, that is. Then they see me there for half a heartbeat. I know

they see me there because they pause, but that is all it takes. It's like a baton passing gone wrong. They try to jump forward in space, but I snatch the crows from their hands. One in my left, one in my right. Their bodies pass through me, untouchable, but the crow totems are thin, and for that one moment, they're as real on my plane as they are on theirs. I pluck them from their hands like flowers, and the agents tumble back to the New York City sidewalk in a heap. Parsons knows immediately what has happened, and I see the hate burn silent within him as he scans the empty air in front of him. Douglas screams and swipes madly at the air, and an entire sidewalk full of people crosses to the other side of the street immediately. But all the spitting and swearing and raving in the world can't help him now. Once I bring the crows to my side, they're lost to him. I couldn't bring them across again even if I wanted to. I and everything with me walk the rope. I can observe their world. Nothing more. Unless the bell rings.

Parsons quiets Douglas and says, "Patience, patience." He looks around at the empty air, passing blindly over as I pump my fists in the air.

"There are other crows," he says quietly. "Other ways."

"I'll be ready!" I scream, right into his face, but he can't hear me, and eventually they turn away. I know that's not the last I'll see of the agents. I have the feeling that Parsons in particular is the kind of guy who only gets more pissed off when you needle him. I remember his golem stare, and I shudder as I watch them walk away, side by side.

Now. What do I do with these two crows?

I call Chaco. I use the two-fingered whistle he taught me, but I think he's just messing with me. I think he knows when I need him, he just wants to make me spit through my fingers. I'm not a good whistler. I can hear him careening through time even before I take a breath. He blows through the soul map and pops out in New York City. He flares his wings and settles on my shoulder.

"What can I do ya for, chief?" he asks.

"Any luck with the bell?"

"Not yet. But I've narrowed it down. When it finds a Keeper, I'll know. I'll be the first there. Although let me tell you, they're gonna have to work pretty damn hard to beat your grandmother. That old lady could kick some ass."

I nodded. Chaco often talks about Gam. He's been through thousands of Keepers, but he keeps coming back to Gam. Sometimes I wonder if Gam didn't have all this in mind when she gave Ana the bell. She was patient even for a Navajo, which basically put her at guru status. Me ending up here, with this gig, at this time, this is exactly the sort of long play she would drum up. The thought makes me smile, but it also worries me. Gam never did anything without good reason.

"I wonder if you could help me," I ask Chaco.

"Maybe. That's eighteen favors to zero now. I'm keeping track."

"Yeah, yeah. Listen. I can't pass through to the human plane, right?"

"That's why you dragged me all the way here? I was in a pretty awesome beach town, my man."

I ignore him. "But you can, right?"

He quiets.

"I know you can, Chaco. You did it with Gam. And I saw you too, back when I was Ben. A couple of times. One time you shit on my car."

He titters in what I can only assume is a bird laugh. "Yes. Yes, okay? I can. When a Keeper is declared—"

"But what about now? When there's no Keeper."

Chaco pauses.

"I dunno, bro. It's not good to mess around with the rules of this place. You don't want to piss off what's behind that curtain."

"Please. I have to get these crows to the other side."

"You mean to the girl you love and the doctor."

I pause. Am I that obvious? I suppose so.

"You know you can never be with her," Chaco says. "You know that, right? I mean, there ain't no way—"

"Yeah, yeah. I get it," I say. And I do. I think. "But I know they would be great allies of ours. Both her and Owen Bennet. I think you know this too."

Chaco puffs up in a birdish sigh. Then he bobs his beak. "Yes. I think so too."

"So you'll do it? You'll cross over?"

Chaco eyes me with cold calculation, then squawks in frustration. "I can tell this is going to be a hell of a run, with you."

"Chaco—"

"Yes, Walker. Yes, I'll carry the crows," he says.

I hold them out, one in each hand. He snatches them in his claws and then takes off in a whirl. I watch him rise, rise, and then blink out of view.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20

CAROLINE ADAMS

Imagine going to work again like it was just your typical Monday after meeting Death herself in a patient's room.

Imagine falling in love and then watching the one you love taken from you. Not even into death, but into something else. Something just as distant, but even less understood. And then the hospital gives you two working days off to pull yourself together, and then it's Monday and you're back at work again, answering your phone, helping your patients to the bathroom, administering meds, all while trying to ignore the fact that your world has fundamentally changed.

Owen is a hero. I expected nothing less. He was borderline adored on the floor to begin with, and then he got himself shot in my place and that just threw the entire hospital into a frenzy. The CEO met him personally. They gave him a ceremonial key to the complex at a big dinner a week later that was attended by every C-level executive. I think I was the only nurse. It was surreal. I thought they only did that stuff in movies. In typical Owen Bennet fashion he demurred and shrugged adorably through everything, one arm in a sling, the other resting softly over it.

The aftermath of the shooting went by in a blur of police questioning, mandatory counseling, and cleanup. There was no way Owen or I could tell the truth about what happened in that room. We'd be committed along with Sitsi Dejooli, Ben's mother, so we kept our lie simple. Two men claiming they were FBI agents barged into Ben Dejooli's room. Owen Bennet and I confronted

them, and Owen took a bullet for me. Then the two men took Ben from his bed and disappeared. The agents never showed up on camera. All the police had was our testimony, as well as that of two nurses who were the first on the code. They said they saw at least one man in a suit, which would have been Parsons, but couldn't say what happened to him. When they turned back around, he was gone, along with Ben.

The police put out an APB for the agents, but there was no trace of them. We were told the FBI had no record of employing an Agent Douglas or an Agent Parsons, and they declined further comment on what they deemed a state matter. The bullet markings didn't match anything on file, nor did any of the blood samples found. Not surprising.

It's also not surprising that this series of events was finally what broke Sitsi Dejooli's mind. She wouldn't respond to anybody: not the police, not me or Owen, not anyone. But in her quiet, staring pondering I sensed a certain measure of peace. I could see it in her coloring, too. Her yellow is tinged with a soft pink now, barely there, but consistent. It looks like the color of a woman who has seen more than her mind will allow. Rather than fight it and make sense of it, her mind has simply decided to close itself for a time. I'd be lying if I said part of me doesn't envy her. She recovered at ABQ General for two days. The only words I ever heard her say after the whole ordeal was her verbal consent to a transfer upstate to Los Alamos, where the Navajo Nation had arranged for her to live in a step-up care mental facility indefinitely. She turned her back on the Navajo, but it would appear that the Navajo hadn't turned their backs on her. The Council said it was the least they could do, given her loss. She was blood, after all.

And all the while I had a decision looming. I had entirely forgotten about it until I received the papers in the mail. My five years were up. My debt was forgiven. If I wished to stay at ABQ General I was to notify my nurse manager in writing by the end of the week. If not, they wished me well, thanked me for my service

at the CHC, and would be happy to write a reference on my behalf wherever I decided to go.

Check the box yes or no. Sign your name. Drop it off with your supervisor. Three simple steps that will define the trajectory of my life. It's enough to make you laugh out loud. They clearly don't know me. I am not good with decisions. I sweat over dinner plans. So I made lists: a pros list and a cons list. The old high-school approach.

Pros:

- The job is pretty good. Not wildly good. Not something I wake up every morning super jazzed for, but pretty good. Good enough, I decide.
- I'm already here. I'm settled. I have an apartment and a car, and I know the city.
- I can work at the rez. Which makes me feel like I'm doing something worthwhile. And I like the Navajo. For the most part.
- Owen Bennet.

I've avoided thinking about my feelings for Owen, because they're all wrapped up in crazy right now. But the bottom line is he would give his life for me. He proved that much back when Parsons tried to shoot me. I know what that means. Ben told me that he loved me. Owen showed it. To think that the world was within two inches of swapping him out for me is insane. It makes me go beet red and feel slightly ill at the same time. Let's be honest, of the two of us, he is the one you want on your team. He's Owen Bennet. I'm just...me. I put x2 next to his bullet point. Then I crossed it out and put x3. He deserves to be weighted more heavily.

Cons:

- If I keep it up here for much longer, there's a good chance this is where I'll play out the rest of my days.

I'm nearly thirty. All the girls say it gets harder to make stupid choices after thirty, even if they might make your life better in the long run. Things like travelling or nursing abroad. ABQ is okay, but let's face it, it's not exactly Paris.

- Ben is dead. And it's hitting me way harder than I thought it would.

I knew he was going to die. I knew the second the chemo regimen didn't stick. I had weeks with him to prepare myself, but it still hit me like a dump truck because I loved him. I hope I let him know that, but the more I think about our time together, the more I'm afraid I fretted so much about whether or not he loved me that I missed a chance to tell him I loved him. Typical.

- Ben isn't gone.

I put this on as a con because it's an argument against me staying here. I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes and for a split second I think I can still feel the soft pressure of his hand. I have to tell myself that whatever happened to him, he is beyond me now. I am slowly coming to peace with that—but I still want to know what happened to him. What it means. What the hell is. And I don't think I can do that if I stay here.

So there you have it. I stare at the list, two columns. It's hard not to call it what it is: Ben vs. Owen. Ben's dead. Owen is alive. So why is this so hard? At three in the morning it's easier to convince myself that I need to go. Nothing seems right around me anymore. The shadows of that day haunt me. The Ben factor has a heavy weighting, too. So heavy I'm not sure it can be measured. In the end, it's enough to make me check the 'No' box. I decide to pack it up. But then, the next day, I run into Owen as I'm about to hand in my resignation. I think he knows what I'm doing. I think he was on the lookout for me.

"Caroline," he says. "Wait. Please." He reaches out for me, and his fingers flutter briefly towards my hand before he drops his arm and looks at the ground. "You're leaving, aren't you," he says.

The *Bennet* x3 flashes in my mind. He looks so sad. Like the resignation letter in my hand is a personal rejection, when it's not. This place is all screwed up for me, now, that's all.

"I wish..." He grits his teeth and shakes his head. "I wish I was better at this. I wish I could stop you. Ben could have. I know that."

"Owen, please..." My mind is already full up on regrets. If Owen throws his hat in the ring, I'll never sleep again.

"No, I understand," he says, smiling sadly. "He...he was special. I just hope that I let you know..." He stutters and smooths at his white coat. "I hope I was able to make myself clear, that you are special too. I know he thought so. But so do I. I hope you know that."

I can't take this. These men have ruined me. I want to do the cowardly thing. I want to run away.

"I can't stop you. I know that," he says. "But I also can't help but think that if I had more time. If we had more time...maybe I could."

I'm crying as I push the letter through the slot. He watches it like it's the tail end of a train carrying his life away from him. It clinks inside the box with a hollow ping. I want him to shake his head and shuffle away. I want him to get mad at me, give me a disparaging look, even. But instead when I look back up at him he's still there, smiling sadly.

"Can I at least walk you to your car?" he asks.

Dammit, Owen. Of course you can walk me to my car, you beautiful man.

We're quiet on the walk out, our hands shoved into the pockets of our coats against the first real winter wind of the season. I turn to him, and the wind cuts at my face and streaks my tears sideways. "I wouldn't have left without saying goodbye to you. You know that, right? I owe you my life, Owen."

He shrugs. "I believe you," he says. At my car we pause. "I was thinking," he says, struggling. He puffs his coat out from the pockets.

"What?"

"I was thinking of doing something crazy and stupid. But I'm not sure I can."

I want to draw more out of him, but there's a subtle ringing in the distance, just barely sounding above the wind and a ripple in the sky draws our attention to the horizon at the same time. He

steps closer to me, so we're shoulder to shoulder. I know he feels it too: something broke through.

"Not again," he says.

"No. Look."

There, on the horizon, is a black speck. And it's growing.

Still, Owen pulls his hands from his pockets and angles himself in front of me, even after we watch as the speck grows into a bird, a huge bird, with a dull glint of red upon its head. A bird I recognize. A bird I saw die.

"How the hell?" I begin, but then I know. Somehow Ben is behind it.

The bird flies in near silence. Slowly, languorously flapping its wings like an ancient beast, which I suddenly know it is, in one form or another.

"My God, it's huge," Owen says. "Is it coming after us?"

"No. Not in that way. I don't think it'll hurt us."

Now it's careening out of the sky, slowing, and dropping down straight for us, and I'm rethinking what I just said. But in an instant it flares its wings and pulls up before flopping rather unceremoniously on the hood of my car. It sort of tumbles down the windshield and then manages to stop itself on the bonnet by gripping a windshield wiper in its beak. It shakes its head, and I swear if I could hear it talk it would be telling us to keep that landing between the three of us. I can't blame it, though, because I see it's got something in both claws. Something it deposits on the hood after a preliminary, twitchy look about itself.

With one final glance at both of us, it lets out a deafening trio of *caws* and swoops up into the sky. I can feel the wind from its wings on my face as it's up, up, and out. I feel that distortion again, like a popping bubble: the world's cabin re-pressurizing. And it's gone. In its place are two crow totems, side by side, touching wing tips.

We stare at them, dumbfounded. Owen is the first to speak. "Well, that's about all the providence I need."

He picks up one in his gloved hand, and tucks it in his pocket. "I believe the other is for you," he says.

I pick mine up as well. It seems to hum, in a way only I can hear. It feels right. I grasp it tightly, protectively, then I tuck it away. When I look up again, Owen is watching me carefully.

"That stupid thing I was thinking," he says. "I think I can do it, now. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"I can't stop you from leaving," he says. "But I was wondering if you'd let me leave with you." He cringes a bit, looking slightly ill with anticipation. "It doesn't have to be like that, or anything, of course. I'd just...it's just that I have this strange feeling. And it's been growing stronger. And it's that Ben, or whoever he is now after all that happened to him...I don't think he's gone. He's just changed. And I think he'll be needing our help. Am I weird in thinking that? Am I going insane?"

I shush him by basically running into him. Before I know what I'm doing I've thrown myself into his arms and am hugging him. No passionate kiss. No longing look into anyone's eyes. The last time I expected that to happen things didn't work out. I'm done with perfect moments. From here on out, I'm just going to work on taking advantage of whatever moments I'm given. Perfect or not.

Owen puts his arms around me in delayed shock, and even that thought makes me want to giggle like a teenager. But I compose myself and step away from him, holding both of his hands in mine like I'm physically keeping him here with me. If things are about to go down, there's nobody on earth I'd rather have on my side than Doctor Owen Bennet.

"No," I say.

His face falls.

"No no no. I mean *no* as in ÷no, you're not crazy.' Yes to everything else."

He looks back up at me with a wry grin, still hesitant.

"Sorry. I always screw these kind of things up."

He lets out a big laugh. I've never heard him laugh before, I realize. And as he does, a flock of crows flies by overhead, an enormous flock—hundreds of them, blotting the sky like dribbled

ink. They seem to catch his laugh as one, and all of them call out against the winter wind together.

Maybe it's just a coincidence. But I doubt it.

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several people helped me out at various stages of this novel, and I'd like to take a moment to give thanks. First and foremost, to my wife, Emily, whose experience as an oncology nurse proved invaluable in crafting the perspective of Caroline Adams. I'd also like to thank Emily in general for her patience and fortitude in being married to a writer. That can't be easy.

I'd like to thank my editor Laura and the editing crew at Red Adept Publishing, along with Kit, my beta reader, for their work in polishing the story. They all have eagle eyes.

In writing the Navajo lore, I drew in part upon the research and essays of Leland C. Wyman ("Navajo Ceremonial System") and R. W. Shufeldt ("Mortuary Customs of the Navajo Indians"). I also learned from Tony Hillerman's work; his *Joe Leaphorn* novels are an education in the Navajo culture in and of themselves.

Finally, I'd like to thank you, the reader, for taking a chance on my book. Whether or not you liked *Follow the Crow*, please leave a review to help others decide on the novel. There's more to come, and if you'd like to be notified when I have another book out, you can join my mailing list here: <http://eepurl.com/SObZj>.

It is an entirely spam-free experience. I promise.

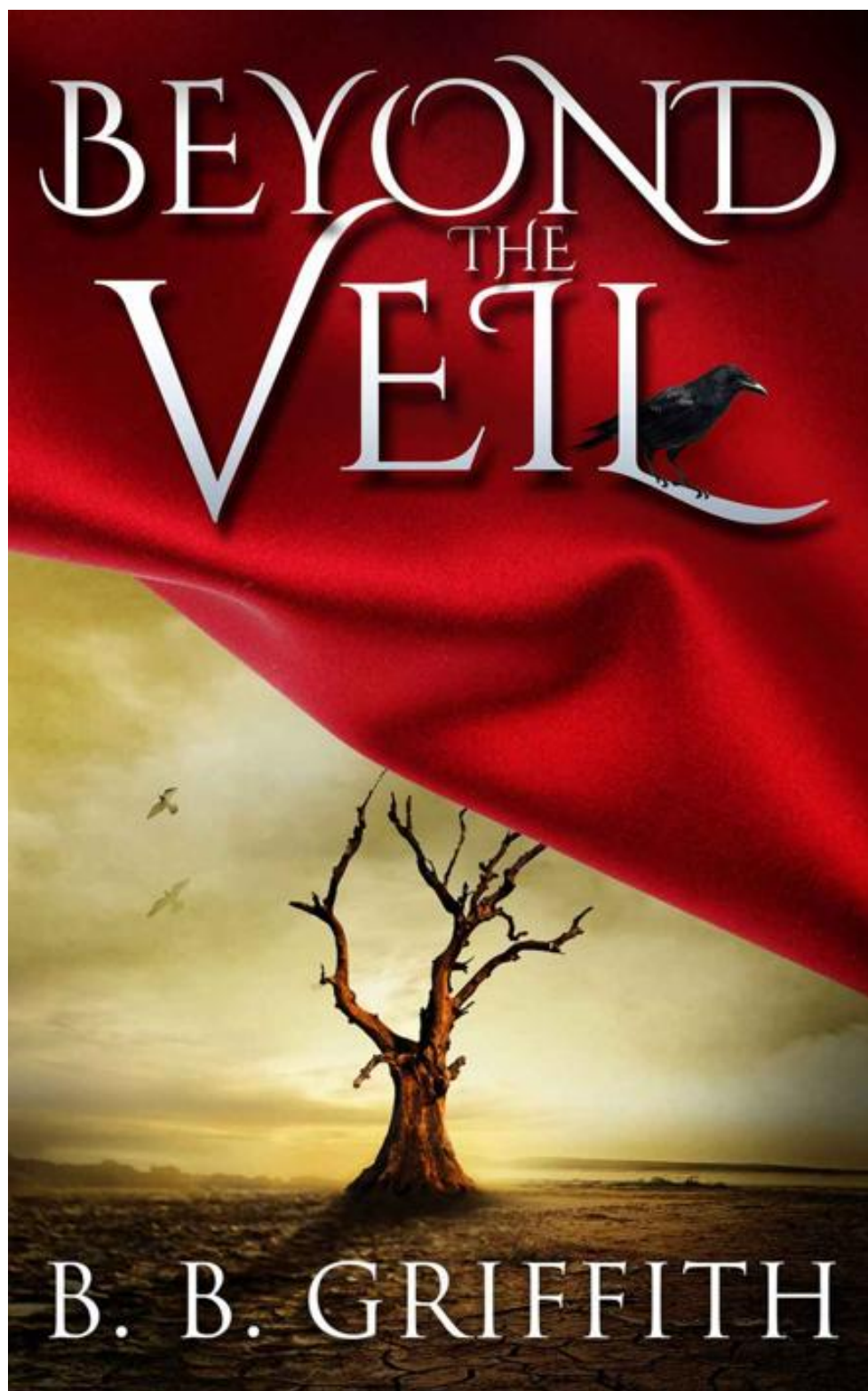
I can also be reached over at my digital home:
bbgriffith.com

Feel free to drop me a line. I'd love to hear from you.

Happy reading,

-BBG

OceanofPDF.com



OceanofPDF.com

BEYOND THE VEIL

VANISHED: BOOK TWO

B. B. GRIFFITH

GRIFFITH PUBLISHING
DENVER

OceanofPDF.com

BEYOND THE VEIL - TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter 1: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 2: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 3: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 4: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 5: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 6: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 7: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 8: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 9: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 10: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 11: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 12: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 13: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 14: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 15: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 16: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 17: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 18: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 19: The Walker</u>

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

*To Dad.
For believing in my stories.*

OceanofPDF.com

*Shall any gazer see with mortal eyes,
Or any searcher know by mortal mind;
Veil after veil will lift—but there must be
Veil upon veil behind.*

Edwin Arnold
The Light of Asia

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

GRANT ROMER

My name is Grant Romer, and I'll ride my bike almost anywhere, but I especially like this graveyard. I ain't scared. Pap says I shouldn't play here, even though the whole time I've been biking around and through it, it's been nothing but quiet. Which is for at least a year. Which is a lot for me, since my whole life is only eight years so far.

Pap thinks I'm settin' at Mom and Dad's plot when I come here, but I'm not. Not always. Mostly I just like to ride my bike around and listen to things fly by me, like the trees and the gravestones and the little flags they put in front of the gravestones, because it's pretty quiet here and you can hear the *whoosh* each thing makes when you ride by it fast. Plus it cools me down. In the summer I do lots of things just to stay cool. Pap says there ain't no place on earth hotter in the summer than Midland, Texas. I ain't been nowhere else, but I believe it.

Every time on my ride over I think how Pap says I should stop coming here, and every time I just pass under the Fairview Cemetery arch anyway, and up until now for an entire year of my life it's been nothing but quiet. And this time it's quiet too. But it's different quiet. It's bad quiet.

For starters, there's no mowing sounds, not even coming over the air from a distance where it sounds like not much more than a buzzing bee. And the tons of birds that chirp all day long, they ain't just ain't chirping; they're gone. All I can see is three big crows sitting like drops of mud on the top of the arch as I go

under. They watch me ride under them with little ticking movements of their heads, but they don't make a sound neither.

I skid my bike to a stop when I'm a little ways inside. There's nobody here. I mean, there usually ain't a lot of people here to begin with, but there's bound to be *some* people. Not today. I look back at the fat crows, they look at me, then they look down the hill to the center of the grounds where there's a big old house. It's where the graveyard people work. Usually there's a car or two. Now there's nobody. No cars. It's getting on in the afternoon, but it's still a weekday, and during the weekday grownups work even in the summertime, so I know people should be there, but they ain't.

I hear Pap in my head, and he says, "*Son, you stay away from that graveyard. It ain't for the young.*" I think for a second about turning around. But when's the last time you ever had a whole graveyard to yourself? I decide to make my circle. With nobody to see me or get in my way, I get going real fast. The gravestones and the trees don't just flutter in my ears, they start to whine. The air makes tears in my eyes, and they trickle back and behind my head, and I'm smiling, and Pap's voice is gone, and there's nothing in my brain but air that feels double cold 'cause Pap just gave me a buzz cut, and my mind goes blank, and that's why I almost eat it on the rock in the middle of the road.

I swerve at the last second, and my foot slips off the pedal and skids on the ground, and my front tire goes all wobbly, so I jump off the bike onto the grass and roll about a bit until I come to a stop sitting right on my butt. Good thing ain't nobody around to see it. That's not how I ride bikes. I hardly ever fall.

I pick grass from my elbow and walk back to my bike, which looks good enough. I pick it up then look back at the rock. It's glinting in the late sunlight. I set my bike down again and walk over to it and stop. It ain't just any rock. It's a gravestone. Right there in the middle of the road. It reads Andrew Gordon Masterson, and it has the date 1968 on it, which is the born date, but there's no dead date. It has a price tag on it, too. \$799. Which is a *lot* of money for a rock. I don't care how glinty it is; that's

almost eight hundred dollars. It's chipped on one side pretty bad, and I can see the bit that came off just a little ways away. Like it was dropped there. I wonder if Andrew Gordon Masterson dropped it there, or if somebody tried to steal it, but ain't nobody stupid enough to steal another man's gravestone. Maybe Andrew Gordon Masterson was trying to steal it. Come to think of it, this whole place has that empty, stolen feeling about it, like the grocery store on Wadley Avenue at the end of the week after the roughnecks pick it clean and all that's left is some cans of spinach and pickled things and the ugly fruits and veggies.

I decide to go talk to Mom and Dad about it.

Their place is on top of a low hill overlooking the old house, not far from where I almost bit it on my bike. It's still as hot as it was at noon, but the shadows of the gravestones are getting long now, so I know it must be gettin' on. I decide to sit with my back against Mom's this time. No offense to Dad or nothin'. I sat under his shadow last time. I like to switch it up.

"What the heck's goin' on here, Mom?" I ask. Don't worry, I know she's not gonna answer. I'm not stupid. I still talk though. Not quite sure why. A big beetle walks slow as an elephant across the top of Mom's rock. I pick it up and set it on the ground. I like beetles, but I can't have them on Mom's rock. It ain't right. I wonder if Pap paid \$799 for Mom's and Dad's rocks. They're almost two years old now, and they still look brand new, so I bet they were expensive. No wonder Pap had to go back to work on the rigs.

I can hear when the crows take off from the arch back at the entrance—that's how quiet it is. They come my way, circle over my head up high, and then shoot over to the old house, where they land with the sound of bouncing marbles on the metal gutter at the edge of the roof.

"I think those crows want me to follow 'em," I say. "So that's what I'm gonna do."

I pull myself up using Mom's rock and then slap the top of both of them like I'm giving Mom and Dad high fives. Then I pick up my bike, hop on, and coast my way toward the old house.

When I get there I stop hard, and my brakes squeak so loud I think the folks underground might catch a note or two. There's junk all over outside the house. Papers caught in the bushes and receipts smashed into the pebbles that line the walkway, like they were pounded there by boots. A strip of caution tape flutters off one side of the door in what little bit of breeze there is. The front door is closed, but the wood is splintered near the lock. I try it. It opens. I stare inside for a second. The crows nearly set me runnin' when they clack their way toward me on the ledge, walking like stick figures.

"Git outta here," I whisper at them, fluttering my hands, but it's halfhearted and kinda chickenshit, and I think they know it. Right now I don't mind the company, even if they're birds. One cocks his head at me, but none of them move.

The place has been run through. That much is easy to see, even from the porch. Looks like it was shut down in a hurry, then maybe some kids got a mind to pick it over—maybe somebody like Otis and his crew from up the street from me. They'd do something like that. Or maybe Andrew Gordon Masterson. But Otis and Andrew ain't here now. Nobody's here. This place is hollow. I can feel it.

I reach inside and flick the light switch. Nothing. Which concerns me, seeing as a light's clearly coming from somewhere in there. It's reflecting off the walls leading around the corner to the garden in the middle of the place. It's not a normal light, neither. It's a shimmery, electric blue light, like one of those underwater lights at the swimming pool. It looks like the kind of light that might have run a kid like Otis straight out of this house.

Not me, though. For some reason, some reason that I can't rightly explain, that shimmering blue light tugs at me. It's something I want to see. Pap told me a story once about how sometimes when the weather is just right, lightning doesn't shoot straight up and down. Sometimes it can become a floaty ball. He saw it once, working late on the rig. A floating, crackling ball of lightning creeping around out in the flat desert. He said two men tore off after it in their truck, like moths to a flame, but it popped

before they got near it, and it was a good thing, too, 'cause it popped like a grenade going off. Pap said that wasn't even the scary part, though. The scary part was how much he wanted to go after it right along with them. Like he was hypnotized.

That's what I'm feeling right now. I'm one of those dumbasses in the truck that went after the lightning. I know it, and still I walk inside.

The last sunshine of the day is cutting through the big stained glass window set in the side of the wall to my left, and it colors the floating dust kicked up from all the scattered books and the overturned chairs purple and red and yellow. I walk past a desk to my right that's all pulled apart like whoever worked there lost their keys and freaked out and then just ran.

Ran from whatever's in that courtyard, probably—so I walk toward the courtyard. I'm no wussy. It's been two years since I was really scared, and I said to myself that I'd never be that scared again.

I'm expecting some sort of fresh hell when I turn the corner, but that ain't what I see. It's actually kind of pretty. I walk through the open screen door into the garden, and there it is, floating in the air above the flowers under the sunset sky. It looks like a patch of water in the air. It's shimmering and blue, kind of like a little pond that got lost. I walk slowly around it. It's wide, but it's thinner than paper. If I look at it side-on, it nearly disappears, like the edge of a knife. And that's when I see that something is testing the surface of it. Just little pokes, like a finger trying to push through a balloon.

That stops me cold. Because that ain't right. Nothing about this is exactly *normal*, but the floating pond thing feels like a *right* thing. It's hard to explain how I know this, but I do. It feels like it's got every right to be there, same as the flowers and the bushes. I bet most times it's quiet and flat. But the poking? Nothing about that is right at all.

It's especially not right when I see what I think is the outline of a face pressing through. I can't make out what kind of face

because it's still covered, but it's trying to look around, and it's pushing forward here and there like it's testing for a weak spot.

Then it looks at me.

Every hair on my body stands straight up. Even my buzzed hair feels like it stands up a little straighter. But that's not the worst part of it. When I move to the side, it follows me. It sees me. Then it opens its mouth into a silent scream.

What does it sound like? Hell if I know. I'm no wussy, but I told you I ain't stupid, neither—I get the hell out of there. I run as fast as I can. I don't look back. I don't do anything except jump on my bike and pedal and pedal until the wind is ripping at me again and I'm free of that old house. Then I'm under the arch and out of the graveyard. I can hear the crows squawking at me, but they can stuff it. They can keep the graveyard for themselves.

*

Pap is working all the way over near Lubbock these days so I thought I'd beat him home from the rig, but I lost track of time in the graveyard, and when I get home it's dark and he's reading the *Midland Reporter* on his old chair. The nightly news is on low on the TV in front of him so I know I blew it, missed dinner. News is after dinner for Pap. That's the way it goes.

"Sorry, Pap," I say before he can say anything. He rustles the paper a bit then sets it down on his lap. He doesn't look mad. I've never seen Pap mad. I never want to. I work hard not to. So he's not mad, but he does look tired. And I know it's because of me. But not just for being tardy tonight—for everything. Because Mom and Dad died and I was still around so he had to stop working on his wood things and go back to the rig jobs for money. He's never said this, of course, but I know it. He's pretty old. He should be working on wood things right now, not driving to and from Lubbock and working on rigs.

Pap picks up a small glass of whisky carefully with his four-fingered hand and takes a sip. "Food's in the fridge, son," he says. He calls me *son* even though I'm not his *son* son. He's always

called me *son*. He called Dad *son* too, which was sometimes confusing. Back then.

"Yessir," I say, and I trudge to the kitchen to open the fridge. It's fried chicken—my favorite. I'll eat it cold. I don't care. I carry the bucket out to the living room and sit across from Pap on the old bench he made by the window. Our house ain't too big. The living room is kind of the dining room too. And the sitting room. And TV room. I chomp on the chicken while Pap rustles the paper and sips his drink.

"The reason you're coming in so late have anything to do with this?" he asks, tossing a folded section of the paper my way. I catch it with greasy fingers and open it up like a napkin. The front page reads, *Fairview Cemetery Abandoned* and beneath that in smaller letters, *Former customers encouraged to claim their headstones*.

"What's a headstone?" I ask, partly to buy time.

"It's a grave marker," Pap says, looking at me carefully. "The article says ol' Andy Arnaud, who owns Fairview, up and vanished a little over a week ago. Abandoned the whole place. His employees have no idea where he is, but not a one of them'll go back to work. Won't set foot there."

I cough a little as a bit of chicken goes down the wrong pipe.

"Somethin' tells me you are of a different mind," Pap says, which is his grandpa way of saying he knows I was running around the graveyard. I look at the ground. I can hear him sip the last of his drink and wipe the wet ring the glass made from the side table before he gets up.

"Son, I ain't mad about you exploring that place," he says, which gets me to look up again. "I understand the draw. I really do. I just want you to be safe is all. Hear?"

"Yessir."

He rustles my hair and pats my shoulder. The skin of his hand feels rough and strong, and he smells like fresh oil and sawdust. He walks past me and sets his glass in the sink.

"I'm headed to sleep. Don't stay up. Just 'cause it's summer don't mean you can stay up all night."

"Yessir."

He pauses before the door to his room. He glances at me over his shoulder. "You'd tell me if you saw anything there that wasn't supposed to be there, right?"

This catches me so out of the blue it's like I'm hit upside the head for a second. Does he know? If he doesn't, would he think I'm crazy? The last thing Pap needs is a crazy grandson running around sucking up all the money he works hard for. The way he says it makes me think he knows more than he's letting on. But what did I see? I'm not even sure myself. A floating pond? A weird face? You don't just go around saying crap like that. Not in Midland.

"Y-yessir," is all I can stammer out. He nods before going in and closing the door softly behind him.

Pap's got a lot on his plate. Whatever this is, he don't need it too. I make a promise to myself then and there that I won't ever go near that house again.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Right?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

THE WALKER

It's a strange time to be dead.

Depending on how you look at it, I've been dead either for a year, or for forever and ever, so forth and so on, ad infinitum. The brain tumor got me about a year ago, but what I became has been around since the dawn of time. So you tell me how old I am. You know what? Save it. Let's just go with thirty. A year isn't a long time on the job, so in a sense I'm still a rookie, but even I know something isn't right beyond the veil, in the land of the dead.

I go by a lot of names, Death being the most accurate and the most boring. The Ferryman is another, but I've never been on a boat in my life. I used to get carsick on the rides from Chaco Indian Reservation to Albuquerque General Hospital back when I was getting chemo, so I doubt I'd last long on a boat. Then there's Azrael, if you're into the whole fallen-angel thing, but I'm no angel. Not even a fallen one. There's the Grim Reaper, of course. Pale guy in a cosmic bathrobe who carries around an enormous farming tool. About the only thing similar between me and that guy is that we're both pale, although I didn't used to be. Oh, and we're both barefoot. No robe for me. I was a cop with the Navajo Nation Police Department when I was alive, and I feel most comfortable in uniform, although the one that I wear now is black. No badge. And no gun. I don't carry any weapons, actually. Well, except my fingers. Which I'll get to in a sec.

My bird, Chaco, he calls me Walker. He's been around for a long while and goes by a million names himself, but I call him

Chaco because it reminds me of my roots on the rez. He's a bit of a smart-ass, but he generally knows what he's talking about, being as old as time. Since he's the only thing I regularly talk to, I guess I get called Walker a lot. It makes the most sense, too, since my job is to walk the soul map. I find souls ready to go (whether or not they want it is another matter), and I cut the fraying cord of their essence that keeps them tied to the living world. I use my fingers. Pointer and middle. Snip, snip. Go ahead. Try it yourself. Just like that. I tuck the remainder of their soul string back up into the soul map, button up their life story with the stories of everyone else, and then I escort them to the veil.

How do you get this job, you ask?

Well, there's this bell. A special bell. A one-of-a-kind bell that was forged with the essence of the living world and the world of the dead and everything in between. And if I was to ring this bell at the right time, say when my poor brain has decided to crap out on me and I'm seconds from death, well, then I'm spared from death... but I become the Walker. I become Death himself. That's some serious irony, right there.

Don't get me wrong. What I do must be done. But I'm not gonna sit here staring at a soul map full of billions of life forces that I cannot touch until their final moments and then tell you that I don't occasionally get lonely.

One-of-a-kind bell, one-of-a-kind veil, one-of-a-kind job.

The veil is a big, billowing, red curtain that comes in as you're going out. It's freestanding. Like the big puppeteer in the sky plunked down a busker stage right where you kicked the bucket. I can't cross the veil. That's not my territory. I'm the Walker. I inhabit no land—not the land of the living, not the land of the dead, not even the thin place in-between. Only fully severed souls can cross the veil. Most people go willingly enough—some skip, some dance, some sob their way through. Some try to run away. Trust me when I say running never works. The veil follows you, and so do I.

But lately the veil has been... acting strangely. If such a thing can be said of a spooky sheet of fabric. When I started this gig, this

was how it went: When someone died I was drawn to their fraying soul string, I cut them free, and in came the veil. The dead went through the veil (or I tossed them through the veil, if they were being dicks about it) and then the veil disappeared. Ta-da! Job well done. On to the next.

But lately things with the veil have changed. I'm losing ground to it. I don't know how else to explain it, but trust me. Like I said, I was Navajo. Still am. Once a Navajo, always a Navajo. I know a thing or two about having my ground taken from me.

Maybe it's best if I just show you what I mean.

I get a tug that takes me to a forest at the base of Mount Fuji in Japan. A place called *Aokigahara*. It's also called the Suicide Forest. The place is known for its silence. The trees here are so dense, they cut all the wind. Your normal forest creatures don't come here. The trees are too thick to run from predators. Chaco told me once that there are certain places that the birds avoid, and at the top of that list is any place without wind. No chattering squirrels, no birds, no wind, dense forest—it all makes for a great place to go hang yourself if you never want to be found.

If you guessed this isn't the first time I've been to the Suicide Forest, you guessed right. About a hundred people kill themselves here every year. Only a fraction are ever found by the living. I find every one. It's what I do.

I step off the soul map and into a bubble of forested silence, like I've dropped down to a garden at the bottom of the sea. The undergrowth is thick. The trees themselves aren't huge, but there are tons of little ones, maybe as thick as my wrist. I reach out and touch one. It bends and snaps back, and it rustles the trees around it, but the sound seems caught up in the canopy, like it was snatched away and stowed in the treetops. I don't immediately see the soul, but I do see a long, satin ribbon stretching out of view.

In the year or so that I've been doing this, I've found suicides come in two camps: those who go through with it wanting to die, and those who go through with it not wanting to die. In the Suicide Forest, if you *kind of* want to die but aren't real sure of it

yet, you bring a long ribbon or piece of string along with the rope you're thinking about using on your neck. When you trek off the beaten path, a little ways in you tie the ribbon to a tree, then a little ways later you tie another ribbon, or loop the string around a bush, and so on. There's a ranger here; his name is Honji. It is his sole job to follow these strings when he finds them. Sometimes he finds a troubled case on the other end that he can talk to. Sometimes just a body swinging from the end of a rope. Honji is one of those people who has a deeper sense for the world beyond the veil. A sixth sense, you might say. He is eighty-eight years old. He volunteered for ribbon-duty a lifetime ago, and still does it every day without complaint, and still sheds quiet tears every time he is too late. He is a beautiful soul. In a lot of ways, the color of his soul string reminds me of Caroline's.

This time around, I beat Honji to the punch. I'm drawn by the sound of laughter toward a dense area of brush where I see a fluttering red ribbon. I push through the wall of green, and there I find a young Japanese man at the base of an old oak tree. He's sitting on the ground, hunched like a rag doll in a rumped suit, and he's laughing so hard that tears roll down his face. He hears me, and his head snaps up. He's smiling. When I come to clip a soul string, I appear differently to each person who sees me. I never know who they are seeing, but this time I must not have looked too out of place, because he still laughs, and it's a relieved laugh.

"After all that," he says, speaking in Japanese. "Everything I did and said, all of the veiled goodbyes and donating everything I own, I jump from the branch and the rope breaks." He wipes tears from his eyes and smiles wider. "And you know what? I'm happy about it! That's all it took! I see now. I see! I can live. I will live!"

He laughs again and leans back on his hands and sighs contentedly, like this was all a big ruse. There's only one problem. I don't get called to big ruses. Something in the quiet way I watch him stills his laughter and drops his smile a notch.

"What is it?" he asks.

I point above his head. There, his body spins slowly from a rope wrapped around the branch he jumped from moments ago. A

rope that is very much intact. His tongue bulges out at twice the normal length, red and purple like a cut of pork tenderloin. His neck looks bunched and crumpled on one side. His head rests nearly on his shoulder. He died instantly.

"Oh..." he says, as if he's just scared away a bird he was watching. He eventually turns back to me, and there's no hint of laughter about him now. "So that would make you..."

"Yep."

This startles him. People are always shocked when I talk to them. It goes back to the movie thing. The ol' point and leer of the man in black. I may point, but I hardly ever leer. Talking to recently dead people is my new equivalent of a Saturday night. I don't waste the chance. It's about all I've got these days.

"But... but... no. How could... how could this happen?" he asks. He's rubbing his face. I think the newly dead still get an echo of the old sensation of touch. He still feels the world around him. But it's not his world anymore.

"Well, jumping from a tree with a rope around your neck might have something to do with it," I say.

"A joke? Really?"

"Sorry." I forget that the freshly dead don't have a real sense of humor. Neither do I, not really, although I'm trying. The Navajo have a... unique sense of humor. When we crack jokes, you can't tell. Maybe it's a joke, maybe it's a grocery list. That's where the humor comes from. If you're laughing right now, there's a good chance you're an Indian.

Anyway, the last thing I want is to become some sort of dour visage of death during the only time I actually get to talk to people, so I'm working on my material with each visit. It's not going so great.

"Look," I say. "What's done is done. Whatever was hurting you back there"—I point up to his swaying body—"that can't get you here anymore. I'm just gonna clip your soul string—it's frayed beyond repair now—and show you through the veil. It'll be all right."

"That thing?" he asks, pointing a shaking finger over my shoulder.

I turn around, and there it is. It startles me, too. "Yeah. That's it."

"Well it doesn't *look* all right," he says, and I can see that he's gone paler still. Paler even than the ankles hanging above his head. And I can see why.

The veil isn't the veil anymore.

It's supposed to be a red curtain. Softly billowing in the breeze, like a rich man's laundry on the line. But this thing is just... wrong. There's a brownish-black color creeping up it now, like the bottom has been sitting in a pool of oil. And it's twitchy, as if a bunch of tiny fists are punching it from behind. This thing looks more like boiling lake water than the veil I've come to know. When did this happen? Come to think of it, the color *had* been changing recently, but I thought maybe it was a trick of the light, or the darkness, or whatever. I go a lot of places at a lot of times. To be honest, after about a month on the job, I kind of tuned the veil out. It's always there eventually. It's the people that I have to be concerned with. The souls I need to cut free.

"Oh shit," I say. Which is exactly the wrong thing to say in front of a skittish soul.

"÷Oh shit?' What's ÷oh shit?'" he asks, really panicking now. He jumps up into a crouch. He's gone past pale into a shade of milky green, like he's gonna puke. Which would be a first. A dead guy puking. What would even come up?

"It's n-nothing. Listen to me, you have to go beyond the veil. It's what you do. It's gonna get you in the end." But I know my words are falling on deaf ears.

We got a runner.

He springs up and tears off through the trees behind him, leaving his swinging body behind. My old cop instincts kick in, and I take off after him. You'd be surprised how fast a guy can negotiate a thick forest when he's scared to death and he can't quite feel it when he bounces off trees and gets thrashed by branches. Me? I still get winded. I think it's a product of being as

close to the living world as I am, even without being a part of it. I get shades of experience and feeling as well. It takes me almost a whole minute of weaving and slipping and shoving through brambles and over a rotten layer cake of dead leaves before I remember, again, that while I might not have him in a footrace, I sure as shit have him beat when it comes to time.

When I want to walk the soul map, I swirl a hole in the living world. It creates a time bubble that I step through, and off I go. If I swirl it just a little bit, it creates the time bubble without the hole. Think of it like a DJ on the turntables, but instead of music, I'm screwing with time. Just call me DJ Time. You'd laugh if I told you how many footraces I had to gut out before I figured out this little trick. So I reach out in front of me and I swirl the space, just like I'm waxing a car. If anyone could see me, I'm sure I'd look like a shitty mime lost in the forest. Everything around me slows, and suddenly the world is my movie on slo-mo, only here I am walking through it all like normal. I'm not gonna lie: this is definitely a perk of the job.

I walk through the slowed world around me, and in about a hundred steps I catch up to the guy. He's turning his head in tiny increments, and I can see that he catches me out of the corner of his eye because his pupils start to pinprick by degrees. To him, I bet I look like I'm moving at hundreds of miles an hour. Like I'm a streak of black light. I stop in front of him, crack my neck, and get a good hold on his arm with one hand. I let out a breath, then I swirl the other way with my free hand.

Time snaps back, and the guy snaps around with it, spinning around my body like a tetherball as I fling him to the ground. I dive on him and pin him. He swings at me, and his fists glance off me. I feel an echo of pressure. Nothing really.

"Hey!" I yell, slapping his face. "Hey! Stop it!" He pushes at my face and muffles my mouth, but I shake him off. "Stop! You're making an ass of yourself, man."

"No!" he yells. "I'm not going in that floating rag! Let me go!"

I fight to pin his arms to his chest like I'm packing him away. "I told you. The veil always wins. Look!"

I point over his head, and he cranes his neck around. There it is. Just like before. Only closer. A lot closer. Closer than it usually is at this point in a chase. I crinkle my nose. It smells now, too. Like dirty, drying mud. I try to keep the disgusted look off my face.

"So you can either run your ass off in the world you left behind until this thing crushes you and keeps crushing you forever, or you can let me cut your string and you go where you're supposed to go."

He stills.

"Will it hurt?" he asks.

"The cut? No. Actually people say it feels like finally popping your ears after a lifetime of being stuffed up."

"No, the veil." I can tell the fight is out of him. I ease up on him, and he sits up, eyes wide with terror. The veil creeps toward him even still.

"I told you, man. I don't know. But it's where you go. End of story."

He drops his hands to the dead leaves on either side of him and lowers his head. "Shit. Just... shit. It wasn't even that bad, you know? What I had here. It just... it wasn't that bad."

Moments like this—when all the shine of sweet release and whatnot is stripped off and these poor souls are faced with their choices and hindsight is crystal clear—they're tough to take. Not much can tug at me anymore, but this does.

"It is what it is." I know it comes out sounding cold, but it's not meant to.

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to go through that thing."

"I know more than you think about the consequences of a single choice," I say, my voice flat.

I think of the bell. I think of Caroline. I think of the last seconds I had with her. The kiss that should have been the first of hundreds, thousands. And I think of my sister Ana, trapped in this job before me. She didn't have a choice. She was only eight years old. She had no idea what the bell meant, what happens when it chimes. How it saves the ringer from death by making him Death

itself. "Sometimes one choice can ring out louder than hell," I say. "But it is what it is."

He looks at me as I bring my hand over his head. I make like scissors with my fingers. He nods. I gently grasp his frayed soul string, sick and struggling, like a lightbulb on its last leg. It was strong once and shined like woven silver, but it's done for now. His eyelids flutter in anticipation as I snip it cleanly. Then he actually smiles.

"You're right," he says. "That feels... awesome."

I fold the frayed string up and into the swirled air above him, sewing it into the fabric of the soul map along with all those that came before it. Their experiences form the base of the map. The foundation itself.

"Time to go," I say, and I pull him up. When I turn around again, the veil is three feet from my face. I barely keep myself from screaming in surprise. The guy is tensed under my grip. He's tugging away, and I don't blame him. I've been wondering what's beyond the veil ever since I got this job, but looking at it right now, I think I can wait a little longer to figure it out. Just when I think the guy is fixing to bolt again, the veil doesn't give him a choice.

It reaches out and eats him. Eats him right out of my hand like a dog would a piece of meat when you aren't watching close enough. One second he's there, the next the veil has swept up and around him, and he's gone in a blink. I pull back my hands like it's electric.

"What has gotten into you?" I ask. I realize I'm talking to a cosmic piece of cloth, but right now it doesn't really feel like a doorway. It feels like an entity. It feels like it's trying to tell me something. The little punches from the other side are intensifying right around where I'm standing. One big one comes out, like a bowling ball thrown against the back of a sheet of canvas, and it's too fast for me to get away from. The veil sweeps out and around me, and I flinch and squint... until it falls back away. It passes through me. I feel nothing. It makes me a little relieved and a little bummed out at the same time.

"You can't touch me," I say, but all the same I back up. It doesn't follow. "I'm the Walker. You have no power over me." I'm feeling cockier now, ten or so steps back. "Nothing has power over me but the bell, you old rag. You got your soul. Now leave."

The veil should leave. There are rules about these things. Guy goes through veil, veil disappears. But the veil isn't leaving. Which is not good, because if this rule is breaking down, other rules are breaking down, and I work in a business where if the rules break down, shit hits the fan. The rules keep things in balance. I don't want to know what happens if the balance between the worlds falls apart. In fact, right now, with the veil staring me down, I'm about the most terrified I've been since I died. Which is saying a lot.

That is, until something pushes from the other side, stretching the veil tight around the five points of what look like five fingertips. It's quick, but it's undeniable. Then they're gone.

Now I'm the most terrified I've ever been.

If you ever visit Chaco Rez, which I wouldn't suggest you ever do without a Navajo guide, you'll see a fair number of Navajo who have just rolled over with what the US government and the Tribal Council give them every month. That's one type of Navajo. But there are others. Some of us, and it's more than you might think, if we're backed into a corner, we can turn the tables by talking. Then there are guys like me, who snap back. The more we're scared, the harder we snap. I think it's part of the reason I was kind of a shitty cop. A good investigator but a shitty cop.

"Listen to me, you piece of toilet paper. You did your part. Now you get the fuck out of here. Take your fingers and shove them up your ass."

The veil billows in waves, almost like it's laughing, or something is laughing behind it. Then it begins to dissipate slowly, blowing away like sand in an invisible wind until I'm alone in the forest. I blow out a big breath.

This has something to do with the bell and the two agents that are on the hunt for it. I just know it. Chaco, my bird, is on the hunt too, and he's a better hunter, what with him being an

immortal creature tied to the bell and all, but still, it would make me and all the good people who make up the Circle of the Crow back in the land of the living feel a whole lot better if he just hurried up and found the damn thing already. He says he's close, but the bell doesn't fully present itself until it's found a new Keeper. I told him maybe he should have been a bloodhound or a homing pigeon or something instead of a crow, and he told me that the Walkers never understand. He likes to remind me that, while there have been thousands of me over the years, there has only ever been one of him.

I feel another tug on the soul map. I look around myself at the forest and shake my head in the silence. Duty calls. And this time, if the poor soul doesn't walk freely into that damn veil, I'm tossing them in from a few feet out.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

CAROLINE ADAMS

I have a hunch that the bell has already passed us by, but I'm still new to this Circle of the Crow thing, so I keep my feelings to myself. Then there's a knocking on the front door of our RV. Owen opens it up, and Big Hill is standing there. I take one look at him and know my hunch is right. It's time to move on.

Big Hill was a swamp bear in another life. If there is such a thing. I'd say swamp alligator, but he's too hairy and fat for an alligator, and he doesn't have near the amount of teeth. He also has quite a soft side. He's squishing up his nose as he says, "I don't feel the bell no more," because it means we have to go, and I think Big Hill has grown attached to us over these past three months. I can't say I'm sad to say goodbye to the outskirts of Shreveport—I was expecting charming and mysterious Louisiana, and this area is more like muddy, backwater, weird Louisiana—but I will miss Big Hill.

Owen looks from him to me then back to him. "What do you mean you don't feel it anymore?"

"I 'spect it was thinking about touchin' down here. But it ain't thinkin' no such thing no more. It's moved on," Big Hill says in his thick, mumbling, bayou accent, pulling his stained and faded baseball cap off his head and dusting it off with one hand. His chin quivers.

"You mean this thing has a mind of its own?" Owen asks.

"'Course it does. It's the bell. But it ain't here no more, and the Circle, we know the job you've been given, and if it ain't here, you

gotta be movin' on." Big Hill clears his throat heavily. It sounds like a downshifting truck.

"Big Hill, are you crying?" I ask, trying to peer up at his wooly face.

"Aw, hell," he says. "I suppose I am. It's just that I like the two o' you." He pulls out a handkerchief the size of a placemat and honks into it.

"We like you too, Big Hill! No tears. You can grab on to your crow totem and walk to us anytime, anyway."

Every member of the Circle has a crow totem. That's the ticket to ride. The crow totems are carved from turquoise and fit nicely in your hand. They depict a crow midflight. They're an extremely old, extremely powerful type of magic... although magic isn't quite the right word for it. More like they're keys that can open up the doors behind our world. If you hold one in your bare hand, against your skin, you can step through the doors for a bit into what we call the thin place. The totem is sort of like a backstage pass to the guts of the living world. The fabric of our world gets very thin, and everything feels much more intense, like you're in the engine room of the world, getting blasted with heat from the furnace. You disappear from the living world as long as you hold on tight to your crow, but it starts to hurt after a while. It's not a natural place for normal, living people to be, but it has its advantages. One step in the thin world is a giant leap in the living world. Owen calls this type of travel "phasing." Big Hill calls it "blinking."

"Hell, you know it ain't the same as havin' ya here," Big Hill says, folding his kerchief and stuffing it back down the front of his overalls. Owen awkwardly pats at Big Hill's hairy arm. He's trying to be nice and consoling, but he's a doctor. He still doesn't have that one down yet. I'm a nurse. I've got the comfort gene in spades. I step right down to where Big Hill is standing and put my arm around him even though I can't reach much higher than his butt. He hangs his big shaggy head. "Plus," he says, "you'n Owen shouldn't be blinkin' if you don't got cause to. There's strange things in the thin place these days."

"Strange things?" Owen asks, stepping down from the RV to join us. "Like what?"

Big Hill looks at both of us for a moment. I can see he's trying to describe what he means, but he's having some trouble. Instead he says, "I brought you some catfish for the road," and nods over at his rusted-out truck. "Help me load you up."

"Oh... really, Big Hill, you shouldn't have," I say. If I never eat another catfish it'll be too soon. Living at the edge of Big Hill's property, catfish is a once- or twice-a-week thing. Big Hill says he's known all around this area for his catfish. I don't doubt it. If a man his size gives you catfish, you take catfish, even if it tastes like glue.

"No, no," Big Hill says modestly. "Think nothing of it. It's a partin' gift from Big Hill."

We've only met two Circle members so far. I'm told it's because they're very private on the whole. The first we met was Joey Flatwood. Before Ben Dejooli died, Joey was his best friend. Ben's dead but not really *gone* gone—he's the Walker now—so maybe they're still best friends. You never know with Ben. Things with him are... complicated. The first time Joey showed up was on a vintage motorcycle, druggie-thin, wearing a leather jacket that swallowed him up and an Indian hair braid that went down to where his butt would have been if he had enough meat on him to *have* a butt. The first time I saw him, in Ben's hospital room, I wasn't sure whether he was there to rob us or kill us. Turns out he was there to fight for us.

Joey is very, very good at phasing and at using the crow in general. Owen and I are still new at it. When we walk in the thin place, it hurts us. It's a slow, steady pain that increases, like something's scraping at your teeth, until you let go of the crow and blink back. Not Joey. Joey could run across the country in no time flat if he wanted to. Of course, he paid a price for it. He pumped himself full of painkillers in order to stand the pain and get as good at phasing as he is. We've seen him a handful of times since that showdown back in Ben's hospital room, and at first he was completely addicted. I could see it in his smoke. His addiction

rolled off his skin in putrid green and weeping yellow. He knew I could see it, too. He knows about my little gift. He just didn't care. He said he had a higher calling and that using the crow to its full potential was more important than his own health.

I told him if he was really devoted to that higher calling, he'd be able to do it without drugs. If you really want to rile up a young Navajo man, all you gotta do is suggest that he's too scared to do something. Works like a charm. I know because I worked with the Navajo for years at the Chaco Health Clinic. Here's another pro tip: this strategy is not limited to young Navajo men.

Recently Joey's been looking a lot better. Stronger. Healthier. His smoke shows up pearl white now when he talks about what the Circle must do, how we are to protect the bell at all costs. *Watch after it, and keep it secret.*

Of course, we need to find the dang thing first.

So, about the colors. If you're the carnival sideshow type, you might call what I have *aura sight*. If you aren't into that mumbo jumbo, you could say I just have a really, really good bead on people. I'm a heck of a nurse. I was back at ABQ Medical and Chaco Health Clinic, and I am now as a travel nurse. Not to toot my own horn, but everywhere I go people want me to stay and work full time. It's not because I have endless patience or because I'm super medically inclined like Owen is; it's because I see what is wrong with people. Literally, I can see it, in colors that come off of them like misty breath on a cold day. It makes for a lot of awkward conversations with Owen when I can see how he's feeling about the road warrior life he took on with me. And how he feels about me in general. Which is, in a word, strongly.

"Here," Big Hill says, shifting a Styrofoam cooler to the edge of the rusted bed of his truck. "Take one end of this and hold tight, hear? This'n is a live one. And a big sucker. You save this'n for a special time with your lady."

Owen blushes wildly, his face turning almost as red as his hair. I can't help but smile. He looks like a deer in headlights, still. As if I didn't know what he was feeling. It was pretty clear that he was

falling for me when he asked if he could join me on the hunt for the Keeper. He didn't do it because he loves RVing.

But Owen and I aren't together. Or sleeping together. Or even hooking up. No heavy petting. No light petting. We almost kissed once after I'd had a bit too much of Big Hill's moonshine, which I think is just radiator fluid mixed with grain alcohol. I pulled out of the Kiss That Never Happened. Owen said he understood. He knows how I felt about Ben, which is funny, because I don't even know for sure how I felt about Ben. How I feel about him still. All I know is I didn't get enough time with Ben. But Owen understands. He always "understands." He's always willing to "give me as much time as I need." He's always concerned that he doesn't "make it weird." He just wants me to know that he's "here for me." And the bell, of course. But mostly me, I think.

It's not that I don't think he's attractive. He is. He's smart and trim and always well dressed and professional, and when he's in doctor mode he straight-up kicks butt. He's good enough to be a full-blown partner at a top clinic somewhere in the Boston circuit or up in Rochester at the Mayo Clinic, to say nothing of these tiny temp offices we ended up working in Shreveport so that we could keep up pretenses and not completely bleed money. He's the best doctor any of these joints have ever seen. That's his world, and he is the king of it. But outside of his world he's completely lost. His fire puffs away, and he becomes the ultimate nice guy, which isn't all bad, but sometimes it drives me nuts.

The fish bucks in the cooler, and both men pause to steady it. After a moment's stillness, Big Hill nods. They load it into the underbelly of the RV.

"It's packed in ice, but sometimes they still kick. The good ones, anyway. Got a couple more things for your journey," he says, and motions Owen back to the truck bed.

"Where did it go?" Owen asks. "The bell. If it's not here, any idea where it went? Should we just start driving?"

Big Hill walks around to the passenger-side door and opens it with a squeal. I think I can see the rust flake down from the joints. "Follow your crow totem, 'course."

I absently reach for my jeans pocket, where I keep my crow. "I still don't know what these things are, Big Hill. Neither you nor Joey can give me a straight answer."

Big Hill steps back from the back seat, and he holds his hands behind his back as if he's stepped up in front of the class.

"They the stuff o' the vein o' the earth," Big Hill says.

"You keep saying that, but what is the vein of the earth?" Owen asks.

"Ain't seen it m'self. But it's where they came from. Now. Guess what's in my right hand."

Owen sighs. Big Hill is tough to understand when he's talking about swamp fishing, much less opining on the powers that hold the balance between worlds. He takes it for granted that there's a bell out there with the power over death. But Owen is in the business of facts. Diagnosis. Science. That a rock carved into the shape of a crow could defy the laws of physics bothers him a great deal. Not Big Hill. Big Hill wants us to guess what's behind his back.

"More catfish?" I guess, trying to hide a cringe.

"Nah, you got plenty in the icebox. It's a jug of 'shine!" He pulls his right hand in front of him, and in it is a bell jar of grainy moonshine. It looks like pond water distilled through a sock. It gives me a hangover just to see it.

"Guess what's in my left hand," Big Hill says, still grinning. I already know. I can see it coming off of him in waves. He's an open book, Big Hill.

"More moonshine?" I guess.

"How the hell did you know!" he says, laughing loudly. "You're a special one. Both of you are. A jug for each of you. Least I could do for the ones the Walker chose."

I take my moonshine. I can smell it through the glass. Big Hill says the two of us are the only members of the Circle in living memory to have received their crows from the Walker himself. They think this makes us special. I tried to tell him how Ben was just a patient of mine, and of Owen's. He won't have it. Ben's the Walker. As far as he's concerned, Ben was never anything else.

He's right, and he's wrong. Ben is the Walker, but he was much more. To me.

"Now go," Big Hill says. "'Fore I start bawlin' again. Head west. That's as good as I got."

Owen nods. He feels the tug, too, just like I do. The bell is somewhere west. Big Hill hugs us each for a suffocating few seconds, then he practically pushes us up the steps of the RV. "G'on now. Get gone. And remember, don't blink. Hear me? There's things in the thin place. Things watching. Things that shouldn't be there. It's not safe."

Owen settles behind the wheel, wider around than he is. I stand at the top of the stairs.

"Thanks, Big Hill, for everything. Be seeing ya."

Big Hill has his handkerchief out again. He blows loudly into and nods. "I hope so," he says.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

GRANT ROMER

The city of Midland is different from the outskirts where Pap and I live. The city has a lot going on, what with people walking around in suits and driving all sorts of nice cars and carrying briefcases during the day. I asked Pap one day how many people were in Midland, and he said feels like twice as many after each boom and half as many after each bust, by which he means oil, of course. We're in a boom right now. There are people everywhere.

I feel best in quiet places like the graveyard, but I ain't never going back there, so I gotta find a new place to ride. I suppose I could cruise the neighborhood, but I've done that a million times already and I might run into Otis and his crew, which wouldn't be good since I know they'd rather ride without me on account of they think I'm weird.

I'm not crazy about it, but I got this feeling that I should go toward the city. Sometimes I get these feelings about places, like I forgot something there even if I know I've never been there before. The graveyard gave me that feeling too. It's why I kept going back again and again. I know I'd have gone ridin' there even if Mom and Dad weren't there.

Pap is working hard on the rig near Lubbock until real late, so I have enough time to wait out the worst of the heat and get started in the late afternoon. Where we live is up north of the city just a bit, and if you look out on it as the sun is setting, Midland stands like a big lightbulb in the center of two patches of dark desert. But if you stare at the dark for a while you'll see it ain't

really that dark—it's shot through with tiny dots of light. Those dots are the rigs out in the desert, drilling for oil and gas, day and night. Pap is out there on one right now, and even though I know he's too far away, I like to think I could still maybe see him. Like maybe he's one of the very farthest dots to the north. I wave at him even though I know it's a stupid thing to do.

I can already see the line of trucks off in the distance to my left like one long, glowing caterpillar. They're going to the man camp, which is sort of like a city of oil workers that popped up on the edge of town during the boom 'cause all the people had no place to stay. I don't want to go that way. That's no place for kids. I want to go where the people are walking in their suits and with their briefcases. There's a pretty nice street that runs around the big buildings and has trees and grass in the middle and shops all down both sides. That might be a good place to ride. I cut to my right, down a small, winding road that heads off that way. But I must have gotten my directions wrong because after a couple of minutes the road winds back, and by the time I stop and set down the kickstand, I'm looking toward the man camp again in the distance.

I start off again, but this time I go hard right, down a straight street that I know will take me to the city. Instead I hit construction. A big man smoking a cigarette and holding a stop sign shakes his head at me and points left. I have to pedal up another hill and cross over a park just to get back to where I started. And I'm staring at the man camp again. I hit the brakes and skid as best I can. I check out my skid mark in the streetlights and nod. It's a good one. But that doesn't change the fact that twice I've tried to cut right and twice I got nowhere. The long line of trucks is still there, creeping forward. The lights in the rows of the man camp houses turn on all at once. I spit. Pap would hate me spitting, but I figure it's okay right now 'cause I got a problem: I gotta go left. I gotta follow the trucks. And I gotta ride toward the man camp.

Sometimes things work like that with me, when I get that feeling about a place. Maybe it's true and Otis is right and I am

weird, but I ain't supposed to go to the right today. I slide my back tire around until I'm facing the trucks.

Fine. If I'm goin' left, I'm goin' left.

The truck caterpillar came along with the oil boom. It's been there pretty much nonstop for a while now. Pap says the problem is that there's only one main road to the camp and the rigs beyond and it's an old road with two lanes, one going each way. He says it worked just fine for fifty years and even through the first oil boom, thank you very much, but the rigs are bigger now and all smart and whatnot and so they need a lot of trucks. So the rigs changed, but the road didn't. It's still the same ol' two-lane road with stop signs and no stoplights, and now there's a hundred big trucks stopping and going at every stop sign. It backs up for a mile sometimes. Stop and go. Stop and go. I bet it takes a whole day for a truck to get from the back all the way to the man camp.

Better to have a bike at top speed.

I whizz past the trucks in a blur like they are gravestones back at the cemetery. Some of them honk at me, but I think it's just 'cause they're bored. I'd be bored too, sitting in a truck and not on a bike.

The man camp ain't much to look at. It's mostly a bunch of big sheds spread out in rows, like the kind you keep tools and old cars in. Except these ones hold people, and some of them sell things like food and drinks. I've also seen people selling beer and cigarettes out of them, and one has this man who sits in front of it and brings men inside, and I think there's girls in that one that they pay to kiss. But mostly it's just people living. New people come in when they take jobs on the rigs, and old people leave when their job is up or their rig goes away to find oil somewhere else.

I shouldn't be going near the man camp at all, much less at night, but I can't go against that feeling. Even so, I try to keep to the outskirts where big light stands shine down the dirt roads between the sheds like there's a football game goin' on or something. I wish I could go faster, but there's lots of ruts to deal with from the big haulers and there's people about too. Some of

them call after me or whoop. Some of them are falling around like zombies, and I know they're drunk. I have to make a hard right to skirt a big rut, and my bike skids out on tiny rocks. By the time I get hold of it again, I almost run into two men falling into each other, trying to fight. They stumble around and stop cussin' at each other long enough to turn and look at me.

"Hey!" one yells, his eyes puffy and his mouth open. "Git over here, kid!" But I'm already gone. I kick up dirt and rocks behind me and pedal as hard as I can. I hear a whistle by my ear, and a beer bottle explodes on a stack of crates to my right. I pedal harder. I hear a flat-footed thumping behind me, and I know someone is chasing me, probably for my bike, probably 'cause it's a ten-speed. I ain't givin' it up.

I pedal harder than I ever have before, out of the lights, out of the camp, and soon I'm shooting through the tumbleweeds and out on the hard desert floor in the dark, and I'm basically riding blind. My legs won't stop pumping, even though the thumping sound is long gone now and all I can hear is the clicking of my teeth. Without those lights and with no moon to speak of, it's as dark as a basement out here, and I'm praying I don't hit a pothole or a rattler den or fly into a ditch.

By the time I get my legs to stop, I'm way out, like I'm floating in the middle of a lake at night. The camp is behind me, but it looks like a blob of light in the distance. There's a working rig ahead, about the length of my finger. I can see the gas flare like a dancing yellow hat on top of the derrick. There's some clanking, and the revving sound of a big engine floats softly over to me, but other than that, it's quiet. Which is good. Out here, in the dark, what you don't want to hear is rattling. I was snake bit once two years ago, but it wasn't a rattler. Got me right in the crook of my elbow. If it had been a rattler, even a baby rattler, I'd have been dead. Especially a baby rattler. They're the worst 'cause they don't know when to let go.

I shouldn't have started on about snakes because there's a rustling in the bushes that I bet is just a mouse of some sort, but it gets me up on my bike and out like a flash. Before I know it I'm

even deeper in the desert and closer to the rig. I feel better closer to the circle of light it's putting out, so I glide my bike as quietly as I can to the edge of the equipment, and in order to calm myself down, I start naming all the things Pap taught me about the rigs.

The first time I saw a drilling rig, I thought it was a giraffe. I don't remember this, 'cause I was just a baby, but I know it's true 'cause that's how Pap taught me about rigs from then on out, as parts of the giraffe. I see the head of the giraffe, the crown block with its little fenced-in fort way up high that I always thought was like the top of a pirate ship. The neck of the giraffe is the derrick, and there's a cord with a hook moving around in there that makes it look like the giraffe is swallowing. The body and back of the giraffe is the platform, where most of the men are now, hooking pipe up to feed the giraffe. Its butt is the engine, which is farting smoke into the air. Below is the blowout preventer, the guts of the giraffe. When I used to cry about Pap leaving to Odessa or Permian or somewhere to run a giraffe for a while, he'd say not to worry, he'd be back because the guts keep him and his crew safe.

I breathe. My heart is back to normal again. The desert behind me is just as big and just as black, but I'm all right with it. The blood stops screaming through my ears. I can actually make out what the roughnecks are saying on the rig. Two men are talking next to the control shack.

"Had to move the whole goddamn pad, is what I'm sayin'," says one. He's in a monkey suit, but he's carrying around a big black notebook, which means he's probably the tool pusher. The crew chief. Like Pap.

"The whole thing?" says the guy he's talking to. He's in a full-blown suit and tie. Not a rig guy. A money guy.

"I been drilling in the Permian for fifty years, Don. Fifty fucking years. And in that time I've moved pads for a lot of reasons, usually because of a geologist or geophysicist or engineer or some other rock licker telling me they think horizontal pay dirt is a hundred feet to the left or right of where we're standing. That's nothing new to me. But that? That shit was too much. We broke five straight bits."

"Jesus," Don says, pulling his hair back with one hand.

"You know how much five drill bits cost? Not to mention the downtime on a rig in this basin? We had to push our whole schedule back."

"You think I don't know what the cost is?" Don asks. "We're already near a million over AFE because of this little shuffle job you did." He shakes his head. "A quarter section to the left. For a million bucks. This shit better be worth it."

I can tell the tool pusher ain't used to being talked to by a guy in a suit like that. He steps right up into the guy's face. "I'll tell you what you would have got a quarter section back, compadre. You woulda got another five broken bits, at least. I got the drill plan from your engineers. We can hit the zone here. We will hit the zone here."

They keep talking, but I'm not listening anymore. Now I'm looking a quarter section to the right, where the rig broke five bits trying to drill a well. It looks like nothing but a flat spot of black earth under a moonless sky. Like a huge tent was there that just broke camp.

I get that feeling again. Like I lost something there even though it's the first time I've ever set eyes on it.

I leave the rig behind and bike out toward that spot. My bike jumps and bumps over yucca and big clods of dirt. The shocks kick back and forth with a quiet hiss. A quarter section is about forty acres of land, and it's dark as mud by the time I hit the taped-off zone that the rig left behind. The desert is churned up around the old spot and pounded down inside of it. I set my bike down outside of the line and duck under the tape. I don't have a flashlight or a cell phone or anything, so I'm not exactly sure what the heck I think I'm gonna find, but I do have that feeling, and it's telling me to check the place out.

I feel in front of myself with my hands and my feet, like a wall might jump out at me at any time. I trip over a big wheel rut and scramble to standing again. No rattling. That's good. In fact, there's really no sound at all. It's as still as the graveyard was. It feels a lot like the graveyard, too. I look all around me for anything

that might look like a blue pool or a creepy hand, but there's nothing. I'm in a pool of black, but it's a quiet pool.

Once I'm where the old rig stood, the footing gets better. The dirt is all hammered down. I can see where the rig was centered. The earth is plated over by a huge manhole. I walk on top of it, and my steps clang out. I jump up and down because at least it's *some* sort of sound.

Then I hear the bird.

I stop jumping like a trampoline's broke under me. The bird's doing nothing but flying, and still it's so loud in the quiet that it sounds like an airplane. It's a darker spot on the black, and I wouldn't be able to track it at all except that I see a streak of red in it that must catch a stray part of rig light that would have died otherwise.

It scares the crap out of me. My feet move so fast I slip on the metal pad cover and scrape up my knee before I can get traction. I pound the dirt back to my bike and slam it upright, but this time I stop before I hit the road.

I've been hitting the road a lot lately when things get scary, which is a chicken thing to do, and I'm tired of it. I told you I'm no wuss. Plus, I don't want to get any deeper into this desert than I already am. It takes all I got to keep my hands on the handlebars and my feet on the ground, but I do it. I scan the flat ground behind the tape until I find it. The bird. It's a crow. And no wonder it sounded so loud coming in—it's the size of a dog. A red stripe starts at its head and runs down its right wing like a racing stripe. The clouds break for a second, and the red glints in the starlight, along with two black eyes. And they're staring right at me.

"What do you want?" I say, and my voice breaks at the end, which is just great.

The crow says nothing, doesn't move a muscle.

"What are you," I say, because I don't need anyone to tell me that this crow is not normal. I can figure that out on my own just fine. For all I know, it might not even be a crow. It might be a monster that just looks like a crow. It stares at me with its beady eyes long enough that I get to thinking about taking up my bike

again and leaving this whole mess behind me, but then the crow looks behind its left wing with a slow, steady motion.

"Aw, crap," I say. 'Cause I know what the thing wants. It wants me to go over into that dark where it's pointing. "Seriously?"

The crow looks back at me and nods. I swear to God.

What am I supposed to do when a crow nods at me? I can't *not* at least check it out. Even though where it's pointing is dark as all hell. Darker than it should be. It's dark like a rain cloud dropped right down on the ground. But the crow nodded at me. I'm not gonna bike home and go to bed and wait for Pap to come back and think the entire time about how a bird told me to check something out but I was too chicken to walk through some soupy dark.

"All right then," I say. I set my bike down again. I walk under the tape and over the slammed-down earth and under the tape again across the old pad, going wide around the bird. He watches me, blinks once. I hit the edge of the dark. I puff myself up and walk forward. It's like walking through a mist. I step again and again, hands out, feet out. Then I hear a rattle. I freeze. I step back as slow as molasses. I hear another rattle.

Most rattlers sound like bean shakers. This one doesn't. It sounds more like bird bones banging against a can. I freeze again, but I don't want to, because I know why the bird told me to go here. Why I rode here through the man camp and past the rig. It's because the thing I don't know I forgot is here. Right here. And I know this place isn't what it looks like. It's not just desert. It's where our world flickers in and out. Where things like birds might not be birds. And things like snakes might not be snakes.

There's another break in the coat of clouds, and I see a glint in the desert dirt about ten feet from me. It looks like a piece of tinfoil. I want to step toward it; I feel like I *need* to step toward it. Like every bike ride I've ever had led me to this moment, where I'm just a step away. Two steps at most. I move toward it. There's another rattle, louder this time, and another glint, but this one is like a slick of grease in a parking lot. And it's moving toward me,

which I know ain't right. The one good thing about rattlers is that they stay where they're at. Not this one. It's going toward the shiny thing, same as me. I take another step, and it quickly coils up with its head like a floating fist. It looks at me, and its tail rattles hollow, like rocks clacking down a well forever. I don't know why, but I know sure as the night is black that I can't let that snake get to whatever shines in the sand in front of us. I know it the same way that I know I didn't end up here by chance. The same way I know that Pap knows about my feelings. I saw it in his face when he said goodnight after I came back from the graveyard, but I missed my chance to come clean.

I'm not missing this chance.

I dive for the shine. The snake coils back like a spring for a half second then lunges at me. I can see its fangs in the dark. They drip with venom, and I think in that split second how they look like rusty wire. Brown and sick. And they're going to get to me. The rattler shoots forward right at the crook of my elbow as I reach out. I'm not quick enough. Nothing in the desert is quicker than a rattler.

Except the crow.

The snake is inches from the meat of my arm when the crow crushes it from the air. I feel the brush of black wings on my face, then the snake is on the ground, thrashing like an out-of-control garden hose. And it can thrash all it likes, 'cause the crow has it right at the back of its head, and the crow don't look scared. I think it makes a point of looking at me before it snaps its beak shut and clips the snake's head clean off. It even fluffs its own feathers a bit afterward, puffing up and settling down with one claw over the head of the snake. Then it points its arrowhead beak at the glint again.

I dig it up from the desert with my fingers and hold it to the weak light of the stars. It's a silver bell, but it's not. It's the lightest and the heaviest thing I've ever held in my hands.

"What's up?" the crow says. And I almost drop the bell.

His feet are still on the dead snake, but he's looking up at me, expecting an answer.

"You talk?" I ask, then I shake my head. "This is a dream."

Truth be told, I sometimes think I've been dreaming since Mom and Dad died. Like I was in the car with them that night and maybe I'm in a coma. Or dead. It would be easier in a lot of ways. At least I wouldn't worry anymore about Pap. No need to worry if you're just a dream. Somehow the bird seems to know what I'm thinking. And I can feel that the bird gets sad. You ever seen a sad bird? It sort of dips its head.

"This is no dream," the bird says. "And that bell is no ordinary bell."

I look at the silver bell in my hands. As if I needed any proof it ain't a normal bell, it's cold. Nothing normal is cold in Midland in August. I clutch it to my chest. I'm afraid of losing it already.

"My name is Chaco," says the crow. "That bell is yours. It's my job to make sure it stays that way."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

THE WALKER

We got a Keeper!

Now that the bell has found its partner, I find myself studying the boy. He has in his possession the bell that put me here. If he wanted to, he could off himself and take my job. I know it's unlikely and improbable, but if he wanted to, he could do it. Ring the bell in that space between life and death, and he slips into my role and I fade away across the veil, just like Ana did before me. The thought turns my stomach. It's something I both want and want to run from. Sure, sometimes the job sucks, but other times I feel like I'm a king and the soul map is my domain. A lone king, sure. But a king. Plus, I need to figure out what is happening to the walls between worlds. I can't go fading away just yet.

I trace his soul string, which is sort of the equivalent of rewinding his life. A bit nosy, but who's gonna judge me? I realize I hardly need to worry about the kid taking my job. He has no intention of leaving his world behind and his Pap all alone, even though he thinks, in the shortsighted way that eight-year-olds do, that it might be easier on the man if he wasn't around. He's seen mysteries, too. Places where the world thins. He has a gift for finding them. I suspect it's part of the reason the bell came to him. He has a drive to set things right, even if he can't yet describe precisely why he feels that they're wrong in the first place.

Grant accepts the absurdity of his new job, the realities of the bell and what it means to be the Keeper, in the way only a child can: totally and without reservation. Chaco is amazing with him.

For a timeless bird, he's pretty good with kids. I can see why Ana loved him. I felt him calling for me as soon as he felt the bell, and I zipped through the soul map to Midland, Texas, of all places, and watched the finding unfold. If I could have, I'd have ripped that rattlesnake apart myself, but his world is beyond my reach. I was powerless to help. Thankfully, Chaco wasn't.

Afterward, Chaco makes sure Grant gets safely back home. He perches right on the handlebars of his bike, making himself smaller so the kid can see. The whole ride back he talks to him.

"So there's this place you go after you die," Chaco says.

"Of course there is. Mom and Dad are there," Grant says, leaning in close to get a look at Chaco's red stripe. Chaco blinks. That was easy enough.

"And the bell. Let's see. The bell. How to describe the bell? Your bell summons the Walker, who guards the gate between here and there and walks our world keeping things straight."

"Like Death?" Grant asks, stepping off one pedal and coasting back to his driveway. Chaco flutters up and settles on Grant's head. Grant looks up and laughs but doesn't seem to mind.

"Yeah, sort of, but he's not such a bad guy. He's here right now," Chaco says, before *tsking* at himself. Way to go, bird. Just tell the kid that Death Walking is right next to him, why don'tcha.

"He's here right now? Awesome!"

Chaco looks at me. I shake my head, but I can't help smiling.

"Yeah, he's right there." Chaco points with one wing. "But you can't see him. Only I can see him. He's not always around you, though, okay? And he won't hurt you. He just wanted to see you. Pretty soon he'll get pulled away on work."

"You mean killin' people." Grant stashes his bike behind a bush. He holds the bell tight in one hand, his knuckles white.

"Well, he doesn't kill 'em. He just cleans up their souls after they die. He guards the gate between here and there, and he watches over a map that has everyone's soul written into it."

Grant stares at the empty space I take up. "Makes sense. Somebody's got to, I guess."

I like this kid.

"So... what are you?" Grant asks Chaco.

"A smart-ass," I chime in. Chaco ignores me.

"Well, I go where the bell goes. I'm its buddy. And the bell chose you, so now I'm your buddy too. Like it or not."

There's a little uptick of a smile at the corner of Grant's mouth. I get the feeling he hasn't smiled much recently. I think it's safe to say he probably doesn't have many buddies either.

"You really a bird?" Grant asks.

"Not really. Close enough, though." I guess Chaco doesn't want to get into what it means to be a thin creature just yet. Although I'm pretty sure Grant would get it.

"And you go by Chaco?"

"That's right," Chaco says, fluffing up his feathers a little defensively. I grin. He and I give each other a lot of shit, but I gave him that name, and he likes it. That little flutter says a lot, coming from a thing that has had a million names.

"It's a good name," Grant says.

"So's Grant."

And just like that, Chaco and Grant are buddies.

Grant's soul thread, like every thread caught up in the pull of the bell, is hard to read. Ever changing. Its color morphs from a healthy, shimmering silver to a dusty, faded white and back again. One moment it is as strong as an anchor tie, the next it's frayed and weak. What's for certain is that his life has become a good bit more dangerous than it was when he woke up this morning. And also a hell of a lot more interesting.

I wince a little when I feel that little pricking that tells me it's time to go back to work, and not just because I want to stick around and hang out with Chaco and Grant, even if it's essentially watching them through the window. I wince because it's getting so that every time I hit the scene to clip a soul, it's a dice roll as to whether or not what I see is in my job description. More and more I'm coming up craps. In short, the weird shit is getting weirder.

But work waits for no man. I turn away from our new Keeper, swirl open the soul map, and step through. When I walk the map it's like I'm walking along a massive rope made up of countless

smaller strings weaving in and around and through each other. These are the souls of every living person. Think of it like a cross section of a massive fiber-optic cable—millions of points of light that shine and pulse with life, which makes it easy to find the departed soul. It looks like a flickering, broken pixel on a big-screen TV. I zip over to it, stop there, and stand still on the rope.

Something doesn't look right.

Soul strings on their way out look weathered, like creeping vines in winter. This one looks young, but it flickers nonetheless. It's unnatural. It puts me on edge. But it still needs tending to, so I take a deep breath, sweep open the living world, and step off the map and back to earth.

I don't know what I'm expecting. A murder scene, maybe. An atrocity. Or perhaps something just as staggering but on a small scale, like an infant, cold in its crib. What I get is a woman sitting on a park bench on the Strip outside of the Palazzio Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Now, I've paid more than my fair share of visits to Las Vegas. Trust me. This place is like Grand Central Station for me. But this time is different, and I immediately know it's wrong. She's holding a map of the Strip, and she's asking people walking by for directions. People who no longer see her. People who can never answer her. She's older, perhaps sixty, but she looks healthy. In fact, she's wearing beads and a frilly sash and a dress that sparkles, along with running shoes. A yard glass of beer sits next to a cheap, tattered sombrero at her feet. She looks like she's been trying to get the attention of the world she left behind for some time; she's sat down with the effort of it. That's strange in and of itself. I'm usually on the scene moments after death.

"Excuse me?" she says, lifting her arm at a passing couple before letting it flop back to her lap. She looks drunk and in shock. And her soul thread isn't right at all. It's done for, all right, but not like I've ever seen. It looks hacked at, like a broken guitar string.

"Please," she says, holding out her hand again as a young woman clacks by on heels, uncaring, unknowing.

"I'm right here," I say, as if I could do something. As if I could bring her back. I've never said it like that before. I don't know why I say it now. But this woman is in pain she can't understand, and I want to acknowledge that.

"Oh, thank God," she says, and she tries to rise but can't. She looks at her legs like they aren't hers anymore. I hold out my hand for her to stay put, and then I move in and sit beside her. Both of us, on a bench, the Strip seething around us and through us. She looks desperately at me and holds up a phone that is an echo of the one she had in the world she's left, which is another thing that's wrong with this scene. Souls usually stick close to their bodies. There is no body anywhere near us. "I can't get reception," she says. "I've lost my friends. We were just at the tables, and then we went to that bar, and then..." She trails off for a second before starting again. "It's a girls' weekend," she says quietly. "We were supposed to stick together. Why would they leave me? Have you seen them? My name is Karen Mulaney. Have they been asking for me?" She looks up at me for answers, and the terrible sadness in her face fogs my eyes with tears. Not because a poor woman died in Vegas alone. Plenty of people die alone. It's because she shouldn't be dead. And what's left of her soul knows it and is crying out in pain.

I have seen terrible things in my line of work. The most unjust, unfair, unbelievable endings to existence you can imagine. They happen every day. But even those unbearable deaths have a *place*. They have a *place* on the rope I walk, which tells me that they have a purpose, too. They may not know what that purpose was, but it was there nonetheless. I know it because when I cut their souls free, their life story fits back in the map same as every other, and the balance of the map holds.

But this is new. This poor woman, lost and alone in Sin City, shouldn't be dead. I know that as soon as I see her chewed-up soul thread. I also know this: no matter how she got here, it's my job to see her across. I look around for the veil. I can see it down the street, coming my way. It moves like a broom, sweeping over the living with no effect, but the dead have nowhere to run. The veil is

entirely black now, which worries me, but not as much as the newfound calm it has. It no longer ripples or bulges or flickers. It's as slack as a curtain in the far corner of an empty house.

"Karen, I'm sure that your friends are looking for you," I say, resting my elbows on my knees. "But they're not gonna find you. You're beyond them now."

"No, I'm not." She shakes her head. "I'm right here. They're close."

So is the veil.

"Karen, can you tell me what happened when you lost them? How you lost them and ended up here?" But Karen has lost interest in me. She's looking at the veil. It has swept its way down the strip and is maybe a hundred feet from us.

"Oh, no," Karen says. She blinks rapidly and scratches at her head then all over her body, like the tweakers we used to deal with back at Chaco. She stretches her neck out like she's wearing a rough wool sweater. Her soul string twitches and frays. I can see that it's causing her pain, not physical pain—she can't feel that anymore—but spiritual pain, which, in a way, is much worse. Her soul is rebelling against being here. It's rebelling against the veil. And with good reason. It's been cheated out of its full lifetime of experiences. Karen's mouth is slack, her eyes wide and rolling. I think about asking her again how she got this way. About who, or what, cut her soul line like this, and how, but I can't bear it any longer.

I place one hand on her shoulder, and with the other, I scissor the soul and set it free. The pop is big this time, like the first crack of a frozen lake in thaw. Karen slumps on the bench, and I hold her upright. I'm surprised to find tears rolling down my face, and I wipe them away quickly.

"It's okay," I say, although I'm not sure if I'm reassuring her or myself. "I had to do it. There's no going back once it's as tattered as that. It was the only way..."

The veil has crept up on us. And before I can finish my blubbering, it sweeps over Karen like limp fingers and pulls her from my hands. It doesn't stick around to gloat this time, either.

Once it has her, it pops out of this plane. Then it's just me on the bench, my arm resting on nothing but air.

Now that Karen's gone, my eyes are clear and hard. This is really starting to piss me off. Not just because the veil is sick, or dead, or evil, or whatever the hell it's become, and not just because the things that are supposed to be happening in death aren't happening right anymore. I'm pissed off because I have a job to do here and something out of my power is messing with that. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd say some fly-by-night poser trying to play Death did a hack job on poor Karen's soul before it was her time to go.

But that can't be right, because the only one that gets to cut strings around here is me, goddammit. Or so I thought. I mean, the evidence was right there. Her string was mangled. She looked like a shell-shocked soldier wandering around holding a limb she'd just lost. I only wish I could have talked to her longer; maybe we could have retraced her steps...

Or I could just do it myself. I whap my own forehead. Of course. When I get runners, I slow time to catch them. Wax left, that's the slowdown move. I do it now, slowly circle left in the air, and I watch the Strip cut to half-time, then quarter-time, then to a trickle. I pull the Strip to a full stop. Then I keep swiping left.

Karen is back on the bench with me, but she's just an echo of the past. I roll back some more and watch as she pleads in reverse for attention from a crowd that can't see her. I watch as she stands up and walks backward, retracing her steps. I pause. I want to walk through the end of her life as she did. I grab the frayed end of her soul string with my free hand, then I zip in reverse. Las Vegas becomes a blur of colors and lights streaming over me. When I slow the roll, I'm at the bar next to her, frozen in time. She's drinking in the middle of the crowd of friends that she would later think had forgotten her. I start from there.

I walk beside her as I live her final hours. I watch as they pay and leave and she spills her yard of beer, her sombrero flopping over her face. She and her friends walk to the blackjack table at the Palazzo, and she sets a single chip down. She hits a blackjack

right off the bat. She cheers, and the table cheers, and her friends slowly pare off to tables of their own as she keeps playing. She doesn't notice. She splits at the right time, doubles down at the right time. She's an aggressive bettor. They bring her martini after martini. She keeps winning. In one stupid bet she drunkenly splits tens over the protests of the entire table. She puts in everything. She hits twenty-one on both hands. The cheers sound muted on the replay, like the soundtrack to her life is playing underwater.

Karen chips out; she's a thousand up. She tips the dealer a hundred. She gets pats on the back. Her eyes are glossy, and her face is red with the win and the booze. She backs away from the table and looks for her friends, but she can't see them, even though I can. They're at the nearby roulette table and hovering around the craps table. One of them stands almost directly to her right, but she misses her. I want to scream at her and point. *They didn't go anywhere, Karen! They're right here!* But this is a replay. There's nothing I can do but watch as she tries to shake off the booze and walk to the elevators. Either she thinks her friends are in their room or she wants to stash her chips. Either way, she leaves the casino floor alone.

In the elevator, she talks with another couple off to see a show. She weaves in place. The couple gets off on the floor below hers, and she exits alone. The twenty-second floor of the Palazzio Hotel and Casino is completely empty when she walks out. It's a long, straight hallway. The elevator bay is in the dead center. The carpet is dark and patterned. The lights are low. Every twenty feet or so stands an alcove with a vase of flowers or a cheap sculpture. I know on cop instinct that this is where it goes south for Karen, but when I look up and down the hallways, I see nothing. There's an ice machine. That's it. But the dread lingers.

I walk beside Karen as she makes her way down the long hallway. I look behind us. Nothing. She stumbles against the wall, and I almost move to help her before I check myself. I look behind us again. Nothing. She stops in front of her door and opens her purse. She fumbles through it then drops it, and her chips spill out

all over the hallway. She laughs and curses. And suddenly there's someone there to help her pick them up.

He's on the scene so quickly it even scares the shit out of me. I jump a foot back. Karen was there alone, and in a blink Karen is with a man. I stop the replay with several quick swipes to the left like a teenaged kid pausing a horror flick to mute the scare. Once the world is frozen again, I take a bunch of deep breaths and get myself together. I'm breathing fine until I see who it is.

It's a man in a boring suit, black or dark blue depending on the light, and a white shirt and black tie. He has light brown hair parted neatly with gel. He looks like the kind of man you acknowledge as doing some sort of important job and then immediately forget when you look away. But if you don't look away—if you get a look at his face—then things change. He's bending down, so Karen hasn't seen it yet, but his eyes are completely black and his skin is as pale as snow.

I know this man. Agent Parsons. I know him because he was the one who came to me at the end of my life, thinking I had the bell. He would have killed me for it, had the cancer not killed me first. I didn't have the bell then, but Caroline did. And he tried to kill her instead. Owen took a bullet for her as she passed the bell to me. I rang it, and here I am today. But that doesn't change the fact that this fucker tried to kill Caroline. I spit at him, but it passes through him. I look down the hall again, and this time I see another figure. I'm not surprised. Agent Douglas always travels with Agent Parsons. The two of them are like dogs that lick each other clean of blood.

I should have known. I press play, my stomach in my throat.

Parsons takes his hand from his jacket pocket where he's been holding something. I know that move. That's a move the Circle uses because they often hold their crow totems in their pockets when they skip through space, but I took the agents' crows. I gave them to Caroline and Owen. And yet here they are appearing out of nowhere again. I rewind it several times. I see the telltale ripple. I can hear the *whoosh, pop*. There's no denying it.

Here's the problem: whatever he has in his pocket, it's no crow totem I've ever seen. I know every crow totem, and every member of the Circle that carries them, from Joey Flatwood all the way across the world and back again to Owen and Caroline. None of the crow totems are unaccounted for. They're using something else.

The Circle has been on the lookout for these two assholes for almost a year, ever since they jumped me at ABQ General while I was on my deathbed. Even though I call them agents, they're not really FBI agents. We figured out that much back at Chaco when the Navajo Police Department ran them down with the FBI but the feds had no record of them. Precisely who they are is still a mystery, even to me.

I've been watching them, too. Their souls are warped and hollow, but they still have them, and if you have a soul, I can find you. I made it a point to check in on them from time to time after I stripped them of their totems, just to make sure they weren't plotting again. They spend a bunch of time in libraries, searching old survey maps and flitting through old microform on creaky machines. They have no social life to speak of. They live in extended-stay hotels wherever they happen to be. They pack a single suitcase each with a second suit identical to the ones they always wear, a pair of spare white dress shirts, and several pairs of black socks and underwear. They meditate at night. At least, that's what it looks like they're doing. They don't drink. They don't chase women. They don't thug around. They're like strange monks. In short, they bored me. And I had a shitload of work to do and a new lifestyle to get accustomed to, so I admit it: I checked on them less and less.

Then one day they were just gone. Both of them.

I found their soul threads on the map, but when I walked to where they should have been in the living world, they weren't there. I waited. I walked a big perimeter, but I found nothing. I searched as long as I could, until I got another tug to get back to work. Four days later I found them again, and it was like nothing had happened—same routine, same libraries, same old maps of

new-world America and ancient Europe, same hotels. The next day they were gone again. This time for quite a while. But they always came back, until recently, when they disappeared for nearly a month. I knew it was too much to hope that they'd died, because I would know, but that's what it was like. Their souls were clouded and obscured on the map. Barely present at all. It was like they were dead.

But now here they are again, at least in replay. And they are both dramatically changed. I walk around Parsons, bent over and picking up Karen's chips, and I'm shocked at how white he is. His brown hair is turning ashen. His face is as white as milk, and thin, so thin you can see his veins through his skin. And they're black, too. Just like mine. The white skin, the black veins, it's what happens when you spend too much time phasing. I'm this way because it's part of my DNA now. With me, it's the new normal. Parsons looks alien. Like the kind of thing that would walk out of a deep cave. And that's when I figure it out. I can't find them because they're living in the thin world. Joey Flatwood had to medicate himself to near death to take the pain of all the phasing he was doing. These guys have taken it even further. And it's taken its toll on them. They look like mannequins come to life.

I watch as she stumbles and rights herself, still smiling, thanking Parsons for his help and cursing her clumsiness. Until she sees his face. Then she screams. Or tries to. In a blink, Douglas is there, phasing down the hall right up into her face, his dead-white hand jammed over her mouth as he pulls her into him, clipping her struggles. Parsons reaches into her purse and finds the room key she was about to use and opens the door. The two of them walk inside her room. Parsons looks both ways down the hall, and satisfied nobody sees them, he closes the door behind them.

I follow the agents into the room, Douglas with his hand over Karen's face, Parsons calmly walking in after him. Douglas looks like an albino pit bull. His jaw is locked. The veins of his forehead are black as ink, and they bulge from the skin. I have a sick feeling in my stomach as Parsons opens his jacket and reaches into his breast pocket. Douglas lets go of Karen's mouth to reach into his

own jacket. Karen pulls in a breath to scream. I don't want to watch whatever is going to happen, but I know I have to. I steel myself and cringe.

Then they all vanish.

I scream in the empty room. I stop the tape, rewind, play again. But it's no use. If they phased, I should still be able to see an echo of them, but they've gone entirely. I swirl open the soul map thinking maybe I can follow a trace of them there, but the soul map is in real time. No rewinding allowed.

They're gone. And they took Karen with them. But I know Karen came back. She had to, to meet me on the bench. So I fast forward. The lights of the Strip blink in triple time outside the big bay window of the hotel room. The world continues to turn. And then Karen snaps back, along with both agents.

Karen falls to the floor. Douglas picks her up and tosses her onto the bed. Both agents step back and watch her, like scientists might a monkey in a cage. Cold, clinical, detached. Karen looks lobotomized. Her eyes are open but unseeing. And that's where she dies. Unmarked and unbloodied but severed at the soul. Parsons looks at Douglas and nods. Douglas smiles. I realize that the two of them haven't spoken a word since they arrived. Somehow it makes what happened here even more unnatural.

Karen's soul leaves her body and wanders through the hotel room in a lost zigzag. She looks around the room as if she's never seen it before. The agents can't see her, but she can see them. Still, she doesn't recognize the men who killed her. She seems embarrassed and tries to start up halting conversations with them before losing her train of thought. Dazed, she walks through the door and out of the room, on her way to the bench outside where I'll find her. I let her go. It's the agents I'm interested in now. They have something that is allowing them to phase more powerfully than anything I've encountered with the Circle. Worse, they have some sort of weapon. A weapon that strikes at the soul. I get up close to them, trying to find any clue, but whatever it is, it's hidden from me. It's infuriating. I swipe at the imprint of the agents in frustration, but my hands pass right through them.

I let the rest of the encounter play out, fuming at the two men who don't seem like men anymore. They look at each other and seem ready to bounce out, but then they both freeze. Their black eyes darken a shade more, like a dollop of ink has been dropped onto their irises. They are frozen for a moment as if hypnotized, and when they snap out of it they blink rapidly and look to each other.

Parsons speaks his first words of the night, and they chill me to the bone.

"The bell has been found," he says. And he smiles. He's so white it makes his teeth look yellow. Douglas nods. They both reach in their jacket pockets and vanish.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

OWEN BENNET

Since you're already thinking it, I might as well just say it. I'm kind of pathetic when it comes to women. Or, at least, I'm kind of pathetic when it comes to Caroline, who is the only woman I can remember ever feeling this way about. Like I have this raging, five-alarm fire in my chest. Like my heart has at least second-degree burns, inching every day toward third-degree classification, and perhaps it ought to be admitted to the Burn Intensive Care Unit.

What I can't quite manage to do is fan the fire in her direction, see if maybe she can catch a similar spark.

I apologize for that dose of saccharine. Earlier I said *kind of* pathetic. I think maybe we can throw out the modifier here altogether and just go with *pathetic*. But you probably already figured that out when you realized that I'd been travelling across the country right next to her, side by side, for basically a year, and I still sleep on the modified sofa/table/couch in the main room of the RV. That's a pretty big tip-off that I've crossed from a "romantic candidate" into the friend zone. *Really, really* good friends, to be sure, but you can take your *reallys* and shove them up your ass.

How was that? That was pretty good. That was some genuine anger. I've been trying to back out of the "nice guy" corner that I seem to have painted myself into. I know Caroline doesn't like nice guys. I mean, she likes them, because who doesn't, but she likes them in the way you like your favorite grocery bagger at the supermarket. He's just so nice. What a *pleasant* guy he is. Then you're in the parking lot and you've already forgotten him.

What Caroline *really* likes—I would go so far as to say *loves*—is darker guys, with devil-may-care attitudes, who are willing to risk it all, even to die, to make things right. I know this because that's what Ben DeJooli was. Or is. I don't know for sure where he stands cosmically. Which is another thing. How am I supposed to compete with an ageless demigod who can walk the space between life and death and who singlehandedly has the power to set your soul free? How the hell am I supposed to compete with that? I'm an oncologist. Which I thought was pretty cool until I tried to stack myself up against a demigod. Honestly. Ben and I are basically opposites. We even look opposite. He's this swarthy Navajo badass, and I'm a lanky, freckled redhead.

This is the stuff I think about when Caroline thinks I'm concentrating on the road. We've been cruising west at a consistent seventy miles per hour on I-20 on our way to the Texas border. I like to establish myself in the right-hand lane and really own it. We're following crows, which sounds insane, but if you had the crow totems that we have, you'd know it just feels right to be going this way. Caroline sits in the big captain's seat on the passenger side in her comfy clothes, which she likes to call her "loungeabouts" like the RV was some east coast estate. I love it. It's things like this that stoke the five-alarm fire.

Her feet are up on the dash, and she's flipping through a magazine we picked up at our last six-hundred-dollar fill-up. She'll read it until she starts to feel carsick then put it in the pile with the rest.

When she jumps a little in her seat and drops the magazine, at first I think it's because she's about to vomit, but then I feel it myself. My pocket is hot. My front pocket. Where I keep my crow totem.

"What the hell?" I slap at my pants like an ember dropped there. I swerve the boat a little bit and get a honk from somewhere to my left before I right us again. The crow is still hot. Not burning, but definitely hot. Caroline has hopped up and is dancing in place. She must really be feeling it. Her loungeabouts

are pretty thin, which I also love, but that's beside the point. She starts to reach in her pocket.

"No! Don't touch it! You'll phase right out of the RV! Hold up, I'm pulling over."

I flick on the hazards and shift into a long, slow stop on the shoulder of an exit for a town I've never heard of just east of the Texas border. I'm tapping my leg the whole time. Caroline bunches the cloth of her pants around the crow like she's carrying a hot skillet with nothing but a napkin. I see the outline of the totem. It's pulsing with rich, yellow light.

"What should we do?" she asks. "What does this mean?"

"I don't know," I say, holding my own crow off my leg over my jeans. "Your guess is as good as mine. But *something* just happened."

"I mean, should we phase? What if it's like a page or something?"

"We could try." I'm not crazy about it though. Big Hill's warning to stay clear of the thin world comes back to me. I know Caroline remembers, too, because she's furrowing her brow in that way she does when she's weighing options.

"It's really hot, Owen."

"Well, you could take off your pants," I say before I realize what I'm saying. She cocks an eyebrow at me, but I think there's a hint of a smile there nonetheless.

"It's definitely trying to tell us something," she says.

I see my window. Mr. Nice Guy would most likely advise against phasing. It's the sober, rational thing to do given Big Hill's warning, a man who is infinitely more versed in the crow totem than the two of us are.

But Mr. Nice Guy bags Caroline's groceries.

"On the count of three. Ready?" I say. She looks at me with wide eyes then nods. "One, two... three!"

We both grab our burning crows at once and blink out of the living world and into the thin world. The colors bleed into harsh basics, like an over-touched photograph. The sounds of the world are dulled and distant. Things move at strange speeds. Time seems

more arbitrary here, less consistent. I have a theory about time in the thin place. The closer you get to the world of the dead, or wherever departed souls go, the less time matters. There, theoretically, it doesn't matter at all.

The pain is slight, at first. The shock of the color switch and the time dilation is more staggering than the initial pain, but the pain is there. When we get our feet under ourselves, it's more apparent. It's like a slow pinch, but you can't quite source it. That's because it's not on your body. It's deeper, past muscle and bone. I reach out to touch Caroline's shoulder.

"You all right?" I ask. My voice sounds like I'm talking through a tin can phone, but she nods.

"This place sucks," she says, looking around in distaste. "We're not supposed to be here. The living should stay in the land of the living."

My sentiments exactly, but only nice guys call uncle. "The other Circle members use this place as a tool. So should we. We're just not used to it yet, that's all. C'mon, let's walk." I hold out my hand, and she grabs it. Then we take a step. We walk a city block in a blink. We stop again and get our bearings. We've left the RV well behind us. The first time we tried this we ended up hundreds of feet from each other as well and couldn't right the distance in the thin world. We had to phase back and walk it out in real time. Now we hold hands. I don't mind it. I don't think Caroline does either, honestly, if for no other reason than she doesn't want to skip off alone in this place.

The pinch is getting stronger. Was it always like this? I'm no Circle pro or anything, but I've phased a few times. It feels like it's getting worse.

"Does the color here seem off to you?" Caroline asks, echoing my thoughts. "I mean, it's always kind of sepia, but doesn't it seem darker..." And just then a black hand rips through the shimmering wall of the thin world and latches on to her hand, the one that grasps her crow. It grips her so that Caroline can't let go and phase back. For a second she stares at it like you might stare at a bad cut in the seconds before the pain hits, then she starts screaming. She

can't scream long, though, because a second hand rips through space and clutches at her neck. She sputters. It all happens in an instant.

I try to pull her my way with the hand that still holds hers, but it's no use. The dark arms jut from thin air, but they're anchored somewhere else, somewhere beyond the thin place, and they won't budge. In fact, they're pulling Caroline backward, and the air is bulging around her, straining with surface tension.

"Let her go!" I scream, but I'm trapped myself. I need a free hand, but I don't dare let go of my crow. I'd phase out, and I could lose her forever.

I swing under the arm that holds her neck and brace it with my shoulder, trying to break the grip. I gasp at the touch of the thing. It sets my heart racing with a rising panic, like it's an amphetamine of some sort. I'm overcome with feelings of disorder and mayhem, but I refuse to let it take her. I strain against the hand, against the panic, and against the boiling of my blood just from being in this godforsaken place. Tears come to my eyes because I know I'm going to lose her. I look over at her, and she's turning blue. She tries to shake her head at me to go.

"I won't leave you!" I scream through gritted teeth, and I feel the walls of the reality of this place start to give.

But then there's a pop, loud and clear, and I know someone is there with the two of us. At first he's a blur—he seems to move as fast in this place as we would phasing through the living world. He coasts on a wave of momentum and slams his fists into the smoky black arm around Caroline's neck. I hear a crack, and the arm caves in. The long, thin fingers fog away, and Caroline jerks her neck forward, sucking in a monster breath.

The third man slides behind Caroline and flips to the other side of the hand that holds her crow. He grabs it as he would the hilt of a sword and wrenches it around and over his head. It disjoints, and he moves to snap it over his knee, but it flits back through the wall and disappears, leaving only a trace of black smoke behind it. Caroline drops to her knees, the crow tumbles from her fist, and she blinks back to the land of the living. I follow her a second later.

Caroline is on her knees on the hot concrete of the shoulder of the highway, and she's vomiting. I drop to my knees myself and suck in gulp after gulp of warm Louisiana air. I reach for Caroline. She's shivering uncontrollably. She leans back and sits on the concrete and reaches back for me. I realize I'm shivering, too. And my hands have that soft-blue coloring that I always associate with cyanosis from hypothermia.

"Told you... that place... sucks," Caroline says, and before she can say another word, there's a *whoosh, pop*, and knowing my luck it's nothing but trouble. All I want to do is lie down on the shoulder of I-20 like a dead armadillo, but I force myself to stand.

I nearly faint with relief when I see Joey Flatwood standing there.

"It doesn't suck," he says, in his quiet Navajo accent where he emphasizes every word carefully. "It's getting taken over."

Flatwood repositions his own crow, which he wears around his neck, to rest over a leather collar piece he's fashioned to keep it from his skin. Then he reaches a hand out to Caroline. She takes it and allows herself to be pulled up. "It's good to walk afterward," he says. "Takes the chill away."

Flatwood looks like he's done a lot more than walk since we last saw him. He's bulked up at the shoulders, and now he fills out his leather jacket. He wears jeans and heavy black boots that buckle at the side. His face filled out, too, but in that angular, Indian way that looks cut from flint. His hair is long but no longer greasy. It's braided with beads and two big black crow feathers that flash in the sun.

He looks like a complete badass, naturally, and while I could weep with joy from seeing him, I can't help but realize that the Indian version of James Dean kicked the hell out of whatever was holding Caroline hostage in the thin place and saved the day for both of us while I was stuck to her hand like some sort of awful figure skating partner. And he's Ben's best friend, no less.

Flatwood is bleeding at the knuckles, but he ignores it. "I thought Big Hill told you not to walk the thin world. It's not safe. The walls are breaking down." He says this without judgment, only

as a statement of fact, in that uniquely Navajo way that reminds me of being back at Chaco. And for a fleeting moment, as the cold still seeps from me, it makes me wish I was still there. In my nine-to-five job. A couple days a week at the Navajo clinic. Living safely behind a curtain of my own.

"The crow totems were burning," I say. "We thought it might be a call of some sort. That's why we phased."

Flatwood turns to me, his eyes alight. "So you felt it too! I swore it was burning, but back in my using days, everything burned. I thought it was ghost pain. I didn't get my hopes up."

Caroline still holds his hand, unsteady. She looks like she's been locked in a walk-in freezer. Her teeth are chattering.

"Hopes up?" I ask. "What's going on?"

"The totem flares when the bell's been found. There's a new Keeper. A young boy. Somewhere in the plains of Texas. I don't know where. Those are the visions the crows have given me." Once he's sure Caroline is steady, he gently withdraws his hand. He looks between the two of us, his brown eyes flashing. "You must go to him. You must protect him. That is your part."

"Us?" Caroline says, wheezy. "Joey, we can't even take two steps in the thin place without nearly getting killed. You should be the one going."

"She's right," I say, even though it burns me. "I mean, look at us. We're rookies. And... look at you."

But Joey Flatwood shakes his head adamantly. "No. You are the Walker's chosen ones. And I am meant to be elsewhere. I have another calling."

"It can't be more important than protecting the Keeper," Caroline says.

"Everything that is done has one importance," Flatwood says simply. I try not to roll my eyes. "You must go to the Keeper, and I must rally the Circle."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because the time is coming when we must fight to keep this world as it is. To hold the balance," Flatwood says, nodding to himself. He tucks one feather-braided strand of hair behind his ear.

"Now go. The crows above will lead you. But beware. The crows above are seen by all. Those that would help the Keeper and those that would hurt him."

He looks at both of us one last time then grasps the lanyard that holds his totem. He flips it so it rests against the bare skin of his chest and phases out of existence. Caroline and I are left alone.

We walk back toward the RV, nearly a half mile behind us, not daring to touch our totems again. We're quiet the whole time, walking side by side, but I sneak glances at Caroline the entire way. She looks forward, her eyes unfocused. I keep expecting to have to catch her, she looks so weak.

Once we strap in the front seats of the RV, she lets out a deep breath. The engine roars to life, and I feel the first real measure of comfort since we phased. I wait for an open lane and gun it, and just like that we're back on the highway. As if in answer, a flock of crows soars above us, flying in our direction hundreds of feet in the air like a black wisp of smoke.

After nearly half an hour on the road, I turn to Caroline. "What is it?" I ask. "What did you see?" Because I know she is attuned in ways others are not. I know she sees things in people, sees what sort of mood they project. I also think she can see what state their soul is in. That is both her blessing and her curse.

"The hands," she says. "They... gave me pictures, in my mind." She turns to me, and her eyes are frightened, her nose runny from the cold she's just been through. "I don't know how to explain them." She looks out the window, gathering her thoughts. "They were pictures of chaos. There was nothing else to them. Just chaos."

CHAPTER 7

GRANT ROMER

I like having a crow for a best friend. I know it may seem weird that I could get a best friend so quick, but if you knew Chaco you wouldn't think so. He's an easy bird to like. With the guys up the street like Otis and his crew, you never know if what they are saying is true when they say they are my friends. I asked Otis once, and he sort of nodded and said *yeah* but in the way you say *yeah*, *why not?* Like he ain't got nothing better to do at the time.

With Chaco it's not like that. Chaco never lies. That was one of the first things he told me. I asked him why, and he said it's 'cause he has no reason to. Lying is a human thing. I believe him because when he says he's my friend, it sounds *heavy*. Like it has the weight of a million years behind it. More than that, even, because Chaco says he came around when the world came around. He wouldn't say to meet up to ride bikes and then ditch me. Things like that don't matter to a super old bird. He's got other things to care about. And the most important one of them is me.

My most important thing is supposed to be the bell. I know the bell is important, but I don't quite know if it's my *most* important thing, because I think my real most important thing is still Pap. I told Chaco this, and Chaco nodded and said he understood but that in time I'd come to see just how much the bell means.

I haven't told Pap about Chaco yet. I haven't told him about the bell, either, which I keep around my neck on a metal chain. At first I was afraid that the chain might break while I'm on my bike

or rolling around in my sleep or something and it'd fall off and roll away and I'd never find it again, but Chaco says once the bell is found, it's never lost. It can only be taken or given. That makes me feel a little better and a little worse. I don't want anyone to take the bell from me, and I don't think the bell does either. It sits in this little pit in the middle of my chest that seems meant for it. It hardly moves. It's not hot or cold anymore, and it hardly weighs anything, but I know it's there all the time. It feels *right*, like a brand-new fifty-cent piece or a smooth river stone.

When I get home that night, the night I find the bell, Pap knows something is up. But I just can't lay it all out for him. I don't think I have the words. He asks me point-blank, "You didn't go back to that cemetery, did you, son?"

"No," I say. Which is true. But it's also not true because what happened at the cemetery and what happened when I found the bell are connected. I know it. But I don't know how, so I just sit quietly and stare at the ground. I want to look at Chaco, who is outside in the trees, but I make myself look up at Pap. He looks so tired. His shoulders seem to disappear more and more every day, like he's slumping into himself. He watches me for a second and then nods.

"Pap, are you okay?" He smiles at me and comes over to me and pats the back of my head, and I breathe in the scent of wood and oil and hard soap.

"Of course, son," he says. "Just got a long week ahead in Lubbock. That's all. Gotta turn in a bit early. Food is in the ice box."

He pads off to his room and softly closes the door, and I know he's not telling me the truth. He's not lying, exactly, but I know he's not *okay*. I know he misses Mom and Dad, and he misses his shop in the garage and the big pile of raw wood he has in there that's doing nothin' but sitting under a dusty tarp. All these things make him sad.

When I open up the refrigerator, I see a small meal of fried chicken. Not the big bucket, just a few chicken strips, enough for me. Not enough for him. I wonder if he didn't eat dinner so that I could eat dinner, and it makes me want to run into his room and

throw the chicken strips at his head and curl up next to him in bed at the same time. He's the one that has a job. He needs the food. And if he works just so I can eat, then there's only one thing I can do: I gotta work so he can eat.

I got a plan.

Back when Mom and Dad were alive and I wanted to buy my bike, I didn't have enough money. I thought Pap might give it to me because he was always giving me a secret five bucks here and there, so I went to him and I showed him the ad in the paper and I asked him for it.

"You know how much this is?" he asked me.

I hadn't looked. I just saw the picture and wanted it so bad that when I ripped it out it tore the price off, so I shook my head. Then he asked how much I had, and I told him almost fifteen dollars. Which was all I had in the world, and I'd saved from Christmas and the last few times he'd handed me a five. Pap said that wasn't enough, which I remember almost had me in tears since I was smaller then and I cried more. But Pap said, "Hold on a minute, now. If you're willing to work for it, I'll make sure you get it." So that's what I did. I set up a stand and sold water and pop from a cooler on Cotton Flat Road, which is a pretty crowded street. That was during May and it was starting to get real hot again, but it was still early enough that people were surprised by the heat and didn't bring water or Cokes along on their errands. I sold a lot of Cokes that day. Made nearly forty bucks. I took it to Pap. He nodded and patted my head with his four fingers, and the next day I had the bike at my house. I'm pretty sure the bike was more than forty bucks, or even fifty bucks, but that was when Mom and Dad were alive and Pap still had some cash, and so I think he spotted me. He ain't never called me on it neither. Now I think it's time I spotted him.

I take my last ten bucks and go down to the gas station and buy two twenty-four packs of different types of Cokes and haul them back in a cooler I strap to the back of my bike. Chaco watches my back the whole way. He seems nervous. He says I shouldn't be out running around because things on his end—the

world of talking animals and dead people—are pretty noisy. But I keep thinking of Pap going to bed hungry, and it stings me in the heart. If I sell all the Cokes, I'll make my ten bucks back plus maybe another forty bucks. And it's hot out today. I think I'll sell them all. Especially because I have a great idea, which is to post up near the four-way stop into the man camp and sell to the truck caterpillar. That's a guaranteed crowd.

I dump the two packs of Coke into the roller cooler then take the whole ice tray out of the refrigerator and dump it all over the Coke. I rope the cooler extra tight to the back of my bike seat. I test ride for a few feet. If I go slow, I'll have no problem.

Chaco lands on my handlebars and nearly tips me over as I'm riding.

"What's going on here, my man?" Chaco asks, walking back and forth until he settles right in the middle.

"I can't see when you sit right there," I say. He hops up and onto my shoulder and then my head.

"That's not helping either."

"Remember how I told you to lay low? This isn't laying low." I can see by Chaco's shadow that he's looking everywhere at once.

"Pap didn't eat anything last night. He gets paid at the end of the month. That's two more nights he might not eat, or might have scraps 'cause he feeds me first. Well, I ain't havin' that."

Chaco looks down at me, and I grit my teeth because all of a sudden my throat is clenching up because I'm mad-sad again. "He looks so old and sad, and I don't want him to be that way anymore, but I think it's too late because what's done is done and Mom and Dad ain't coming back, and I'm not old enough to get a real job yet so this is what I got." It sort of pours out of me the way the tears usually do, but because the words came out first the tears stay in and I feel a bit better. Chaco is still looking at me. Then he sort of fluffs himself down on my head.

"Are you hugging me?" I ask, smiling.

"Yeah," Chaco says.

"Bird hugs are funny."

"Just go with it."

"Thanks, Chaco," I say, after a few seconds of riding.

"Well, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. Or so I hear. But you promise me a couple of things. First: don't sell to the weird guys. You know 'em. I know 'em. If they look weird or it doesn't feel right, you back away. Second: they put the cash in the can, you toss them the Coke. Cool? You're not getting up near anybody." He leans over and looks down at me with that cocked-head stare that I think means he's being really serious.

"Jeez, Chaco. Nobody's gonna kidnap me in the middle of the day with all those people all around." But actually I'm getting kind of nervous. I was just trying to make some extra cash, but the way Chaco is talking makes me think I'm going into enemy territory or something.

"You haven't seen what I've seen, man," Chaco says. "We got a deal?"

"Deal."

The four-way stop outside is just like I expected. Jammed up and noisy with creeping trucks going back almost as far as I can see. It's hot and humid, and all the heat from the trucks makes it worse, plus the whole place smells like exhaust. Perfect for sellin' Cokes. I chain my bike to a tree nearby and put up my sign, and I'm not set up for five minutes before I get my first beep—a big silver eighteen-wheeler with the round back that looks like a medicine pill and means it's carrying water or oil. I glance at Chaco, who sits in the shade of the tree, high up where he can see everything. He doesn't tell me anything or try to fly out or stop me, so I go up to the passenger door. The driver reaches over to push it open. He's a big fat guy wearing an old T-shirt with the state of Texas on it and some faded words I can't make out. He looks all right.

"You got Diet Coke?" he asks.

"Yessir."

"How much?"

"Dollar for one."

"No shit?" He starts laughing then checks the line through his windshield. He won't be moving far anytime soon.

"Pretty steep, boy. But you got the best of me. Maybe I should go into the roadside pop business. I'll take two."

I toss him the cash can. He seems to know what to do with it, plopping two bucks in. He tosses it back, and I dig around for two Diet Cokes, which I toss up to him. He catches them both then cracks one open. "Cheers," he says. Then he idles on another ten feet, and I go back to my stand.

I try not to grin because I need to look all business, but already that's two bucks I made off of cans that cost me maybe a quarter each. Things are looking good. As soon as I pocket the cash, I get another beep. Then another. I get to each of them in turn. One's a skinny younger guy, and the other is a big army guy, but they both look all right, too. The Army guy gives me two bucks for one Coke and says to keep the change. Then there's a bit of a break, but soon enough another beep. I keep tossing Cokes, and in about an hour I'm over halfway done. I got seven Cokes left and thirty-five bucks in my pocket. That's a lot of fried chicken.

I take a break and pull my stand into the shade under Chaco's tree and lean back against the trunk. I wipe my face with my shirt, and it comes away like a mask of sweat.

"You all right down there?" Chaco asks.

"Yeah," I whisper back. "Almost empty."

"That's pretty good. What say we pack it in?"

I look up and try to find him in the shadows, and when I do, I see he's out as far as he can be while staying in the shade, away from eyes. He's not looking at me. He's watching the skies. I follow his gaze, and I can see why. A whole mess of crows are on the horizon. And more still even farther out, like thin black lines of pencil. They're coming in waves.

"Wow," I say. "What's with all the crows? Is that... are they bad?"

"No," Chaco says. "They just sense a disturbance, that's all. But whatever got them riled up could be bad news. Plus, they're basically pointing a huge finger down at us right now."

Before I can ask more, I hear another beep. I step out from under the tree almost on instinct, looking for the truck it came

from. One last sale and then we're off.

"Hey, hombre. How about we let this one be?" Chaco says, his sharp black head flitting from the sky to the row of trucks. I get the beep again, and this time I see where from: a shiny white truck a little larger than an ice cream truck about five spaces back. It looks brand new. I take another step forward, and just then it's like the bell takes a step backward, like it's trying to burrow into me. It doesn't hurt, but it feels heavy, and it makes it hard to walk. I clutch at it, and as I do the truck swims around in my vision. It goes from brand-new to hazy and milky, like an old faded picture of a new truck. I blink, and the picture is gone. But I know something is wrong.

"Yeah, we oughta get outta here," I start to say, but my words are slow. I can't look away as the door rattles open and two men jump out. They wear black suits and black sunglasses, but their skin is whiter than the truck. One stands tall, and the other is sort of hunched over with his hands out. Even their brown hair is faded, like their heads were dusted in powder.

They both take off their sunglasses, and their eyes are like black marbles. I know because they're looking right at me. When they see me, the eyes widen, but they're still black all through. I try to run, but my feet don't seem to be working like they should. Everything feels muddled. I look up for Chaco, but I don't see him. That's when I really get scared.

The two men look at each other, and the tall one nods at the thicker one, who pops his neck back and forth and disappears. There's a *whoosh, pop*, and then he's inches from me, his hand out like a claw going for my neck. This close, I notice his skin has black veins and that a turquoise glow comes from underneath his jacket, but all I can really see are his eyes. They say one thing: *I am going to kill you.*

His long fingernails brush my throat, but that's as far as they get. A river of black pours out of the sky, and wings rush all around me. All I hear is the sound of a million feathers along with a fast clapping sound as the birds slam into the man. He staggers back, punching at them with his fists, but it's no use. For every one

he hits, ten more are behind. The man roars like a bear, raging forward, and he almost gets to me until one crow, my crow, the biggest crow of all, passes right over my head and rakes him with talons as big as your finger. The man's head snaps back, and Chaco takes a strip of his face with him as he circles up and around for another go, but the man has already disappeared. In a blink he's back with the other guy by the truck, one arm over his eyes.

"Let's go!" Chaco says to me, flapping in front of my face, and it's like the birds are part of him. They flow through and around him like water, like they're his wings. "They will buy us time!"

I flick off the cooler hitch, hop on my bike, and tear away, not even looking behind me, not even caring about the seven Cokes. Chaco is above, just in my sight. More and more birds are whipping by us, all going back at the two men. I try not to think how each beak is as sharp as a razor and missing my face by inches, but none of the crows touch me. Not even a feather. I only feel the wind from their passing, and I try to focus on following Chaco. He's like a living GPS, ticking right and left just before I get to turns so I know where to go. I pump the brakes to skid into turns. I pedal so hard I kick up gravel behind me. The wind brings tears to my eyes, and I remember how it did the same thing back at the graveyard when I listened to the rows of gravestones fly by. That seems like a lifetime ago now.

It took me almost thirty minutes to get down to the four-way stop sign, but it feels like I get back home in about a minute. I stash my bike in the bushes where nobody will see it and open up the front door and turn around and actually lock it, which I almost never do, and then I run into my room and squeeze in the small space between my bed and the dresser. I haven't squeezed in between there since the days and weeks just after Mom and Dad died. It's a lot tighter than it was then, but I still fit. A few seconds later there's a light tapping on the window above my head. I look up and see Chaco there, taking up most of the window.

"You all right in there?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"You hurt?"

I shake my head again.

"You scared?" he asks after a minute.

I nod.

"You wanna talk about it?"

I shake my head. I just want to sit here for a second and hug my knees.

"D'you, uh... You want me to leave you alone?"

I tilt my head up to look at him, and I see him looking down at me. His eyes are sad. I didn't think it was possible for bird eyes to be sad, but his are. I shake my head again, hard this time. He sort of fluffs up, and when he settles again his eyes are less sad.

"All right then. I'll just stay right here, okay? Sometimes you need to sit and chill in the corner for a bit. I get that."

And that's where Pap finds me when he comes home that night. Still sitting in the corner, my knees to my chest. He calls my name a few times, and I call back but it sounds weak and like a baby, so Pap opens my door really slow.

"Grant?" he asks, switching on the light. He looks around until he finds me, then he's quiet for a second, hand on his forehead. "Are you all right, son?"

Everything wells up inside me then, and it's like my head is a full bucket of water that tips over, and for some reason all I can think to say is, "I left the cooler and my Cokes," and then I start crying. I cry so hard it's completely silent. Pap gets down on one knee, then both knees, and then he sits down, and then he takes one of my hands from where it clutches my legs and he presses it between both of his hands, and they're cool and rough and clean. After a minute, it calms me down enough that I can talk again.

"I have a friend who's a bird," I say. I don't know why I say it. I'm tired of holding things from Pap. I never want to hold anything from him again.

"I had a lot of friends like that too when I was your age," Pap says. "I wish some of them had stuck around, sometimes. They were so... I dunno. It's like they were real."

"He's still here," I say.

"Yeah?" Pap says, his voice gentle. "Where?"

"He's right out of the window."

Pap looks up. "Holy Jesus!" he says, and his hand shoots to his mouth because he never says that. I know I should be shocked, but it's so out of place and the look on his face is so open mouthed and wide eyed that I start to laugh.

"His name is Chaco. He can talk, but only to me I think." I watch Pap watch Chaco, and I smile more as Chaco does this funny little bow thing that smashes his head against the glass. "You think I'm crazy, don't you? And a liar," I say, looking down again. "Maybe I am. Maybe this is a big dream, and I was in that car too. I think that sometimes."

"No," Pap says quickly. "No. Never. You're not crazy, and you weren't in that car, thank God Almighty. And you sure as hell ain't a liar. Pardon my mouth tonight." His eyes are still on Chaco. "That is one big bird, son."

"He's probably my best friend. I met him when I found this bell." I take the bell out from under my shirt and hold it out to him. There's no ringer, which is good. It has a heavy shine to it. Not bright or polished. Heavy. I know Pap knows it ain't normal. He doesn't try to touch it or hold it, which I like. After a second, I tuck it back away. "But you can't tell no one about the bell, Pap."

Pap looks me square in the face for a second, and I can tell he's thinking hard, digging deep in his brain. He looks up at Chaco, who watches both of us with a flat gaze.

"Where'd you find the bell?" he asks me.

"In the desert past the man camp. Maybe a half mile in."

"There's the Wilmington rig out near there," Pap says, thinking. "They just moved the pad."

"Yeah, that's the one. Near there. How did you know?"

"Because that's a thin place," Pap says. "A place where things are different."

Above me, Chaco nods. "I knew it!" Chaco says. "I knew it! He's like you, my man!"

I look at Pap cockeyed for a second. "The graveyard is the same way."

"I guessed as much. That's why I told you to keep out. Those types of places, they ain't bad, exactly, but they ain't good either. They're just..."

"Thin," I say.

Pap nods.

"And sometimes thin places don't sit right with people who don't know about them. Now, I don't know nothin' 'bout no bell, but I do know this. You are a special boy. I think your father had some of it too, rest his soul. He didn't get the time to use it. But you're special too. You're like me. You can see the thin places. You feel them."

"They give me this feeling like I lost something there even though I've never been there," I say, and all of a sudden I feel this warm sense of relief. If you ever thought you were going crazy and then found out you weren't, you'd know what I feel like. If not, I just can't explain it to you. It's like something big breaks inside you for the better.

"But you saw something there today," Pap says, his face darkening. "Something scary."

I shake my head. "Not there. No. I saw it near the four-way stop on the road that leads to the camp. In the middle of the truck caterpillar. Two guys. But they weren't guys. They weren't even people like I've ever seen." I look up at Chaco, who is watching me carefully. "And I think they knew. I think they knew about the bell. And they wanted it *so bad*."

Chaco nods. "They did. I'm not gonna sugarcoat this because that's not what I do, so here's the truth. They've wanted that bell for a long time, and they're about the worst kind of thing you can imagine. Now that they know you've got it, they're looking for you."

"What do we do?" I ask, and my voice is quiet and mousey, and I think how strange it must be for Pap to hear a one-sided conversation like this. "If a million birds can't stop 'em, what can the three of us do?"

Chaco spreads his wings, and they shoot out past the edges of the window. "You're never as alone as you think, hombre.

Remember how I told you that everyone could see all those crows in the sky? Well, there are people that are as good as those two are bad, and they saw the crows too. They're coming our way. We just gotta make sure it's them that find us first."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

THE WALKER

All I want to do is go after the agents. I know they're headed for Grant and Chaco. Two pictures float in my mind. The first is Grant, still just a kid, clutching the bell like he just snatched a hundred bucks off the sidewalk, trying to figure out what it all means and what his part in it is. The other is Karen. Her soul butchered—hanging by a thread before its time. Grant could end up like that. And that doesn't sit well with me. The lifespan of a soul is written well before its thread is first spun. From day one, I took comfort in knowing that no matter what kind of fresh hell the agents want to rain down on the world of the living, no matter how thin the walls between the worlds have become, all of it was already written into the souls that play a part. It has been since they were created.

What happened to Karen is shaking that faith. It sure as hell looked to me like what happened to her wasn't part of any plan.

I step out of Vegas and into the soul map and start sifting through strands, looking for Parsons and Douglas again. Even if they were in the thin world and hidden from me, their last steps in the living world would at least give me a clue as to where they were. But when I walk the map in their footsteps, it's like a huge game of Twister. One foot in Vegas, the next in California, then to Arizona, then New Mexico, and on and on. These guys are phasing on a level I didn't think possible, striding across entire states at a time. But this time I'm not going to lose them. I'm tracking them step-by-step when I get called away again. That's me, always on the clock.

I walk the map until I find the flickering soul, and again I stop. This one is all sorts of weird. If a soul is like a shining lightbulb, and a soul on its way out is a dim, flickering lightbulb, then this thing, if it can be called a soul, is a lightbulb that rattles hollow with a blown filament, just a shell now.

At times like this, where I get one weird call after the next, I really wish Chaco was around. But he has a new job now. And it's time I did mine. I swirl open the map and step into the living world.

I land outside of the Albuquerque foothills. Not all that far from Chaco Reservation, as the crow flies. I recognize Palomas Peak to the south and what looks to be a single bright streetlight illuminating I-85 to the distant west.

I'm looking at a man named Stanley Vickers. He's a sixty-seven-year-old accountant who lives and works in Plymouth, Virginia. He has two kids in their late thirties and is divorced going on ten years now. He died of a heart attack while sitting behind his desk.

I know all of this because I walked Stanley through the veil a week ago, back in Plymouth. And yet here Stanley is again, wandering around in the middle of nowhere, New Mexico.

"Stanley? What the hell are you doing here?"

Stanley seems to register my voice, but when he turns around and looks at me, his face has this slack blankness to it that reminds me of the paint huffers back on the rez. He weaves in place. His eyes slowly close then slowly open again. He doesn't answer me. I walk up to him. He doesn't move. I wave my hand in front of his face and snap my fingers a few times. His skin seems to mist away a little bit, as if he's not quite whole.

"Stanley. Hello? You in there, Stan?" I wave my hand above his head. No soul string there. I shouldn't be surprised since I snipped it myself barely a blink ago, but I snip all around him anyway just in case. His hair and skin swirl around as if they're losing consistency, but nothing else happens. No pop, no release. Whatever this thing is, it's not Stanley. I put my hands on my hips and look around the desert in the failing light.

"Where is that damn veil," I mutter, and sure enough, there it is, gliding toward us across the darkening plains in complete silence. It doesn't catch the light so much as poke a hole through what remains. It is entirely black, and it's as flat and dead as a lake surface. To be honest, it's scary as hell, so I do what I do to all things that I'm confronted with that scare me. I start cussing at it.

"Why don't you do your fucking job, huh? I cut the strings, you take the souls. Where is the major breakdown here..." But as it approaches, I trail off. This thing is nonresponsive. It's as much of the veil I once knew as this shell wandering the desert is Stanley Vickers.

"Are you gonna take him?" I ask, stammering a little. "Look at him. He's just standing there."

The veil doesn't move. I feel like I'm talking to a corpse. But of course it wouldn't recognize him. It already took him once. As far as the veil knows, Stanley is on the other side. It must have sensed the disturbance same as I did, but it's blind to Stanley. I see that I'm gonna have to walk him right up and push him through myself, which doesn't exactly excite me, because I don't want to get anywhere near the veil.

I go wide around Stanley and put my hand to his back. "All right, Stan. Time to go. Again." He shambles forward with my hand at his back like he's had ten too many shots at Sancho's Bar. My touch sinks partway into him, which is more than a little gross. I get unsettling flashes of his past life, pictures of his wife and his desk and his yard and a little yapping dog. It depresses me. I aim him at the veil and narrow my eyes.

"No funny business," I say.

Nothing.

I brace myself and shove Stan toward the veil. He falls through it like a rock through a black cloud. The veil doesn't rustle. Doesn't move at all. Which by now I'm finding more unsettling than when it was getting handsy. Then it pops out of sight.

Now, to figure out just what happened to my man Stan.

I open the soul map and find where I tucked Stan's soul string away. I mark it then step back into the living world and start to

swipe back along the line of his life, just like I did with Karen. I backtrack a week. Before Karen met her end, before Grant found the bell. The world whips and blurs until I land in Plymouth, Virginia, once more. On the third story of a big brick corporate building, where he worked in a corner office. I recognize all of it. There's Stan, typing away at a spreadsheet but pulling every now and then at the collar of his shirt. His coloring isn't good. He keeps flicking the fingers of his left hand in and out, rubbing them. He feels constricted. His arm is going numb. Warning signs, Stan. C'mon, man... and there he goes. Mid-report. So it was a massive coronary that got him. He was alive one moment then dead the next, eyes still open, his face on his keyboard.

Enter: me. I watch myself step from the soul map and survey the scene. I take a point of pride at my response time. Less than thirty seconds.

I watch myself help Stan's soul up from his seat. He's a little disoriented, but he gets it faster than most. More than anything he's pissed off. He says he was voted most likely to work himself to death in high school, and here it actually fucking happened. "Can you believe that?" he asks me.

Sure can, Stan. Time to go.

He's still shaking his head, as if he's pissed off at his dead body, as the veil snaps him up. I watch myself look around the room for a minute then swirl open the map and step through. Job well done.

So here I am, watching the credit reel of a job I just did, which just so happens to be in a corner office with a dead, soulless body slumped over a keyboard. Nothing too out of the ordinary, but something has to happen to bring Stan back. So I wait.

I wait, and I wait, and I wait. I see the entire aftermath. The screaming secretary who stumbles across the body. The ambulance call. The medics that come in, take a pulse, and start prepping the gurney in no particular hurry. The office is in shock; they shut down early. I'm still there in a darkened room. Nothing strange yet. Nada. But somehow Stanley ended up wandering the New Mexico desert.

If it ain't happening here, maybe it's happening there.

I whip back to where I ran into Stanley in the foothills. It's still several hours before I find him, but all is quiet here, too. It occurs to me that he could have been wandering around for hours out here even before I came across him. Who knows where he started. I spin in a circle, but see no sign of him. Nothing but cracked earth, dry, brittle bushes, and barren desert trees. Nothing on the horizon but the mountains one way and the highway with its lone light in the other. I squint at it. Kind of strange for I-85 to have a streetlight this far out in the desert. Usually it's just you and your headlights.

In fact, the light looks way too green to be a streetlight. It's almost turquoise, actually. Like the crow totems...

I start walking toward it. Then I start running, which I don't need to do, since I'm still in replay mode, but I'm running nonetheless. Because I know this ain't gonna be good.

Sure enough, the "streetlight" isn't a streetlight at all. I'm deeper in the desert than I thought. The light is coming from the desert itself, pulsing with the time of a heartbeat. It's leaking from the mouth of a spillover that looks to have serviced a river system long gone dry.

I walk into the riverbed following the light, taking the subtle bends and turns slowly, until I stop at the mouth of a cave, where the light is strong. Ancient marks surround the opening. Marks I recognize as crows, some drawn with fingers and some chipped into the rock itself. Two large boulders look like they once guarded the entrance, but they've been pushed aside, the earth ripped beneath them. The mouth has been exposed for what I feel must be the first time in generations. The turquoise light pulses in low, measured time like the heartbeat of the earth. I run my hands over the rough cave paintings as I walk inside, and their paint takes on a turquoise sheen. I have a sudden flashback to crawling through the open mouth of the hogan when Gam performed my Evilway ceremony. This is like that. I feel like I am entering a sacred, delicate place. I pull my hand from the walls, afraid, even in this

echo of events, that I'll kill something special just by intruding here. I feel strongly that nobody should be here. Ever.

But somebody is. I can hear a distant squealing sound, like nails on a chalkboard. I walk toward the sound, and every inch of me is on edge, even though I know that nothing can hurt me. But old habits die hard. It's the sound that's doing it. It's a scream. I can hear it more clearly with every step. Someone is being tortured.

I'm deep in the cave now. The only color is turquoise. It's like I'm walking through the middle of a crow totem that is being destroyed. The sound is too much, so I run toward it, if only to get it over with. To see what I came here to see and be done with it.

I follow the guts of the cave around a final bend, and it opens up into a low cavern. I skid to a halt on grainy rock. In front of me, Parsons and Douglas are naked, facing away from me. The white skin of their broad backs is thickly veined in black, and their hair is slicked with sweat. They are hacking at a vein of beautiful turquoise that feathers through the earth and widens just at their feet. It is the source of the light, so powerful now that it's nearly blinding. Perhaps it *is* blinding, to them. Perhaps it is what has turned their eyes black. This one vein pulses enough light to travel through the cave and sift over the riverbed, where it's still strong enough that I mistook it for a streetlight.

It's also screaming. With every blow the agents rain down upon it, it screams. Not like any animal or human might—not out of fear or anger—but out of pure pain. It hits me like a staggering punch to the gut, worse than any sucker punch I ever felt while I was alive. It's the ground itself screaming. This is a vein of the stuff that knits together the heart of the living world, and it's being ripped apart by the agents.

I lose it. I scream at them and run toward them, as if I could hammer away at an echo of the past. As if I could change what was written. The rational part of me knows I can't, but like I said, I'm a cusser.

"You fuckers! What are you doing? You're killing her!" I don't even know who *she* is, but I know they're killing her. I swing at

their imprints. My fists pass through them. I fall to the ground against the vein and am washed in light like blood, and I feel like I'm gonna cry. But I'll be damned if I cry in front of the agents. Even in front of a picture of them. So I watch.

They're hammering at something inside the vein. Smashing away like children at a piñata. Their naked bodies are bright, and slick lines of sweat seem to trace their black veins and pool in the crooks of their skin. Their eyes are manic. They both step away at the same time, in total silence, heaving with the effort, and I see that they are each holding pure turquoise.

So this is the source of the totems. This, or something very like this. Although here the agents are taking what the earth freely gave to the Circle. I've held the totems. There is nothing of this scene about them. They are like nuggets of gold that unearth themselves and tumble down the rivers to be found. This is pure theft.

My point is proven when I get a better look at what exactly they are holding, because it sure as shit ain't a crow. Douglas holds a rough chunk of turquoise in an oiled rag. It's flat on one side, like a crude whetstone. Which makes sense because Parsons holds a knife. It's jagged and unfinished, but it's clearly a knife. The blade is maybe six inches long and roughly chipped, but it still glints sharply, just like an old arrowhead or traditional skinning knife. The hilt is turquoise too but wrapped in silver wire. Parsons holds it up above him and checks its edge. His eyes flash black when he sees it. He breaks into this horrid grin, and suddenly I know what the agents have been doing all this time when I should have been watching them like a dog. They were here, hacking away at the lifeblood of the living world. Fashioning some sort of weapon from the same material the crow totems came from.

And it all comes together for me. This was how poor Karen's soul was clipped before its time. What I do with my fingers, the agents have found a way to do with a knife. It's sloppy, it's ugly, and it's a perversion, but it works. I remember seeing the glow of the thing from beneath Parsons's jacket in the Vegas hotel room.

If I ate anything anymore, I think I'd have puked it up by now. That's how wrong it feels to see a weapon crafted from the vein in front of me. As it is, I just get this phantom nausea, which is almost worse.

I have answers, but they just lead to more questions. Why would the agents care about cutting souls? If they wanted to kill someone, they could have saved themselves a lot of time and exposure to the turquoise vein if they'd just shot them. Something tells me getting rid of a dead body wouldn't be a problem for these two. And for that matter, how did they find this place? It was walled over, left in peace for generations. They must have been told by someone. A Circle member? Did we have a traitor in our ranks? If not, then that meant someone else out there knew about this place, this pulse point to the heart of our world, and told the agents. Neither option was good.

Which brings us back to our friend Stan. This shit-show ended up with a departed soul wandering the New Mexico desert. I want to know how.

I don't have to wait long.

Douglas is pacing around, psyching himself up for something. He flaps his arms back and forth like he's about to swim a few laps then slaps at his pecs, muttering to himself. He rolls his head around on his neck and pushes against the glittering rocks of the cavern, like he could move the cave. Naked and powder-white and crazed, he looks even more like a bulldog than before. Caged and prodded, ready to rip. Then Parsons hands him the knife. He takes it by the handle with both hands, and he raises it above his head, like he's about to drive a stake into the ground. But instead, he runs at the wall of the cavern, bellowing like a midnight train.

I scream with him as I watch him slam the knife into the rock wall, but it's not precisely in the rock; it's in the space before the rock. It's in the wall of the living world itself. Once it catches, Douglas rips down on it, practically hanging off the floor from the hilt. I can see the wall between the worlds slice open in a thin white line, like a paper cut before the blood seeps out. The knife moves about a foot downward, then it catches and sticks. Douglas

screams in rage, and I smile grimly. He wanted more. They wanted to get through. I can see it in the disappointment in Parsons's face as he looks away in disgust.

Nice try, assholes. Maybe you could throw a ferret through that thing, but you ain't getting through. You're staying right here.

Douglas jerks the knife back out and hands it to Parsons, who takes it and covers it with an oiled cloth of his own. Parsons walks over to where he has laid his suit over a boulder. He carefully dresses himself, but I can tell his mind is racing. Douglas slams his fist into the rock wall of the cave a few times then puts his own suit back on, leaving blood marks on the cuffs. At the mouth of the cave, the agents pause. Parsons turns to Douglas, who still seethes.

"It was lazy and foolish to think we could get through using the knife alone," he says, his voice flat and slow. "There is only one way across to the land of the dead, and we have known it all along."

Douglas nods once.

"If the knife can cut a soul, it will serve its purpose on the other side. Let us test it, someplace where we will not be noticed. Someplace with enough chaos. Then we will redouble our efforts to find the bell."

Douglas nods again. Parsons reaches in his jacket and touches the knife then disappears in a flash. Douglas reaches in his jacket, touches the whetstone, and follows him a moment later. I know where they're going, of course. Off to Vegas, where Karen will be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Spoiler alert: the knife works.

Once again I'm left alone. I walk over to the vein they've ripped apart and try to see what damage they've done, but it's so bright it almost seems to buzz. I can't see anything but retina burn. When I blink my eyes clear again, I notice smoke drifting in from the cut Douglas made. More and more seeps through, and as it hits the air of this world it starts to change into something else. That something else is Stanley Vickers. He fumbles himself together and ends up sitting on the floor of the cave like he woke up there

halfway through a ten-day bender. He gets up, completely lost. He staggers into the walls and falls on the floor and scrabbles his way toward the mouth of the cave and out.

I know how this one ends, too. Soon enough his presence will start to weigh on the soul map, and in a couple of days I'll feel it, too. I'll find Stan about a quarter mile from here, for the second time. He doesn't get very far. Poor guy.

But it's not Stan that worries me anymore. What worries me is that the agents somehow found a way to this place, and they have crafted a weapon that they intend to use in the land of the dead. I remember the way their black eyes glimmered in the hotel room, when they realized, somehow, that the bell had been found.

Parsons said there's only one way across, and he's right. It's the veil. The veil that has been rotting away as the knife was being ripped out of the earth. As the knife was being constructed, the veil was breaking down. The walls of the living world might hold up to the knife, but the veil sure as shit won't. Not now.

But Parsons knows as well as I do that he can't see the veil. Even if he's prepared to slice it open, he won't find it. As far as I know, the only way you can see the veil is if you're dead, or if you're me.

So that's it then. The puzzle is snapping together. The agents are gonna take the bell, then take my job, then take the knife across the veil, and by the time they do whatever evil shit they plan on doing over there, I'll be too dead to care.

CHAPTER 9

CAROLINE ADAMS

The crows have led us to Midland, Texas. I guess Paris will have to wait.

It's probably for the best. I'm not really the Paris type. I've seen too much weirdness to sit and smoke at sidewalk cafes and get in touch with my artistic side. Someone who sees colored smoke coming off people might be a little too in touch with her artistic side as it is. Plus there's only so much espresso I can drink before my hands start to shake. And smoking kills you. Don't even get me started on that.

I chase the bell now. I deal with the thin space between the land of the living and the land of the dead. And I'm not bummed about it, either. When the chaos things tried to latch on to me and drag me into oblivion off the highway, sure, I had a moment where I thought maybe Paris might have been a better choice. How about you take a walk down the street and then have a surprise chaos hand rip through the fabric of the air and go after your jugular? You'd be doubting your direction in life as well. But once we got on the road and the highway was sliding under us and the summer sun was shining through the window of the RV onto the front seat, I started feeling better. I love road trips. When I was a kid and couldn't sleep, Mom used to put me in the back seat of our old station wagon and drive around the neighborhood until I conked out. It still works.

Cruising aside, it's really Owen who calms me down. Warms me up. Helps bring me back. And he does it just by driving and

giving me time. Although it helps that I can see the worry coming off of him in waves. He wants badly to comfort me. To reach out and touch me and reassure himself that I'm thawing out. There's another color on him, too. I've seen it in others, and it's different for each person. For Owen it's a rich cream, like foamed milk or melted white chocolate. It started to tinge his smoke when he took that bullet for me back at ABQ General Hospital, when he decided he'd rather I be around than him.

There's another word for that smoke. A four-letter word. But I don't even want to go down that road because that's just crazy, and it kind of breaks my heart to know Owen feels that way without him saying anything. It seems like a thing I shouldn't know before he wants me to know. It's a thing that's partly made real by speaking it. So until that happens, I try not to think about what his feelings mean for us. I also try not to think about how I'd answer him if he said it—and how my answer might disappoint him. Or worse, how my answer might snuff out that beautiful color of smoke. Because the truth is, right now I'm not in a position to love anyone back. I can't keep my own head on straight, much less bring someone else on board in the front seat of my life.

And now I'm starting to freak out again just sitting here. I'd say I'm seventy-five percent convinced that I'm not a complete freak of nature because of the things I see in people. That last twenty-five percent is still on the fence, though. And sometimes when I start to think too hard about it, my life gets thrown all out of whack and I wonder what the hell I'm doing with myself in an RV with a guy I like—and maybe *more* than like but maybe not—but definitely *need*. And a magic crow in my pocket. And a special bell in my sights.

Just lock me up and throw away the key. I wouldn't blame you.

I force myself to look out of the window at the desert floating by out on the horizon, and I feel a little better. I look over at Owen, and I feel even better still. I give a little fist pump. See? Old Caroline would have been paralyzed by these thoughts, her eyes open like some shocked baby who'd just tasted her first lemon,

except that it would last all day and night and sometimes roll into the next day and affect every aspect of her life. Now at least I'm keeping my neurosis contained. That deserves a fist pump.

Sometimes I think if I could just make Owen realize how weird I am it might make him think twice about me. Pull over the boat and usher me out. But what I call weird, Owen thinks is special and unique. Which is true. But it's also weird. He's nice-guy understanding about it when sometimes what I need most is for someone to call a spade a spade.

We hit the outskirts of Midland, and now all of a sudden it's stop and go. Then we find ourselves in a long line of semitrucks, and we hit full-blown stop for thirty seconds at a time. I'm not sure who lives here, but I'm willing to bet it's not the type of people I see getting in and out of these trucks and walking around with huge packs on their backs. We idle next to a supermarket, and I see a big line of conversion vans in the back of the parking lot that look set up for the long haul. A couple of two-seater cars are even set up with chairs around them that don't look like they're going anywhere anytime soon.

"What's with all the people?" I ask.

"We're in the middle of oil country," Owen says. "I suspect these are people looking for temp work on the rigs, trying to cash in on the boom."

I try to think of the kind of life someone has to have to give it all up, head to Midland, and camp out in their car in a parking lot in the hopes of finding a temp job. It makes me feel like a complete bitch for freaking out about crossing the country in this boat of an RV with my own bed and a flat-screen TV and an endless supply of gossip rags. And Owen by my side.

"It's kind of hard to follow the crows when the crows are everywhere. And they're acting very un-crow-like," I say, leaning over to look up and out of the windshield. The crows seem as confused about what they're doing here as we are. They're floating this way and that like ribbons in the breeze or hopping from tree to tree in mass movements of black. We're not the only

ones taking notice, either. Stuck in standstill traffic, people are getting out of their cars and filming with their phones.

"This is as far as I think we're going to get for a bit. No sense in sitting in traffic for the sake of it," Owen says and turns off the road into the supermarket parking lot. He parks the RV in the far corner in the last free spot tailored for it. He kills the engine and sits back in his seat then looks over at me. I'm expecting a *what now?* What I get is "I think we have to move on instinct. If Joey Flatwood and Big Hill are right, the crow totems will lead us to the Keeper and the bell. Are you ready?"

I smile. There's the Doctor Bennet I remember from ABQ General and Chaco Medical Clinic. Maybe something about the attack in the thin place steeled him. Like he saw what he was up against, saw it hurt me, and it pissed him off.

"It's like a crow convention out there," I say. "The agents aren't stupid. If we followed the crows here, they can't be far away."

Owen nods stoically. "We better move our asses then," he says. I think about asking him exactly what he thinks the two of us can do to protect the Keeper—which the rest of the Circle apparently thinks Ben hand-picked us to do—when we can barely take two steps in the thin world without getting jumped. But I think that last line of his was sort of his action-movie exit, which is cute. So I let it go. Regardless, we're on a path, and that path has led us here. No point stopping now.

We start to walk east, leaving the long line of trucks behind. It's getting into the late afternoon; the sun is at our backs, but it's still sticky hot. The streetlights are flickering on one by one. Several crows sit atop each and watch us as we walk.

Soon we're walking through the middle of the city. I take off my long-sleeved shirt and tie it around my waist. It's still hot even in a tank top. Owen looks like he's regretting his "forever in a button-down" policy. He looks sunburned, which you'd think would be impossible given that we stepped out of the RV at six p.m., but it's true.

"You feeling anything?" he asks.

"I dunno. Would I know it if I did?"

He shrugs and dabs at his forehead with the underside of his sleeve. "Maybe it's working already. Maybe it's been working this whole time. I should have brought water." He pauses, and we lean against the still-warm brick of an office building. I can see that he doesn't have a lot of faith in wandering around waiting for feelings, and I also see annoyance, probably because he knows that I know that he doesn't have a lot of faith. He looks at me sideways.

"You know that thing you're doing? Where you know everything about me? Can you turn it off?"

I look down, and my face reddens. "I'm sorry, Owen. Sometimes I wish I could." That's a lie. I love knowing things about people. So sue me. And when I look back up at him, I know he sees through me. He's sporting the *yeah, right*, cocked-eye look.

"It's okay," he says. "If I could know how you really feel about things, I'd be all over it." His smile ticks up one corner of his mouth.

"I know it sort of... puts you at a serious disadvantage in this whole"—I pass my hand between us—"this *thing* we've got going on here."

Owen lets out a breath. "Yeah. It's quite a *thing* we've got. Just awesome. You read me like a book, and I get to take it."

"I'm a mess," I say. "You, you're ordered. It's clear as day with you. If you could see what my smoke looks like... It's a cat's cradle with a million different colors of string. I'm all over the place."

It looks like this isn't what Owen wants to hear. In fact, he kind of looks like I'm pissing him off. Which is why it's good when a stream of crows thumps its way around the corner—the heavy flapping of their wings feels like it stirs the air around me. They're flying low, by the windows, and they look like they know what they're doing. So we run after them.

We run with the crows above us as long as we can, cutting across streets and whipping around corners. We run until my lungs burn, and then we run some more. I'm sweating like a pig. I taste salt. My eyes sting. And still we run. If I ever had my bearings to

begin with, I'm totally lost now. Eventually we just can't keep up with the flock. The last one passes overhead, and Owen staggers to a halt. I've got serious sweavage, and my thighs are sticking together. I double over and put my hands on my knees to catch my breath. Owen does the same. After a minute, when I feel like I can talk again, I stand. The air doesn't move here. It's like we're in a bubble. If I could, I'd strip down. I look over at Owen and see that he's allowed himself to unbutton the top button on his shirt. I laugh. It's ridiculous. He's ridiculous. I kind of love it. He looks at me and laughs, too, which means I must look much more like a farm animal than I think. Then we both look for more crows.

They're circling high over a subdivision of small houses, most of them not much bigger than a double-wide trailer. They're flat and low but well kept and brightly lit. Most have dirt front yards, but some have that crazy, thick super grass out front that can live in this type of climate. My crow totem stirs, like when you have your phone in your pocket and it phantom buzzes on you.

"The bell is close," I say. "I think it may be in that group of houses somewhere."

Owen nods. I know he can feel it too. We take a step toward the neighborhood and then freeze at the same time. Something else is here. Something close that shouldn't be. It feels like a vague muscle cramp you can't quite rub away. The crow totems are rebelling against it like opposite ends of a magnet. Whatever is coming, it's like an anti-totem.

"We gotta move," I say, but Owen is already one step ahead of me.

CHAPTER 10

GRANT ROMER

Pap moves his sitting chair into my room so I can sleep. The last thing I remember is hearing the rustling of the newspaper and the tinkling of the ice in his drink as he takes a sip, then I'm so tired that I just nod off.

I have this dream that I'm back at the graveyard by the floating pond. The 'thin place' is what Pap called it. Everything is still strewn about, and the light is all weird and off, like an old movie. There's nobody else there, just like at the real Fairview Cemetery. Pap said other people can't see the thin places like I can, but they can feel them. And if things ain't right with a thin place, it sort of bleeds over into the people around it, and sometimes they get up and go. In my dream, things ain't right. In fact, *things* are coming out of the thin place, smoky black things that are inching toward me and molding together into arms and hands. I turn around to run, and standing right there are the bone-white men with black eyes. They smile with their yellow teeth and grab at my chest where the bell is. It burns so bad that I bolt upright in bed and cry out.

Pap is by my side in a second. "It's all right, son. It's all right. I'm right here. Just a dream."

I clutch at my chest and nearly collapse back into bed. I feel the bell still there, and I'm relieved the dream things didn't get it. You're probably thinking that would be impossible, but you wouldn't be so sure if you'd felt how hot the bell is in my hand. That's when Chaco taps on the glass. And it's not a *how you*

doing? tap. It's a quick, rapid-fire tap that I already know means we got trouble. I throw open the window.

I say, "The bone men—"

"They're almost here," Chaco says. "They're both phasing again. I don't know how. They must have found another way." He's puffing in and out really fast now, talking to himself and to me. I turn to Pap to translate, but one look from me and he seems to get it.

"Can we fight them?" Pap asks, balling his huge hands into rough fists. Chaco shakes his head in a blur. "They're much faster now than they ever were, and stronger. They let the thin place possess them. They're hardly even a part of the living world now. Our only chance is to run."

I turn to Pap. "We can't fight them," I whisper.

"Then we run." Pap says to Chaco, "Meet you round back." He grabs my hand, and together we cut through the house and through the back door. We don't even close it. We run over the lawn and through the back gate, and then we're running down the alleyway between all the houses before I even really wake up completely. I'm still in my PJs, even. I look above us and see Chaco like a dark drop of oil on the black sky.

"Where we goin'?" I ask.

"Camp," Pap says. "I figure if these guys are as bad as I think they are, only thing we can do is distract them and maybe lose them. Ain't nothin' more full of distractions than that damn camp."

Pap never liked the man camp. He told me once it was full of the new kind of field worker. He called them "cocky drunks who think they're oilmen." I remember it because Pap hardly says a bad word about anyone.

"They can't take my bell, Pap," I say. "Not the bone men, not the cocky drunks who think they're oilmen, not nobody. It's a really important bell." I clutch it in one hand as I run. I speak in whispers and pull up my pajama pants. I feel like a burglar in the night.

"I know. I don't know how, or why, but I get the same feeling from it that you do. That thing is more important than me, might

even be as important as you. And you're about the most important thing in the world." Pap is wheezing a bit, and I try to slow up so that he can catch his breath, but he just pulls me along faster. My heart is jackhammering in my ears. I'm trying to listen for that *whoosh, pop* that the bone men made when they first came after me, but now I imagine that I hear it everywhere. One thing's for sure: we're being followed. I feel it even before Chaco's shrieking *caw* tips us off.

I clear my throat. "There's somebody back there."

Pap nods. "It's two of them, I think. Too dark to make out for sure. C'mon now, this way."

Pap knows this area even better than me. We run in silence this way and that, cutting through neighborhoods and over flat plots of dirt, and we only slow just as we get to the edge of town. We cross the last paved road before the man camp breathing hard and trying to look like we didn't just run a mile. I try to find Chaco ahead, but my heart is pounding too hard, and my eyeballs feel like they're shaking. I can't see him above me, but I know he's there, somewhere. A lot of men are stoop-sittin' outside of their sheds. They eye us as they smoke or drink, and almost all of them stop whatever they were doing to look our way. A couple of big guys who look drunk stumble to their feet. I don't know if they think they recognize us or what, but one calls after us. Pap pulls me along faster again. He looks left and right and then decides left, trotting now and muttering to himself, "Stupid, stupid, stupid idea."

"It's not stupid, Pap," I say. "Maybe if there are a ton of scary things around us at once, they'll all just holler 'n' go after each other and leave us alone."

Pap smiles even though I know he's scared, too. He stops to look down at me. "Now that right there, some might say is life in a nutshell." He ruffles my hair. And that's when someone grabs me from behind, and I go from feeling a little better to screaming in one second.

Chaco swoops down and flaps his wings, and the air around us seems to swim in black. "Whoa, whoa! Grant, it's all right! It's

all right, my man! These are the people I told you about! They're cool!"

Chaco perches on my head, and I sag a little with his weight and stare at the two people who came out of the shadows. One is a tall, thin guy with red hair who looks like a schoolteacher, and the other is a lady with soft eyes and a nice-looking face who is holding her hair up off her neck and fanning herself with her hand. They both stare at Chaco, but they don't look surprised that a huge bird is on my head. I think they've seen him before. Pap is balling his fists, but I put a hand on his and hold it like he held mine back at home in my small space.

"My bird Chaco knows you," I say. They nod. "He says you're good people."

The lady nods. The man shrugs. "Comparatively, for sure," he says. The lady elbows him.

"My name is Caroline. This is Owen. Are you... do you have the bell?" she asks, dropping her voice, although from the way she's looking at me, I think she already knows I do. I think she knows that and a lot more about me. Still, I clutch at the bell. Chaco titters on my head.

"It's all good, man. All good. They're with us," he says.

I look back to them and nod. The lady smiles at me, and her smile makes me feel warm. The man crouches down and cocks his head at me, then he laughs. "Incredible," he says. "It's... it's ludicrous, but also it's inspired. A child. It's perfect. You're perfect."

I don't know whether to snap at the guy or blush, but Pap saves me the trouble. "We better keep moving."

He starts to press at my back to move again when we hear another scream. At first the new guys look at me like I did it, but I was just surprised that first time. I hardly ever scream. Chaco knows it wasn't me. He snaps his arrowed head to the right, back the way we came. That was a grown-man scream, which is a thing you hardly ever hear, and that sounds terrible.

"Remember how you talked about running trouble into trouble and hoping it doesn't notice you?" Chaco asks. I nod, and he bobs along. "There's a rough crowd hanging out at this

makeshift booze hut. They're fixing for something. Follow me." Chaco lifts up off my head in big swoops. I turn to Pap.

"Let's follow him." I think he hears that my voice is kind of soft, because he thumps my back and pulls together a small smile for me. I straighten up.

"All right then," Pap says. The new guys nod. We all take off after Chaco.

We stand out in this place like four sore thumbs, and everyone outside of this shop Chaco takes us to knows it. I'm expecting a restaurant or something like the Roadhouse where Pap sometimes used to go with Dad. It's not like the Roadhouse. The Roadhouse has a bright sign with some letters missing on it so it reads *Radhus*. This place has no sign. It's not really a place, either. It's the same type of cheap-looking shack as every other building here; this one just has the door wide open and cigarette smoke pouring out of it and a big crowd milling around on the dirt outside getting into each other's faces. Not fighting, exactly, but fixin' to. Until they see us, that is. Then they pour it on us.

"Look at this fuckin' guy," someone yells, and I don't know who they're talking about exactly, but I think it's probably Owen. I think I like Owen, but even I know he stands out the most. He'd stand out in downtown Midland. Then I hear another person say, "Hey sweetheart, what's he pay to fuck you? I'll double it." Which I don't really follow, but I know ain't what you're supposed to say to people.

Owen surprises me by stepping forward and saying, "Keep drinking, you fat-ass. It's either going to be diabetes or cirrhosis that gets you. Then you'll be praying to God that people like her can save your pathetic life."

I don't really get what Owen's talking about, but that's okay 'cause I can tell these men don't either and they've got about twenty years on me. The fat guy shoves a few people out of the way and steps forward.

"The fuck you just say to me, boy?" he says, stomping forward. This time I expect Owen to turn tail for sure, but still he doesn't back down. Chaco lands heavily on the flat roof of the

place. He squawks loudly, and I can see he's looking from the crowd here down the mud pathway back toward the entrance, where I hear another scream.

Then a *whoosh, pop*.

Pap hears it too, and even though he ain't never had the *whoosh, pop* happen to him before, he squeezes my shoulder even tighter and tries to move me behind him.

Caroline hears it and steps up between Owen and the big man before he can get to him.

"You men are gonna die here tonight if you don't start running," she says. "Fair warning."

Whoosh, pop. Closer this time. The men laugh. One spits a stream of tobacco juice at her feet, and it dangles in his beard and on his shirt, which is crossed with dark lines of the stuff. "Only ones in trouble tonight are you and your boyfriend. The old man and the kid can fuck off if they know what's good for them."

Caroline doesn't look mad, but she is looking. She's looking at this guy the way she looked at me, as if she can see more of him than anyone else on earth. Only this time she doesn't like what she sees, and it makes her sad.

"That's what I thought," she says, almost whispering.

"You first, ginger," the big guy says, and he swings a big ol' punch at Owen, wide as a house. Only when it's supposed to hit Owen, it doesn't. It hits nothing. Owen's gone. The big guy just about chucks himself over. Then there's Owen, in a blink, standing behind the guy, and he looks as surprised as anyone that he's there. Then he breaks out into this huge grin.

"Caroline, I did it! Did you see that? It's less of a step, you know? More of a pivot sort of thing and you aren't so far away when you..." He trails off when he seems to remember what he's doing there, and he lays a big heel into the fat guy's butt right as he's trying to stand. The guy goes down hard right on his chin.

"Owen, behind you!" Caroline yells and runs toward him, but it's too late. A bottle zips through the air and clocks him right in the back of the head, and now it's Owen that's staggering. Then he's on the ground, and there's a pile-on. Caroline tries to pull

them off him, but she gets wrapped up herself by another man. I want to go to them and help, even though I know I stand no chance of doing anything worthwhile, but Pap holds me back. I was really starting to like these guys, and here they are going down in a cloud of screaming and sweat and dirt and the smell of dirty metal and dog crap. We get shoved away, pushed to the outside, and I look up at Pap to tell him to let me go, but he's looking past the pile. Down the mud road. At the bone men.

Both of them are there, like powder wearing a suit and tie. There's a *whoosh, pop* and they're gone, but now it's me who's pushing Pap to get away. I can't even get out the word *run* before both bone men are in the mess of people in front of us. The tall one cocks his head, and I'm reminded of this one time when I watched a lizard for a whole hour. Just watched it look at things. That's how he looks at each man he picks up. Then he tosses them a good twenty feet with a flick.

"Where is the child?" he asks.

Another roughneck grabs at the bone man but screams as soon as he touches him and lets go like he's been burned. Pap pushes me behind him.

"Where is the bell?" he screams again, and his voice sounds so jagged and harsh that it even pauses the brawl. The tall one stares at the pile. He thinks I'm underneath, like maybe the bell is what everyone here is fightin' for. He nods at the short one, the one built like a brick wall, and this one steps forward. I almost give up the ghost by screaming when I see him. He's the one who went after me, and he's the one Chaco ripped up. His face has two huge gashes running down it, from his forehead all the way down to his chin, and they go through his eyes, which are like bleeding black marbles. He squats down and shoves his arms underneath the pile like a tractor, then in one lift he flips four or five people up and spinning in the air. They scream until they land in clumps with a sound like smashed tomatoes. He does it again. More people fly. Then there's Caroline. Her clothes are ripped up, and she's crying. The guy holding her drops everything and runs, and she falls to the ground and crawls over to Owen, who ain't moving. He's sort of

crumpled, his arms and legs at weird angles and his face mushed and puffy. When the tall one sees him, his eyes flash.

"You two. I know you two. We must be close," I hear him say, even over all the running and all the fighting that's still going on at the fringes and pouring out of the smoky door to the makeshift restaurant. The tall one moves toward Caroline, who starts to back away but then stops herself. She stands tall, slowly, but she does it. Then she walks over to Owen and stands over him, inches from the tall one. She doesn't say anything. She's looking the bone man up and down.

"I can see what you were," she says. "But you aren't that man anymore."

"Less and less. Soon I will leave humanity behind altogether," he says. "The child is here. The bell is with him. We know it. Perhaps all he needs is to be drawn out." He grabs her by the arm with one hand, and with the other he reaches inside his jacket pocket. He pulls out a knife that seems to burn the air and that stains them both a weird green color. I don't need to know what type of knife it is to know that it's just *wrong*. I know in my heart that I can't let that thing touch anyone.

I scream again. "No!"

I can't even take another breath before the bulldog bone man is in front of me. This close, the *whoosh, pop* shakes my ears. His cut-up face is inches from me. His slashed eyes don't move, but I know they see me. He takes a deep sniff and looks down at my chest. Then, faster than a blink, he grabs the bell and rips it through my shirt and off my neck. The force yanks me down, and I'm on my knees. I see the other one walk up to me. His shoes stop at my hands.

"I knew you'd betray yourself, child," he says. "Compassion is a uniquely human failing. You cling to the belief that there is a way that things should be, but that is wrong. That implies order." He lifts me standing by the nape of my shirt. "You can't be blamed for thinking thus. Even we did, once. The thin place burns what is human away from you bit by bit and shows you the true nature of things."

"Go," I say. I think it comes out as a groan. I think I'm trying to say *go away*, but his grip is so cold that it burns. Everything burns. The green knife burns. The place where the bell rested near my heart burns. The bell wants to come back to me, but the short bone man grips it with his whole fist. It has no chance of escape.

"Oh, we will go. But first we need a death. That is the way of the bell." Everything becomes green as he raises the knife above me. But Pap is there. He screams and throws himself at the arm holding the knife, but it's not enough. I barely feel the bone man move. He keeps raising the knife over my head until Chaco hits him like a cannonball. He staggers backward, one hand protecting his face as Chaco rips at the knife, but as soon as he touches it, he screeches and shrinks away like he's been stung bad, which gives the bone man an opening. He snatches Chaco around the neck and slams him to the ground. Chaco twitches and flops then goes still.

"Chaco!" I scream. "That's my best friend! What did you do to my best friend?"

The bone man doesn't care. Why would he? I bet he never had a best friend in his life. He grabs me by the neck and brings the knife up again. Pap is scrabbling, and I'm pulling against him, but we're not moving a muscle on the bone man, until Pap spits in his face. He spits right in his eyes. That catches him up.

"Leave him be!" Pap yells. "You're perversions. Both of you. You ain't fit to touch my grandson."

The tall one turns to him, and that lizard-like interest comes back. He blinks the spit away, which is the first time I think I've seen him blink. He drops me.

"One death is as good as another," he says. Then he plunges the knife into Pap's stomach, and Pap drops to the ground before I can even scream. His eyes are open, but there's nothing behind them.

Even though I can't hold it, I feel the bell start to pull itself together. Chaco lets loose a heartbreaking cry, and I feel him rushing toward me. I watch the black eyes of the bone men widen as the glow of the silver grows, and grows, and grows.

"Ring it," the tall one says.

The bell is rung. It sounds like a shotgun, and it sounds like a whisper, but mostly it just sounds sad.

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CHAPTER 11

THE WALKER

I am there.

I am there when the agents come to Midland. I walk behind them as they reach the camp. I reach for Caroline as she is swallowed up in the brawl, but my hands swipe nothing. I scream for Chaco to help, but he says that his charge is Grant. He says it again and again like he has to constantly remind himself or he'd be diving in.

And when the bell is ripped from Grant and Chaco does dive in, I see him dashed to the floor. I scream when Parsons plunges the turquoise knife into Grant's grandfather. I watch as it cuts a soul that is still strong, that still had time. I watch as the knife destroys the natural order of things and rewrites a small portion of the soul map in one jagged, muddy swipe. My world lurches. I get a sense of drunken vertigo, and everything leers to one side for a second before righting itself again. I can do nothing. I am worthless.

Now all Parsons or Douglas needs to do is stab himself and ring the bell. Then I hand over the keys to the car and cross over forever, and one of them takes my place. I close my eyes. In a way, I want it to happen. In a way, it's bittersweet. I wish I could tell Caroline goodbye, but my life has never been on point in the timing department anyway. It makes sense that it would end like this. Like I got hung up on.

Parsons says, "Ring the bell." I squeeze my eyes shut. I hear the bell chime like a hammer striking a brass pipe that's as big as a

car...

...And nothing happens to me.

I open my eyes and find both agents very much alive and the bell very much rung. The sound's shockwave has formed a bubble around the agents that is distorting time. I remember it well from when I died and rang the bell. The shockwave pushes outward slowly, like a kid blowing a bubble. But that was when I was in the thick of it. It never occurred to me that someone might ring the bell in the presence of death and not actually be dying themselves. But now that it's happening, I remember Caroline and her last moments with Gam. The bell formed then, but Gam told her not to ring it. She could have, but she didn't. The agents just did. And now the agents are waiting inside their bubble of time. They can only be waiting for one thing.

I feel the tug of the soul map calling me to a man named Abernathy Romer, but I don't need the hint, because I'm already there. I watch as the soul of Abernathy sits up from his dead body and turns to his grandson, who is huddled over him. He reaches for Grant, and his hand passes right through the kid. He knows in that second that he's been cut from his grandson, and he weeps. It's a soft, hitching sound that is all the more heartbreaking for the fact that I know from his soul string that he's only cried twice in his adult life: once when his grandson was born and once at the death of his son and daughter-in-law. He calls their names first.

"James? Becca?"

He gets no answer. He stands and watches Grant slump over him, shaking with silent tears. "So I am alone, then," he says.

"No, sir," I say.

He flips around and puts his hands up, eyes wide.

"No more fighting, Ab. All we can do now is watch and wait." I point at the agents in the bubble of the bell and add acidly, "Like them." I don't know if they can see us, too, but they aren't on the lookout for us anyway. They're on the lookout for the veil. They watch with fierce intensity, scanning the horizon like stranded sailors looking for rescue.

Ab's hands lower slowly. His eyes stay wide. "Are you..." He trails off. I nod. I want to sit down with him over a beer. I want to shoot the shit. I want to tell him how he was robbed of years he should have had with Grant. But the veil is here. Funny how even outside of time, there's never enough time.

"What in God's name is that thing?" Ab asks.

"That's what everyone's waiting for." The veil sweeps down the dry, cracked mud street of the camp with all the presence of a strip of iron, and when it enters the bubble of the bell, the agents see it, along with everyone else.

It's sort of like if a big stage prop falls down in the play that is our living world, and all the people working behind the scenes in black are suddenly bang on in the spotlight. Everyone's focus meets at once, and everything within the bubble is revealed. The agents see me. Grant sees his grandfather's soul standing over him. Owen sees us both. I see Caroline.

Caroline sees me.

My name is on her lips. I can see it. And I see something else, too. Something I haven't seen for a long time. I see someone who misses me. I can't tell you what that feels like after what seems like an eternity of people terrified to see me. Here's a woman who misses Ben Dejooli. Not the Walker. Just Ben. She doesn't cry out or yell or run to me. She just smiles through her tears. Until the agents step between us.

"Benjamin Dejooli," Parsons says slowly, splitting into a yellow smile. "Remember us?"

"You screwed up, Parsons. If you wanted my job, you had to off yourself and ring the bell at the same time. You two are such fanboys that I'd have thought you'd have picked up on that by now."

Douglas laughs. It's a disturbing, hyena laugh. Quick and clipped. "We don't care about your job anymore, Ben," Douglas says.

Parsons nods slowly in agreement. "You see, you're the ferryman. Nothing more than a glorified day laborer. You hold every soul by the hand and escort them to the threshold like you

were their arm candy. You are doomed to this for eternity. Giving everything, getting nothing. Why in this world or the next would I want that?"

I consider myself pretty quick on the draw when it comes to swapping barbs, but shit, this one floors me. I was just starting to feel good about my job.

"You have no idea what I do," I say. "You can't. If you walked the soul map, it would destroy you."

"We don't come to walk the soul map, Mr. Dejooli. We come to own the map on which you walk," Parsons says. "Your peasant's day job doesn't concern me. I know what you do. I also know what you can't do. You can't cross the threshold. You take the souls to the veil, never beyond."

"The veil is closed to the living. Those are the rules."

"Those *were* the rules." Parsons's black eyes are like pits of coal in his face.

He trades Douglas the knife for the bell. Douglas positions the knife in his hand with the care of a boxer wrapping tape. Then he eyes the veil just as he did the wall back at the cave. He has an audience this time: Caroline, Owen, and Grant, along with the soul of Abernathy. Anyone from the camp in the land of the living who is paying attention is seeing what they can't possibly understand, and many are struck dumb in the middle of the brawl.

Of all of them, Grant is the worst to see. With one hand he clutches at his heart, where his bell was ripped from him. With the other hand he reaches for a living picture of his grandfather only feet from him but beyond his grasp. It's not fair that he should have to see this. None of it is fair. But it's the way it is.

Douglas runs at the veil the way a bear sprints, his body seemingly falling over itself. He screams like a demon and then jumps with the knife high above his head. He brings it down on the veil, and it sticks. He uses his body to drag it down, and down, and down. He falls to the ground with the knife in his hand, laughing like a maniac, because he's ripped it right open.

There's a loss of pressure so great that it brings every living thing near the bubble to their knees. Only Ab and I are standing.

Even the agents are buckled over, but they recover. They grit through it and stand tall and suck in the pain that must be pummeling them. I realize that this is what they've been training for. This is their moment. Parsons screams in triumph and holds his hands out wide.

"Do you see, Benjamin? Do you see? Nothing can keep us from him now!" Parsons screams.

Him? I don't like the sound of that, but I don't have a lot of time to think about it. I'm scared shitless. I admit that freely. I'm looking around this place like I stepped into a bad party and all I want to do is turn around before the guys with guns realize I'm there. And I may have done just that—swirled open the map, walked through, taken a stroll over to Cancun for a couple of personal days to piece all of this together—if it weren't for Caroline. Caroline is on the ground with her hands pressed against her ears. I want to run to her and envelop her, but I know I can't. I want to tackle the agents, but I know I can't. Still, I feel I owe it to everybody to watch. So I watch. That's me. Fuck the Walker; they should just call me the Watcher.

But you know who doesn't just stand around feeling sorry for himself? Abernathy Romer. He's been seething at Parsons the whole time. When Parsons holds his hands out, palms open, swimming in victory, Ab swats the bell out of his hand.

While the bell rings, it exists on every plane, but Ab doesn't know that. Ab doesn't care. He sees something that is precious to his grandson, stolen from him, and he wants to give it back. His hand passes right through Parsons, but it connects with the ringing bell. It's out and spinning in space before anyone knows what happens.

Scratch that. I should say "before anyone but Grant knows what happens."

Grant sees it all. He's on top of it. He's so quick on the draw that he scampers out and snatches it mid-air like one last handshake from his grandfather. He clutches it to his chest, and the kid smiles. Finally, he smiles. When Ab nods at him in approval, he smiles wider.

Parsons looks at his empty hand, confused. Douglas pushes him toward the split veil. "Let's go!" Douglas says. "Forget the bell! We don't need it anymore!"

As broken as it is, the veil is already slowly oozing together again. The hole the agents cut is closing, just like it did back in the cave. They don't have enough time to go for both the bell and the veil. Parsons turns to Grant, and the look he gives would probably kill a normal kid, but Grant isn't a normal kid. Grant squares his shoulders.

"Go!" Douglas screams again. It seems like it takes an effort of will from him, but he rips his gaze from the bell and turns to the veil. He doesn't hesitate. He runs and leaps through the crack. Douglas follows without so much as a word back toward us.

And now I've got a problem on my hands.

Whatever those powder-haired freaks want to do on the other side, I guarantee you it's not gonna be good for any of us. Not good for the living world, the dead world, or any world in between. Parsons is the brains of the duo, and he's pissed about losing the bell back to Grant, which is good, but these two are like crocodiles. They're not going away; they just keep swimming until they get what they want.

And now they're swimming around unchecked on the other side.

Ab looks at me. Grant looks at me. Owen looks at me. Caroline looks at me. All of them watch me even as the ringing—and their vision of me—begins to fade.

"Ah, shit," I say. Because I know what it might mean. When Death takes a holiday, the dead go on vacation. But I can see it in Caroline's eyes. I've got no choice. "After you," I tell Ab. He nods. He turns to Grant and clutches at his heart, then he holds his hands out. "I love you, son," he says. Even if he can't hear it, Grant gets it. He's crying silently, but he nods.

Ab walks through the veil.

I have seconds left. I take one last look at Caroline and Owen, then I go for the rip. It's just about shoulder width. I dive for it. It catches on my waist. I push through and fall out and over like a

newborn animal. And just like that, the living world and the world in between are lost to me.

I'm beyond the veil now, in the land of the dead.

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CHAPTER 12

OWEN BENNET

When Parsons stabs Grant's grandfather, I'm thinking subcutaneous perforation for sure, and probable bowel piercing. Almost certainly there will be internal bleeding. But it's in the stomach proper, not the liver, and Parsons pulls the knife out cleanly and doesn't go for more. I'm thinking that if there's a medical building in this camp, there's a good chance we can save his life. Instead the man drops dead instantly.

It's the knife. Something about that knife is an aberration. I recognize the rock it's made from, of course. I put that together as soon as Parsons took it from his jacket. It's the same as my totem. But in shaping it into a weapon, the agents created something terrible.

When the bell rings, I can see it all—the world of the Walker. Of Ben. And, of course, like a knight in shining armor, there's the man himself. If he is a man anymore. Whatever he is, it's done him good. He's standing there like he's just pushed open the doors as a late entrant into a black-tie party and he's the guy everyone's been waiting for. Especially Caroline. I don't even need to look at her to know. But I look at her anyway. I can't tell if she's in awe or if she's scared out of her mind. All I know is that there's a connection there. A strong one. One I've never quite been able to spark between us. And I can't even be mad. I can't even blame her. This man died for his sister, took up the mantle of Death, and has been keeping the balance between life and death like some sort of dark

king for the past year. Meanwhile a man has just died, and I—the doctor, mind you—am standing around blinking like a cow.

I'm seeing Grant's grandfather in two places now, so I know there's a good chance my mind has finally broken. There's his body, and then, through the hole the bell ripped into the air, I see him again. It takes me a second to realize that it's his soul. The agents and Ben are talking, but the ringing of the bell is still shaking my head. Plus my left ear feels puffy and useless from when one of the camp meatheads socked me, so I can't hear what they're saying.

Douglas, the thick one, gets a running start and lashes out with the knife at what looks like a barrier of burned paper. It splits open, and then it's like the barometer drops fifty points. I'm thinking we've lost everything. We lost a good man to the knife, we lost the bell to the agents, and now we're going to lose the agents to whatever lies beyond. Then Grant's grandfather swipes out at Parsons. There's a glinting in the air, and Grant dashes from his crouch and makes a spectacular, cross-dimensional catch. His grandfather reaches for him in farewell, but with the bell safely on our side, the rift is sealing fast. Soon they're parted. What's on that side will stay there, and the agents are on that side.

The aftermath of the opening and closing and of the ringing of the bell sits on everyone within eyeshot like an elephant. I'm the first to speak.

"Caroline," I say, and I admit it, it's partly to break her train of thought, which I'm sure is careening around Ben Dejooli Mountain. But mostly because I know that we have to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off. The agents succeeded in something. And anything they succeed in is bound to be a mess for us. Caroline is staring at the spot where Ben disappeared. She doesn't even know I'm calling for her until I touch her shoulder.

"Caroline," I say gently. She starts. She's bleeding from the lip. I roll my cuff to a clean spot and gently dab at it. I find myself pushing a damp strand of hair back off her face. She either allows it or is too stunned by events to stop me. I'd like to assume the

former, but after seeing Ben across time and space, it's most likely the latter. "The agents," I say. "We have to find them."

Caroline shakes her head. "They're gone."

I stand back and check her over. The dirt and the tears and the scrapes only serve to make her more beautiful. I'm reminded of those times when we were on shift together at ABQ General and running around from patient to patient, both of us rumpled and disheveled and tired, but fighting the same fight. Those times she'd smile at me at four in the morning as we passed in the hall. That was when I started to fall in love with her, I think.

And suddenly she's looking at me and her face is softened and she's back here, in the land of the living, with me. And I remember how she can basically read me like a book, so I shake my head as if that will clear my thoughts. I'm sure I'm as red as a fire hydrant. I touch my face. It comes away red, all right. With blood. "God, I must be a mess," I say. I try to dab at my face, but she holds my hand away and keeps it in hers.

"Let it coagulate. Just a few cuts. You'll get your shirt all bloody," she says.

As much as I want to stand here, my hand in hers, I can't shake the image of Douglas running full tilt with that horrid knife held high. "We've got to go after them."

"They're beyond us now," she says. "Beyond even the thin world. They're in the world of the dead. The world beyond." She turns to Grant, who is sitting again, slumped over, near his grandfather. He's holding the bell, but it's Chaco he's looking at. Poor Chaco, a broken mound of feathers on the cracked mud. The camp men have mostly scattered now, but I know they'll be back. I know we have to get out of here, but I'm not about to rush Grant. Without speaking, Caroline moves over to him and lowers herself down to both knees.

"I'm so sorry, Grant," Caroline says, and she's looking at him, but I know she's also looking into him. At the color of him. At his essence. She lays one hand gently on his shaking back. The other she passes lightly over him, grabbing smoke. Whatever she sees makes her eyes well with tears, but I can see her mind working.

Then, out of nowhere, she says, "You weren't a burden to your grandfather. You gave him such joy. If he was ever sad, it was only because of how he wished you could have made your mom and dad as happy as you made him."

Grant's shaking subsides a little. He looks up at Caroline. "How do you know?"

"Because I saw it. How much he loved you... it came off him in waves. He blazed with it." Caroline holds out a hand to him. He takes it, and she helps him up. The three of us stand around Chaco, and the dusty wind tousles his feathers.

"He was an awesome bird..." I begin, but Grant stops me by stepping forward and kneeling down next to him.

"Chaco," he says. "I have the bell. I'm the Keeper still." He presses his little finger gently to Chaco's head, brushing the small feathers of his face. "That means we're still best friends. You told me. That means you have to get up."

I want to take the kid and hug him. I don't think I can watch him talk to his broken best friend. I think it'll rip my heart out.

The good news is I don't have to for long, because Chaco stirs.

Chaco's broken wing stretches out and snaps together again. His bulging neck straightens. His claws flex. His black eyes open, and they find Grant. Chaco twitters. Grant smiles and holds out his little arm, and Chaco flips himself up. He shakes his head like he's taken a bad fall then takes a wobbly walk up to perch on Grant's head.

The wind drops on a dime and the dust settles, but I don't get the feeling that the storm has ended, only that we're standing in the eye of it. Grant looks up at Chaco, and I think they're having some sort of silent conversation. When he looks down at us again, I can see in his eyes that my hunch is correct.

"The bone men, you call them the agents. They did a really bad thing. They ripped open the veil. It was sick to begin with because of them, but then they pretty much broke it." Grant says. "And Chaco says that if it's broken, things can come through."

"What things?" I ask. Grant and Chaco look over at me at the same time. The double weight of their gaze gives me goose bumps

but not as much as what Grant says.

"Things from the other side. Things that shouldn't be here. Bad things."

Grant and Chaco look at each other again.

"What else does Chaco say?" I ask.

Grant smiles at me through all his pain and all his loss.

"He says he'd be my best friend even if I didn't have the bell."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

THE WALKER

So now that I'm over here on the other side, beyond the veil, I bet I know what you wanna know.

You want to know if I'm seeing God. Maybe you think I'm staring at a blazing figure sitting on a throne behind a set of gleaming pearly gates. Maybe you think that by crossing the veil I'm somehow free of my job and am getting reborn. Maybe you think what I see over here is so crazy, so awe inspiring and beyond description, that I'm struck dumb. Maybe you think I'm seeing beyond the racing edges of the universe, like I'm surfing the Big Bang.

Well, you're all wrong.

Don't feel bad about it. Hell, the Navajo don't even have what you might call a totally formed idea of what happens after we die. We're fine with the multiple worlds thing—I remember Gam used to tell Joey and me about how we humans had to go through five worlds just to get to the one we lived on, so I shouldn't fuck it up by tossing my cigarette butts on the ground. But as to what happens after we die? The Navajo don't really go in for that. In fact, my people believe that chances are after we die we sort of hang around because we're pissed off at those of us that are still living. We give the dead some things in the forms of offerings, mostly to get them to stop lingering. Best-case scenario is they disappear back into the great balance of things.

In fact, now that I think about it, and after having dealt with poor Karen and Stan 2.0, maybe the Navajo aren't so far off. No

more so than anyone else. But don't worry, we didn't get it exactly right either.

What I'm staring at is a river. It's a massive, glowing river that looks like it's floating a billion flashlights. I know instantly that these are the souls I deliver. When I push them through the veil, I'm delivering them to this river. Ab and I stand on the shore just watching them. Neither of us can speak. The souls provide all the light there is in this place, but it is plenty. Everything has this mesmerizing glow about it, and for a second I forget everything, even the agents who ducked in here minutes before me. It's just Ab and me, standing side by side, following the souls, like fireflies, with our eyes.

Then Ab says, "I gotta go." It startles me.

"Yeah? Where? Into the river?" It looks kind of nice. Like swimming with a bunch of glowing fish.

"Yeah, but not just anywhere in there. I gotta go thatta way." Ab points down the right side of the riverbank.

"You act like you've been here before or something," I say, my mouth still not quite working right. "Why not that way?" I point down the left bank.

Ab shakes his head. "Nope. No way. That's not my way. My way is that way."

"You mean you can't go left?"

"I could, I suppose," Ab says. "But I don't want to." He steps forward into the river, and his feet leave no mark upon the sand. He goes into the water up to his knees then pauses. He turns back to me.

"Grant," he says. "What will happen to him?"

"I don't know. But if he's with Caroline and Owen, he's in good hands."

Ab lowers his head a bit, his brow furrowed. He takes another step in the water, and it starts to glow around him.

"I'm sorry, Ab," I blurt out. "I fucked up, man. I should have seen the knife coming. I should have followed the agents, and when I lost them, I should have known it was trouble. I let my guard down, man. I let it down and you died. That knife never

should have happened." I look at my own feet. I make two heavy prints in the sand. When I look up again, Ab is smiling sadly at me.

"It's all part of the plan, young man."

"No, it's not. You don't understand. That knife, its purpose is to destroy the plan. It was created to ruin the plan. I saw your soul string, Ab. You had time left. You shouldn't be here. You should be back at home, with Grant, drinking a glass of whisky on the rocks and reading the Midland Reporter." I feel tears come to my eyes, and in a stupid act of defiance, I refuse to wipe them, as if that will make them go away. "You know, you think you know your job, and then you start feeling good about it, and that's when you fuck up. That's prime fuck-up time."

"Hey," Ab says, not harsh but enough to stop my blubbering. "I don't know much. Even after all these years living, I feel I'm going out knowing less than the day I came in. But I do know this. If I wasn't supposed to be here, I wouldn't be here."

I put my hands on my hips. I don't know how I can make him understand about the knife. I think he sees the frustration in my face because he says, "I get it, son. That knife is bad news. But I want you to consider for a second that even it has its place. Maybe breaking the plan is part of the plan."

I try to consider it. A thing that can alter the soul map, which is essentially the plan of the living world, also being a part of the plan? It's too much for me. I shake my head.

"Don't worry about it," Ab says. "You just keep going. Do me a favor. Watch out for my grandson. If you can." Ab sinks into the water up to his chest. His lower half disappears. The glow around him grows.

"I will."

"Now you go get those rat bastards that stuck me." He's up to his neck now. "They ain't supposed to be here." I nod. He smiles at me. Then he dips under, and he's gone. He's a glow now. I watch his glow spin around and then float peacefully down the river to the right. I can't help but smile myself. If I were to hazard a guess, even though I think he was a content man, I'd say Abernathy Romer hadn't smiled like that in years.

Now it's just me on the shore. Wherever Ab is going, that's not where the agents went. I turn to the left. I walk about fifty feet, scanning the ground. I see what remains of two sets of footprints, which tells me that the vein rock won't work here—there's no phasing or skipping space. The agents are hoofing it on foot. I look in their direction, but the river bends and twists and the shoreline changes terrain, following it. I can't see the men themselves, so I start running.

I get about five hundred feet down the shore before I realize that the veil isn't following me. It sits like a sad, lost dog right where I came in. Its tattered, broken silence serves as a reminder: as long as I'm over here, I'm not doing my job. This hits home harder when I look back the way I came and see that the bobbing soul lights have floated away from where I came in, and nothing else has replaced them. The water is blank. Empty. The inflow has stopped.

I pick up the pace, running full tilt now, following the footprints of the agents, which seem to fill with oily water like parking lot puddles.

The scenery begins to shift on me. No more flat beach. Soon I'm running over pebbles, then rocks, then I'm dodging around boulders. Another couple hundred feet, and the earth starts to jut up around me. Soon I'm running through a canyon that zigzags all over the place. The soul light flickers and wavers like a flashlight under water. I look to my right and see the souls down this way are acting up, zipping all over the place, sometimes surging out and taking almost human form before crashing down into the water again. I feel it too: the farther I go down this side of the river, the more chaotic everything becomes. I don't think it's the agents doing it, either. I think it's the river itself. It flows two ways. There's the way Ab went, and then there's this way. The other way.

Soon even the terrain itself can't seem to decide on a form. The inlets and breaks in the rock walls that border the river shift before my eyes. It's like I'm running through a scatterbrained formation of a river. New earth pushes up through splits in the

ground then breaks down seconds later. The river cuts one way through the canyon, then in a blink it changes course and cuts another way. The walls of rock recede and expand, almost as if they're breathing. The flow is in the same direction, but at one glance it seems to go uphill, then down, then around, then through overhangs that break apart the second I pass them. I focus on putting one foot in front of the other and scan the horizon when I can.

A pillar of stone shoots into the air, missing me by an inch, and when I stop to right myself, I see the agents up ahead. Parsons is in the lead, and Douglas lopes just behind him. Douglas carries the knife in his closed fist, tip down, hilt up, pumping it in time with his stride. Parsons carries something, too. It looks like a small book. He holds it up and runs blindly forward behind it.

I feel that this side of the river is normally a place of chaos but that the presence of the knife has really revved things into overdrive. The earth around Douglas blurs and stutters. The soul light ebbs and flows around him. The two agents look like glitches in the program out here.

Parsons comes to a skidding stop, with Douglas a few paces after. Parsons flips the book around, looking to his right at the river. This is my chance to catch them. I pick up speed.

Douglas hears me first, and he lets out this low growl that gets Parsons's attention. I don't get any patronizing smile this time—this time Parsons is pissed off. It's a minor victory, but I'll take it.

"I don't have time for you right now, Dejooli. Go back to your boat, ferryman."

"I don't give two shits what you've got time for. Clearly you've got enough time to stick the laws of the universe in a blender with that damn knife of yours. I feel like you can take a second here to explain to me what exactly it is that you're planning on doing. You know, before you really, cosmically fuck everything up. I'd ask you where the hell you're going, but judging by the way you're reading that book, I'm about ninety percent sure you don't know yourself."

Parsons, who was never a real talker to begin with, even before he went and bleached himself, doesn't even give me the time of day. He just nods at Douglas, who grins and takes a step forward. The jagged cuts that span his face seem not to bother him in the slightest. "Wait," Parsons says, and Douglas pauses. "Give me the knife. We can't risk losing it." Douglas shrugs and hands Parsons the knife, then he balls both hands into fists and walks toward me.

I smirk. I'm not worried. It's easy to feel cocky about yourself when you're already dead. I spit on the sand. "Really, Douglas? Are you that much of a dumbass? You know you can't hurt me." I hold my hands out as if I'm welcoming him. Douglas cocks one arm and throws a haymaker mid-stride that shuts me right up. It knocks me off my feet and sprawls me out along the shuddering, shifting riverbank.

"Forgot what it feels like to get hit, Dejooli?" Douglas asks. He saunters over to me and grabs me by the shirt. "The thing about this place is that there are no laws. No rules. Only form and destruction. Here, you're just another form." He pulls me up by the collar. "And I am destruction." He slams his fist across my face, and I see stars. He drops me, and I scramble for footing. He seems to enjoy it. He revs up for a kick, but when he lashes out, I catch his foot and wrench it like a bottle cap. He howls and goes down hard on his side.

"Cuts both ways, Douglas," I say. "If you can hit, I can hit. And you don't have the strength of ten men out here. Just one. And barely that."

Douglas curls his lip and stands, limping. "I've never killed a dead man before. But I guess there's a first time for everything." He throws himself forward and uses his momentum to snatch me into a bear hug. I see it coming, but I'm not that big of a guy. Every time I got into a fight back at Chaco, all the bigger guys—which was almost all of them—would use this same approach, like they could just crush me out of existence. The first few times I ended up on the wrong side of it, it sort of did feel that way until my old partner Danny Ninepoint had to save my ass. But then I learned to

use their momentum against them. I sidestep Douglas and fling him behind me like a duped bull. He falls flat on his stomach. This is my opening. I jump up in the air with my knee out, ready to crack down on his back, but just then the lay of the land switches on us. The ground rolls and cracks, and I'm caught in an upthrust of rock that slams into my knee and flattens me even as it carries me up into the air. It tumbles Douglas onto the floor like a hamster in a wheel, end over end until everything comes to rest. Except that I'm a hundred feet in the air now, marooned on a square patch of rock.

Douglas slowly stands, dusting himself off. He shields his eyes and looks up at me. Then he laughs. "I hope you like the view, Dejooli!" he screams. "You may be there a while!"

I look over the edge and immediately feel sick. This is a true mesa. The sides are sheer and smooth. I always hated heights. It's in my blood. The Navajo are a plains people for a reason. It's hard to tumble to your death in miles of open grassland. I always appreciated that. Never more than right now. I do the only thing I can: I spit down at him. Like some kid leaning over a bridge. Real mature, I know. He sidesteps it easily. Then he's forced to dodge another jut of earth himself. It almost takes his legs right out from under him. All around us, the land is going haywire. Dust coats the air like mist. It's as bright as midday one second, then pitch black for a blink, then everything is in this gloaming color, then marine blue, then bright again. There's no rhyme or reason to it, but it does seem to be getting worse. When I look around, I think I can see why.

We're at the edge of things. Just beyond where Douglas limps over to Parsons, the river disappears. The horizon is a thin line of black, and beyond that is just a void, like a spot between stars. It turns my stomach a bit, so I flip around, back the way I came. I can see the river wind off beyond sight, and the world seems to settle along with it. Form, function, order. Just seeing it helps calm my racing heart. I think I'm getting a hint of what Ab meant when he said he felt that this way was best for him. I almost reach out to it.

Only Parsons's triumphant laugh gives me pause. I snap around and find him holding the book out at arm's length.

"Now!" he says. "This is it! But quickly! Already it changes!"

And without a second's hesitation, he runs right into the river. Douglas takes one last look up at me. He gives me a dismissive shake of the head, the kind that says I ended up being even less of a factor than he thought I would be. Ninepoint used to give me those from time to time. They burned me every single time. Then Douglas is splashing off after Parsons. The bobbing soul lights seem to vibrate as he passes. They zip out of the way of the two men then spin around them like embers caught in an updraft. The agents sink and sink, and then they're gone, just like that. I scramble to the edge of the ledge, scanning the river. Crazy or not, they're still human, both of them. I figure they gotta come up some time. But they don't. And then a minute goes by. And another. And I realize it's just me here now. Alone again. Stuck on a shifty ledge above a churning world.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

CAROLINE ADAMS

I think I pined. I didn't mean to pine, but I think I pined when I saw Ben through that rip in the air. Which sucks, because not only am I not a piner—I pride myself on not being a piner—but that was about the worst time in the world to get starry eyed. A man had just been murdered, for crying out loud. We were in the middle of man-camp hell. Dust flying, people yelling and fighting—and a little boy screaming. It's times like that when I'm supposed to be managing the situation, but instead I got zapped by the sight of Ben. You know who managed the situation? Owen. You know who I stand to hurt the most by all this nonsense with Ben? Owen.

It's a joke, really. A cruel joke. Just when I think the guy is beyond me, he pops up. He did that for months and months in my brain. I'd be at the gas station waiting for the boat to fill up and—*bam!*—surprise Ben thoughts! We played blackjack while he took his chemo regimen with those same blue-faced cards they were selling by the cash register. Or when we got waved through a cone zone back in Louisiana and there was a cop who looked just like him, even wore his pants a little high on his hips like Ben did. I'm doing nothing but flipping through a gossip rag when I see that cop and—*bam!*—surprise Ben thoughts!

But this time it was surprise Ben. Surprise *the guy himself*. In a way it was a blessing that I only had seconds to see him, to process him. Like one last voice message from someone who is gone forever, just a few seconds long, a quick hi and goodbye. You

can delete that without going too crazy over it. Any longer and I would have made even more of an ass out of myself than I did.

When I turn to Grant, my skills finally kick in, and I become the nurse I'm supposed to be. Grant's grandfather is gone. Grant's smoke is weak. He's going into a state of shock, which makes sense since he saw the soul of his grandfather pass into the great beyond. I had to go talk to my school counselor for a while because I accidentally locked myself in the basement storeroom at school when I was about his age. I thought that was bad. This kind of thing would have sent little girl Caroline right off the deep end. So I do the first thing that all nurses do when they deal with a patient in shock. I let him know I'm here in a completely nonthreatening way. I reach out and gently touch his shoulder, heaving with sobs. He looks up at me, and I can see why he is in pain. I can read it dancing on his skin, leaking from his eyes, and swirling like unformed words around his chapped lips. It has less to do with his grandfather dying than it does with how he feels like crap for dragging his grandfather down during what would be the man's final days. He accepts death in the way a child can—because he has to. What he can't accept is how his grandfather had to live after Grant's parents died. I see all of this as clear as a book, and the clarity almost staggers me.

I hold myself together because one thought cuts through: he's wrong. Grant is wrong to think his grandfather found him a burden. I know he's wrong, because I saw his grandfather's smoke too. And I saw how it only really shone true when he was with Grant, the two of them, running along with Owen and me.

And just like that, I know how to help him. I know how to fix his color. I see his pain as gaps in his smoke, and I know how to smooth them over. I know the words. So I say them. It's like I'm smoothing over a cracked vase with fresh clay. In fact, I see it happening. My own smoke comes off of me and flows over his. Changes it. It doesn't quite bring it back to the brilliant color it was when I first saw him—he's far too sad for that shine right now—but it turns it into something close. Something that could one day get back to that color.

Grant stands. He takes my hand. It takes a lot to floor the little guy. It takes even more to floor Chaco, who literally rises from the dust in front of us and hops up onto Grant's head. I remember Ben's grandmother's bird, just like this. Probably the same one, in the way that these creatures span across time and space. It stuck with her to the end, as I held her hand. I have no doubt Chaco will be around for the end of Grant, too, and will do his best to make sure it doesn't happen anytime soon.

Chaco snaps his gaze down the dirt road, past the crowd that is slowly pooling at the edges of our group. The crow caws, and Grant scrambles around me to where he can see around the buildings at the edge of the camp and out into the desert. I follow his eyes. There's an oil rig not far out there, painted red in the sunset, but that's about it. I turn back to Grant. His eyes are unfocused, almost like he's in a trance. I think he can see more than I do, just like I see more than others do, but his talent is different.

"What's out there?" I ask.

"A thin place," Grant says. "It's where I found the bell."

Owen steps up to us, still stemming the blood on his face with his cuff, despite my fussing. "Guys, I hate to break up the party. It's been such a lovely time. Charming little camp you've got here. But the natives are getting restless again. If we don't get out of here soon, we're going to end up in another fight or in jail. And one brawl a day is plenty for me."

"Grant, we have to get you someplace safe," I say.

Chaco caws again and leaps from Grant's head with a swoop. "There's nowhere safe," Grant says, translating for us. "We're the only ones who can stop it."

He's in full-blown Keeper mode now. I recognize the look from Ben's grandmother, when she gave me the bell back at Chaco. It's an ageless look. Focused but distant.

"Stop what, buddy?" Owen asks, his voice plugged up by his swollen nose.

"That thin place is breaking," Grant says, and then he takes two running steps down the dirt road before pausing and turning

around again. In a second, he switches back to the little boy he is at heart. His face softens and his brow furrows as he looks down at where his grandfather's body lies. His smoke stirs and slows and darkens, but his color stays true, even deepens a little.

"You all right, Grant?" I ask, which is a ridiculous thing to ask. Of course he's not. None of us are, in the grand scheme, but he looks up at me and nods.

"I know Pap's not there," he says, looking at the body. "That's not him. But still, it..." He pauses, swallows.

"Sucks." Owen says, taking his hand away from his face. Grant looks at him and then nods. "We're with you, Grant," Owen says. "Take us to where we need to be." Owen's eyes harden, and he balls his hands into fists. Tattered and torn and bloody, he's not bowed. I feel heat rising to my chest, which I know I can't one hundred percent attribute to adrenaline, and I feel like I'm staring again, this time at Owen. Funny how your hormones don't care if you're on the threshold of hell.

And while I'm thinking about hormones, Owen and Grant are already running toward the desert. Owen looks back at me. He ticks his head for me to join them, and I see a hint of a smile. His smoke is dark, too. Thick. Settled. I have this bizarre urge to snort it, like some sort of junkie. I think it might give me guts. I rub at my face as if that could straighten out my thoughts. This last half hour has given me enough fodder for a decade of sleepless rendezvous with 3:00 a.m.

I take off after them, and soon we break through the edge of the camp, the three of us running through the desert at a dead sprint, streaking smoke behind us like the tail of a comet, with Chaco crowing high above us.

We follow Grant's lead, and the kid can run. He seems to know the best route, jumping over pits and pointing out rocks to watch. He's not tiring, and neither is Owen. Or if he is, he's hiding it well. So I don't slow either. I try not to think of the kinds of things that scamper and slither around the desert soaking up the last of the sun. I tell myself it's probably mostly fluffy little prairie dogs, but then I see a flash of banded scales. Not a fluffy prairie

dog. There's no stopping now. In fact, I pick up the pace and fall in step with Owen. He's sweating profusely. There is no wind in this desert, and we're baked twice: once from what's left of the sun and once from the heat seeping out of the dirt below.

Grant skids to a stop. Above him, Chaco wheels hard right and flares his feathers out behind us in a low loop. He coasts right over my shoulder and settles on Grant's head. Grant ticks forward with the force of his landing but keeps his eyes focused on a bare patch of land in front of us ringed by caution tape. It's almost a perfect square—I'd say two hundred feet or so per side. The dirt looks hammered down here. Like a big square elephant sat on it. Grant won't go past the tape, and when Owen tries to step past him, Grant tugs him back.

"Is this the place?" I ask. "The thin place?"

Grant nods, his eyes sweeping the flat land. "See that rig over there?" He points at the rig I saw from the distance without looking at it. Now that it's near dark and the rig is lit up, I see at least ten people moving about underneath the spotlights.

"This was where that rig was first set up. 'Cept they couldn't set up right cause the bell was here. They broke a bunch of drill bits. Those cost a ton of cash. So they moved the rig over there."

Chaco chirrups, and Grant nods. "Well, yeah. Other things went wrong too. The rig sort of broke down. It all kind of went to chaos."

Chaco caws.

Grant's eyes are unfocused again. "This is a thin place close to chaos, but it's broken. It's leaking."

"Leaking what?" I ask, still catching my breath.

Grant seems to struggle with this. I can see him talking to Chaco in silence.

"Souls," Grant says. "But not like Pap's soul. Pap is good where he's at. This is the other kind of soul. From the other side of the river. The kind that don't care where they're at."

Rivers and souls aside, I can't see anything. I squint and still can't see anything. Just the desert at sunset, and all I can hear are

the distant clanks and calls of men at work. Beside me, I see Owen squinting too, with his hands on his hips.

"I can't see anything," Owen says, echoing my thoughts. "Are you sure, Grant?"

Chaco chirrups again from Grant's shoulder, and this time he flares out his wings. They reach twice again the width of Grant's shoulders. Grant steps back and holds the fist that clutches the bell out in front of him.

"Chaco says to grab your crows," Grant says.

Owen reaches in his pocket, and I grab my totem at the same time. In an instant, we blink into the thin world. The first thing I notice is Grant, standing like a toy soldier in front of us, his body a faint outline of smoke, but the bell that he holds in his hand blazes like the sun. So does Chaco sitting atop his head. In fact, I don't think I could rightly call Chaco a bird any longer. He's a changing thing. A bird one moment, then a lithe, leonine thing prowling across Grant's shoulders the next before returning to bird form again. The two of them stand like pillars of white against what I see beyond them.

I see the thinning that Grant is talking about. It floats in the air like a swimming pool, reflecting light in crazy, distorting ways. And in the middle, it's leaking. Strange lights float on the far side of the pool. They zip and shake and spin spastically, but they're all slowly moving toward the crack, like hundreds of strange fish pulled toward a leak in a billion-gallon aquarium.

"Get ready," Grant says. "If you have to let go of your crow, get away. Don't let them touch you. And don't worry about me. Chaco says they hate the bell because the bell has rules to it and they hate rules."

Chaco's wings flare out larger than a beach umbrella over Grant. I can feel the subtle pinch of the thin place already starting to squeeze me, but I ignore it. I grab Owen's hand. Owen squeezes back. There is a moment of pure desert silence. Then I hear a powerful splintering sound, like a windshield cracking, and I see the thin place break.

The bobbing lights drop out of the fissure one by one, and as they do, they change. They become a misty black smoke that sifts and clumps together into ever-changing shapes of two- and four-legged creatures. Each of them is different but for one thing. Every one of them has a hollow, swirling black pit where their face should be.

These things look and lurch like monsters from the darkest closet of my imagination, but I don't sense malice from them. The color of their smoke, the way it drips from them, I recognize it. Some of the worst cases I dealt with at Chaco Health Clinic had a touch of it—usually the poor men and women who were beyond themselves with addiction, people who didn't know who they were anymore, only that nothing around them made sense and everything was spiraling out of control. Their new normal was chaos. They had a touch of this black. These things *are* that black.

"If you can push them back through the break, chances are they'll go their own way on the other side," Grant says.

"Chances are?" Owen asks. "That's the best we got?"

"Just kick them back where they came from. We gotta hold them here, in this stretch of desert. No further," Grant says, with boyish simplicity.

Owen looks at me with a wide-eyed, terrified smile. "Hold them here. Why the hell not? Like the little Dutch boy."

He lets out a nervous chuckle, and that's when they seem to notice us. A four-legged thing half trips, half leaps toward Owen as he's talking to me. I step forward and grab it where I guess its neck would be. It shifts and turns in my hands, wriggling like a snake. I scream and drop it. The slimy-but-dry feeling of its scales sets me wiping my free hand on my jeans. I let out a string of *ews* that I'm not proud of, but what can I say? I hate snakes.

My hopping around draws more of them our way, all of them still shifting but settling on a human form. Owen doesn't let them. He's got his hands up and in fists, one with the crow in it, and he goes boxing. He gets one good, clean uppercut to the first thing then kicks the rest over. He looks a bit like a disgruntled postman taking it out on some boxes, but it works. I watch as he drags one

soul back under the break and then drop-kicks it upward. He staggers and winces, limping a bit, but the thing is sucked up, back through the crack. It's like a vacuum. The middle of the break drops the souls out, but the edges suck them back up. It's a balance, albeit a broken one.

Owen turns to me and gives me a look that says *if I can do it, so can you*. Which makes me pull my shoulders back, put my own hands up, and get to work. A smaller form floats over to me, and I catch it with my free hand. It shifts under my grip, first into a four-legged thing of some sort, then a flapping bird, then a hissing rodent. I almost drop it then, but I manage to rear back and chuck it into the updraft, where it's sucked away again. Owen's drop-kicking like it's his job, but still more come. For every one we kick out, two slip in. This is a losing fight.

I notice that when the souls hit the ground they change the ground as well. They create divots and mounds where none were before, like their very touch rewrites the world. Even the air they pass through smears and clouds. I try to get Owen's attention to show him what I mean, but my initial butt-kicking adrenaline is wearing off and the painful pinch of the crow is seeping in. It makes my teeth rattle. I have to let go of my totem.

In a blink I'm back in the living world, standing in the middle of an empty patch of desert. I can't see the souls, but I can see how they muddy the world as they slip through the break in the sky above me. Ten feet away I know Owen struggles with something out of my sight because I can see how it blurs everything around him. Behind me, Grant stands stock still like a tiny shaman, his eyes blank and distant, his bell hand out. Above me, Chaco dives with a screaming call and blinks out of sight and into a battle of his own. I shake my hand off like I touched a hot stove and take in several gulps of hot desert air. I grab my totem again.

Chaco slams into some roiling black shape that looks near enough to a person. It whips and boils around him as he drags it back to the break and flings it in the updraft. Owen is tiring, not only from struggling with the souls but also from the bite of his

crow totem. His teeth grind; his face is pale and splotchy. He shoves another creature high into the air. It's sucked away from him, but he staggers and sits hard on the ground before blinking away to the real world. When he flits back to the other side, he's a murky outline to me, but I can clearly see two of the souls focus on him, as if suddenly picking up a different scent. His living, breathing scent. They start to make their way toward him, bulky blocks of smoke that fall into form and shape as they lumber forward, and that he cannot see. Above, Chaco screeches, and Grant translates, his voice shrill and cracking.

"Don't let them touch you in the living world! They'll change you forever if they touch you! You gotta hold the totems!"

Owen seems not to have heard; he's still panting and flexing the hand that held his totem, now on the desert floor next to him. The souls march nearer to him, ten feet away now, but he can't see them. They've turned the air and the earth around them into rifts and rivets and bubbles and streaks, charring some bits and smoothing others but forever changing everything, and I know that they'll do the same to Owen if they touch him. So I grip my crow tightly, lower my head, and come at them sideways.

The lead figure reaches out to Owen, trailing a sooty mess where its arm passes, and it grabs his lapel before I can slam my shoulder into it. I sink into it like squeezing a sponge, only instead of water coming out, I'm inundated with a muddy blast of chaotic pictures and images until it staggers away from me. My shoulder tingles, but I'm otherwise unchanged.

Owen looks at his shirt collar in horror. It's smeared. Not burned, not tattered or torn or broken, but smeared. Like an impressionist painting. Its essence has been changed.

"Good lord!" Owen says then scrambles to grab his totem. He blinks into the thin world next to me just in time to see the second figure a few feet from him, reaching out to him. It pauses as Owen leaves the living world, almost like it's disappointed. Then Owen grabs it by the neck, spins around so he's behind it, and drags it one-handed back to the updraft. He squats and encircles the thing's trunk with both hands then grunts and heaves it up into

the break, where it's sucked away. He reaches for me and grabs my hand, and together we carefully step away, back to Grant. As we do, another soul slips out and another. We blink back to the living world, and I steady myself with both hands on the ground.

"What the hell are these things?" Owen asks.

"Chaco says they're souls that went down the chaos side of the river," Grant says, his voice distant.

"I can feel it, when I touch them in the thin world. I get these —"

"Bad thoughts," Grant finishes.

Owen nods, working his fingers like he's trying to get the blood flow back.

I know even without being able to see them that the souls have turned their attention back toward us. Owen shakes his head.

"The pinch of the thin place is getting worse. It's like one long bee sting," Owen says, gasping in the warm air. "I'm gonna be pretty worthless here after too much longer, but maybe I can lead them away from you guys for a bit. Give you a chance to fix that break."

"Owen." I shake my head, but he interrupts me, even as his eyes flick across the deceptively empty desert around us. They're coming for us, right now. It makes me wince.

"You're more important than I am, Caroline. Always have been. You can do things nobody else can... maybe you can fix that break."

"No," Grant says, interrupting us both. "If you're tired, stay behind me." Chaco swoops down and lands on his head then turns to us and nods.

"Seriously?" I ask.

Chaco nods hard. "Quick!" Grant says, pleading.

Owen and I look at each other, then at Grant, and then scamper to stand right behind him, each of us with one hand on his shoulder. I take a breath and grip my totem, and when I snap into the thin world I have to stifle a scream.

The souls are surrounding us. I count fifteen of them, maybe ten feet from us and pressing in. I grip Grant's shoulder harder

than I mean to and try to focus on breathing as Chaco caws loudly.

"Hold still," Grant says. As if I could move a muscle anyway. The four of us stand as still as statues, like we're posing for some ridiculous family portrait. They shamle forward, and I begin to think that maybe Grant just wanted us all to be together when we're smeared out of existence by these things, but when the first soul gets within a couple of feet of us, the bell starts to glow. It's soft at first but enough to give the souls pause. The closest souls press forward again. But the bell glows brighter with each inch they take, and it's as if the light itself is a hardening barrier. The closer the souls get, the more they struggle, until they're stopped cold inches from us, and the bell is blazing like a spotlight from Grant's fist. It's so bright I have to close my eyes. Chaco caws again, and Grant speaks for him.

"The bell is a symbol of order. It's been passed down forever. It creates each Walker, which is a job that keeps order between the worlds. These things are its opposite. Souls that have chosen chaos. They're like opposite ends of a magnet." He looks up at me and smiles. "Stick with me and they can't touch you."

Owen laughs, his eyes dazzling in the light of the bell. I almost sag with relief, but I don't want even another inch of separation between us.

"Take that, you stupid things!" Grant yells. Chaco fluffs his breast up and titters.

"Yeah, you... frickin' stupid things!" Owen says, steering away from a swear word I know he wants to grab. "You ruined my shirt!"

I find myself laughing, too, especially when I see the chaos souls start to fade back, inching away from us, leaving a greasy stain in their wake. Then something grabs their attention. They all turn as one to the right. I follow their line of sight and see that they've turned to the oil rig in the near distance. An engine has revved to life, and another battery of floodlights have kicked on, illuminating a handful of people working on the platform there. I stop laughing. When the souls begin to move toward the oil rig, Owen does too. Grant falls silent. "Oh, no," I whisper.

"We're not easy prey anymore," Owen says. "So they're moving on to what is."

"We gotta stop ÷em," Grant whispers, his voice breaking. "Pap worked on a rig like that once. There's someone else's Pap out there. Maybe a bunch of them."

Chaco caws again and lifts off into the air, wheeling above us. "Chaco says to stay behind the bell, do what we can near the break," Grant says quietly.

"It's like spitting into the wind," Owen says. "There's more by the minute. And they're all heading off toward the rig."

"Unless we can plug that hole, we'll just be running in place," I say.

"Chaco says he's working on that," Grant says. I follow Chaco's flight and watch as he dives straight for the break, changing his own form until he's a pencil-thin streak of black feathers. I squeeze Grant's shoulder even harder as he shoots for the break, and in a blink he's gone. For a second I think maybe he's plugged the hole himself, but half a minute later another black soul slips through and hits the battered and scarred ground below the break. Another follows. They form themselves, take one look at us, and then head off in the direction of the rig with the others.

"I think it may be up to us," Owen says.

CHAPTER 15

THE WALKER

I thought about jumping. I don't want you thinking that I just counted that out, because that makes me sound like a chicken. But you tell me what you would do in my situation. First of all, the agents are long gone. They were long gone the minute they ducked under the river. The second thing is that I'm in pain for the first time in a while. My jaw feels like a balloon where Douglas hit me, and my knee is all swollen where the earth slammed into it on its way to taking me up into the sky and plunking me here on this magic-carpet-sized mesa about a hundred feet up.

I know I can't die. I'm already dead. When I lose this job, I'll become just another soul in the river—and I pray to who or whatever runs this place that I float the other way when that time comes—but even knowing this, I'm still not so sure that jumping off a hundred-foot cliff would be good for me. And don't get me started on how I'd be jumping in water. You ever jump off a big cliff? The Chaco flats flooded one time when Joey and I were thirteen, and this deep desert pool formed in the middle of the valley for a while. All the kids liked to jump into it from the cliff edges. On a dare, I jumped from what I swore at the time was fifty feet, but now I'm thinking it was more like twenty. I didn't pencil my legs right, and when I hit, I tweaked my knee and got a slap right to the balls that I felt for the next three months. At this height, water turns to cement. Maybe not soul-river water, but still...

The third thing is, the whole landscape is bucking and shifting at random, and I have this terrible feeling that as soon as I chuck myself off this cliff it'll shift and melt, and I'll become a smashed bug for no reason.

So that's why I'm still up here. If you're wondering. Now that I hear myself, it does sort of sound chickenshit. I wonder what Caroline would think of me, flat as a door on this mesa, batting back and forth the idea of jumping. She'd see right through me. That's her gift. She'd see that I'm really thinking about whether it matters in the long run anyway. I'm either solo up here forever or solo down there forever. Say I catch the agents, stop them from ruining things, then what? It's back to the solo workday. Forever. Neither choice gets me closer to her.

Plus, what Parsons said back when the bell rang still stings a bit. Here I was thinking that the agents wanted my job so bad that they'd go to the ends of the earth and beyond for it, but it turns out they just wanted to get beyond the veil. Then he called me a day-laboring peasant.

What an asshole.

All I'm saying is things have me in kind of a funk right now. I know that time is precious, but I'm getting jaded. Time is slowly losing its importance to me. I'm like the annoying guru at the top of the mountain who pisses off the pilgrims. Everyone dies at one time or another. Sure, they may bottleneck at the veil without me there to snip their lines, but why not just sit on a fucking rock until the dam bursts?

Anyway, I'm not proud of it, but that's what I'm thinking on my rock, when out of the corner of my eye I spy a long slice of black shoot from the river, like the edge of an obsidian knife. As I watch, the back half of the slice catches up with the front half to form a beak and tail feathers, and two wings shoot out with an audible bang. I hop up. It's Chaco! I suspected Chaco might be able to travel through the break, but I didn't dare hope he'd come for me. I leap up and wave my hands.

"Hey! Over here! Chaco!" I laugh and then cut it short as a wave of vertigo hits me, or maybe the plateau shifts a little. I have

to catch my balance. Then I get to waving again. "Over here!"

Chaco wheels around. "Yeah, yeah. I see you. I see you," he says. And he doesn't sound happy. I step back, and he lands in a fit of dust at my feet, flaps his wings a few times before tucking them in, then just stares up at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Where are the agents? I only ask because I swear when I last saw you, you were going after them. And yet here you are without them."

"They jumped in the river." Chaco follows where I point and furrows the fine feathers on his head. He turns back to me.

"And what the fuck are you doing? Working on your tan?"

"No," I say, fully aware I sound like a child. "It's just... I dunno... did you know I can get hurt here? What's up with that?"

"Of course you can get hurt here. This is the doorway to chaos. The rules don't apply. Or if they do, it's on and off. Nothing is for sure. I'd have thought the freaky landscape might have tipped you off on that one."

"Well, that's another thing, I thought maybe this plateau would... sort of... go back down." I'm reaching now.

"Or stay up here for eternity," Chaco says. "Which it has an equal chance of doing. Given that there are no rules here."

I know I don't have much of a leg to stand on, so I do what I always do when pressed against the wall. I get pissed. It helps, a little. "Hey, fuck you, man. Excuse me if I have to think about it for a bit before I throw myself off a cliff. You're not on this side of the coin."

I should know by now that this type of shit doesn't work on Chaco.

"Do you have any idea what is going on in the mortal world right now?" he asks, clawing his way up my front until he's right in my face. I open my mouth then close it. I assume things are going downhill fast, but I don't really know. I don't really know anything about what is going on, to be honest.

"Owen and Caroline are standing with Grant against a frickin' platoon of chaos souls. A platoon, Walker. They're coming from a

break in the thin place where the bell landed. It's sourced directly from this end of the river. Right down there. And if we don't close it, I got reason to believe all the thin places will start to break down. Everywhere."

"What are chaos souls?" I ask quietly, my mind racing.

Chaco turns to the river and points with his wing. "Those are chaos souls. This side of the river is chock full of them. The river only exists on this plane, but it's very deep. Sometimes it gets close to other planes. There are thin places where the bottom of that river gets too close to the living world, and the thin places are cracking because those two assholes have been screwing with things. The river is leaking, and your friends are caught up in it." He's puffing rapidly now.

"Chaos souls..." I repeat. That doesn't sound good. "Are those like... like demons or something?" The Navajo believe that demons are trapped souls that wander the earth. It fits. But Chaco shakes his head.

"Demons," he says, as if I'm stuck in the Stone Age. "What did you see when you first came through with Abernathy?"

"Nothing. I mean, a shore. The river. It was calm."

"No judge, no jury weighing Ab's life?"

"No."

"No winged St. Peter behind his ledger, looking your name up, running your life down, telling you which way to go?"

"No. Ab seemed to know which way to go. He felt called to the other side."

Chaco nods. "Toward the side of order. The side of light. That's because that's the kind of man he was in life. But if you happened to cross over with any of those guys down there, they'd tell you that it just felt right for them to go toward the other side. This side. Where you are right now. Sitting on your ass."

I look down on the churning souls below. "So they're here of their own accord."

"That's right. These souls brought themselves here. They aren't demons, they aren't ghosts, they're souls that feel that the

end of this side of the river is where they belong. Now if that's damned, so be it. Damned can mean a lot of things in my book."

"What's at the end of this side of the river?"

Chaco settles his feathers for the first time. Sort of slumps a bit. "That's something you gotta find out for yourself. Because that's where the agents went."

I know Chaco knows what's at the end of the river. "Is it... is it a lonely place?" I ask. I know full well how lame it sounds coming out. I also know I'm showing my hand to Chaco. Showing him what's really bothering me. So it's good of him when he softens his bird brow. He understands.

"It's a place of chaos, Walker. Sometimes lonely, sometimes not. What I do know is that it's never one thing for long. It's not a place of peace."

"And I gotta go there, huh?"

"If you don't, the living world you knew will be overrun. The girl you love will be wiped away forever. These souls don't just want chaos. When they're this far down the river, they *are* chaos. They rewrite everything they touch in the living world. You and I both know Caroline. We know she's a soul that would follow Ab's path down the river. But if one of those things touches her, they could change her, and she'd be powerless to stop it. Maybe she'd end up down there. Maybe she'd be of two minds, ripped apart."

I find myself locking my jaw. I find myself balling my fists. I step to the edge. And damn if it isn't still just as far down.

"I know what you're thinking, Walker. You've been running through a *woe is me* scenario up here. You're getting the itch. I've seen it before, with past Walkers. It's really hitting you now that you are all you've got out here. You're getting thoughts that aren't like you. Thoughts like ÷What is it to me if the world goes to hell?' But you gotta remember, man. Remember them. Remember her. And she's not alone. But if things go wrong here—and they're going very wrong right now, my man—if they keep it up, she could be lost forever. Do you want that? Remember her."

And I do. I remember her. It's the color of her soul string that I remember first. The *colors*, actually, because she has way more

than one. I got to see them for a bit, before I left. The best way I can describe them is like the swirling colors on the skin of a floating bubble when the sunlight catches it just right. And then I think of that bubble popping. Or worse, being *smeared* somehow. Smudged out by the chaos souls dripping from the crack at the bottom of the river. The river I gotta jump into.

"Fine. Fuck it. For her," I say. "See you, Chaco."

And I jump.

I fall a long time. It's like the land drops out below me, farther and farther. I tell myself not to flail, but I flail. I flail like a ragdoll. I scream too. Guess I haven't learned anything since the Chaco flats jump. I get ready for another ball whacking.

But then, just when I can see the souls roiling the water, I feel Chaco's claws on my back, ripping my shirt to get a grip under my arms, and the earth stops rushing at me. Instead it only zooms. Then it floats toward me.

"Chaco! You could do this the whole time?"

"Yep," Chaco says, his big beak above my head. "But I had to see if you would jump."

Before I can piece together the weight behind that statement, Chaco says, "Good luck, Walker. Give 'em hell." And he drops me into the river.

CHAPTER 16

GRANT ROMER

Back before Mom and Dad died, the three of us and Pap would sometimes go to church. Mostly for Easter and Christmas, but sometimes Mom would get the idea to go on a random Sunday, so I've been to church a bunch of times. After Mom and Dad died, I think Pap kinda turned on the whole thing, so the two of us never went. But I still remember Sunday school, and I know about souls and how they're the real *you* inside you. Chaco says these black smoke monsters are souls, but if they are, they sure ain't any kind of soul I've ever heard of.

I always thought that you got your soul, and if you believe in God and do all right with your life, you'll end up in Heaven and get to see your mom and dad and pap again. If you don't do those things, well, you'll be sorry and sent to Hell. These chaos souls sure look like they come from Hell. But they don't look sorry. They don't look like they're burning or hollerin' in pain, neither. I'll tell you what they look like: they look like sick animals. Crazy, smoking animals that are wandering around doing what they do because that's all they know now. Like the mangy, rabid coyotes that sometimes come in from the desert and have to be put down.

When that bunch of them got real close to Caroline, Owen, Chaco, and me, I didn't feel like they wanted to get at *me*, Grant Romer. They wanted to get at everything that made it so I was standing there in that spot. It was like the bell formed a little snow globe around us, and the chaos souls wanted to turn all of us to water and mix up the snow globe so there wasn't nothin'

recognizable in it but a bunch of bits. They weren't angry about it, or scary like the agents are scary. I think it's just what they are.

And what they're doing right now is heading straight for a drilling rig, like ants to a kitchen. I think it's the noise—or maybe the smell—but mostly the way it's all working together: people and machine. There's no chaos there. But it's coming. The souls are messin' up the desert where they step and screwing up the sky where they pass. One steps through a tumbleweed, and the tumbleweed stretches out like putty until it's a dripping line.

"We can't just sit here and watch all those men get smeared," I say. "I don't care what Chaco said."

I look up at Caroline and Owen, and they both nod.

"Really?" I ask. "You ain't gonna try to stop me or nothin'?"

"He said stay behind the bell. He didn't say where the bell could go," Caroline says. "I know we can't stop these things; there's too many of them. But what we can do is warn those men at least."

"Convince a bunch of good ol' boy roughnecks that an army of cell-destroying chaos souls is at their doorstep," Owen says. "Sounds easy enough." He's rolling up his sleeves. I can't tell if he's joking or if he's dead serious. I'm beginning to think with him it's always a little bit of both, because Caroline smiles.

"Leave the convincing to me," Caroline says. "I'll know what to say."

Owen looks at her then looks down at me. I shrug. I've seen weirder things today.

"Let's roll," Owen says. "You're in the lead, big guy. We follow you."

I start running toward the rig and thinking about giraffes again, and then all of a sudden I'm crying. Thankfully we're running pretty fast, and I'm in the lead so Caroline and Owen don't see.

The last of the sun still shines off the tip of the rig. The giraffe stands tall, but if the chaos souls get to it, it won't for much longer. For everything to be okay, so many different parts have to keep working together. Especially the blowout preventer, the guts of

the giraffe that kept Pap safe. It has to keep working to keep these men safe too.

We cut wide around the march of the souls. Caroline holds on to my hand, and every now and then Owen stops, grabs his crow, and checks to make sure we won't run into any of the souls and wipe ourselves out by mistake. We keep running, and he catches up a little bit sweatier each time with some added directions. *Cut left. Shoot straight through. This is the front of them. Now they're behind us.*

The sun is nearly set now, and the shadows are long. I look behind us and see a flat stretch of desert that's shifting and moving in little ways with the touch of the souls, like it's made of new paint that's getting rained on. You might miss it if you didn't know what to look for, but once you see it, it's impossible to unsee. It's like the desert is playing tricks on us.

"How far back are they?" Caroline asks. The hands we hold are sweaty, but she hasn't let go, and neither have I.

"Closest one is about fifty yards or so. They're wandering but with a purpose. I think we've got five or so minutes max to get all these people out of here," Owen says. Then he looks at Caroline. "What do you need from me?"

Caroline scans the rig. It's loud and smells like gas. She squints, looking for something beyond what we can see, but she shakes her head. "We gotta get someone who's in charge."

"Oh, I can do that!" I say. "He'll be in the toolbox. C'mon." I grab their hands and pull them after me toward the side where there's a shed. A few men in hard hats look at us with questions in their eyes, but we ignore them and they don't say anything. I stop in front of a makeshift staircase made out of big bricks that leads to an open door. I hop up and in the shed with Caroline and Owen close behind. Inside, three men stare at a bunch of computers with all sorts of numbers and shapes running up the screen. All three wear hard hats, but two of them are in nice clothes, and one is in a greasy brown monkey suit. He has a big brown beard with bits of grey in it, and his hands are tanned and thick and strong like Pap's. I run up to him.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you the tool pusher?" I ask. He looks to his right above my head, then he looks down.

"What the fu... heck is this? Sam, is this your kid?" he asks.

One of the two men sitting down swivels around. He blinks at me. "No. This yours, Don?" The other man turns around for a second then turns back.

"I don't have kids," he says.

"He's with us," Caroline says.

"And who are you?" the tool pusher asks. "This is a tight hole, ma'am. That means no visitors allowed. And it certainly ain't no place for a kid."

"You're in danger," Caroline says, stepping forward, stopping him. "You and your whole crew. All of you need to leave this place now. It's life or death."

This gets everyone's attention. Both men swivel back around. The tool pusher squints at us. He has the same lines shooting from the sides of his eyes that Pap had, and I almost step closer to him. But then I feel Owen squeeze my shoulder a bit, and I fight the feeling down. Pap would be the first to say that this ain't the time for stuff like that.

"Who the hell put you up to this?" one of the clean men asks. "Did corporate do this? This shit isn't funny."

"No, it's not," Owen says. "You have less than five minutes to get everyone off this rig." His voice is rising, but Caroline stops him with a touch. She hasn't stopped looking at the tool pusher. I mean *looking* at him. The way she looked at me that helped me get up off Pap when Pap was gone.

"You know what I'm talking about, don't you?" Caroline says.

The tool pusher shakes his head, but I can tell she's getting to him. If anything, he looks scared. Caroline steps forward, and he steps back.

"Now just a minute," the other clean man says, getting up from his seat, but Owen steps in front of him.

"Sit down, kid," he says. Which is funny, because he doesn't look like a kid to me. He looks about the same age as Owen. But the guy listens. He sits down.

"Nothing about this operation has been going right," Caroline says, looking carefully at the tool pusher. "You had to move the rig, even. Things are breaking. Your veteran men are screwing up." The tool pusher licks his lips and straightens his hat, his eyes on her. "You think you've lost it. You're wondering if you're too old. You think maybe the men don't respect you anymore. That you can't do your job."

The tool pusher lets out this tiny little huff of breath, like he was hugged real hard.

"It's not your equipment, it's not your men, and it sure as heck isn't you. It's this place. And this place just broke open. Now, please. For the love of God. Get your men and yourselves out of here." Caroline stands up straight again. It's quiet for a couple of seconds.

"Sound the alarm, Don," the tool pusher says quietly.

"What? Just because some crazy lady came in here and—"

"Sound the goddamn alarm! Clear the floor! Get everyone out! Now!"

"Just calm down, Jerry—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Jerry says, pushing the man aside as he flips open a box and presses a big red button. An alarm goes off that sounds like a truck horn on repeat. He looks back at us, eyes wide. "You better be right, ma'am, or you just cost us a boatload of money. And our jobs."

But Caroline isn't looking at him, and I'm not sure she even hears him. Her head is cocked like she's straining to hear something out the door. I run to the doorway, but I can't see anything but bright lights and, beyond that, complete blackness. Desert night and worse. But I don't need to see anything to hear the screaming.

All six of us rush out of the toolbox and look around to see where it's coming from, which is probably why none of the workers notice when Caroline and Owen disappear into the thin place to get a better look. They're back in a blink.

"Over there," Owen says. He's pointing at the butt of the giraffe, and it's blowing a lot of smoke. Way too much smoke. The

screaming is coming from the men on the drilling floor. I know it's the smoke that's scaring them, but if they looked carefully they'd have a lot more to scream about. The engine is smoking because it's being warped. And it's being warped because a chaos soul is walking right through it, trying to get to the men on the platform. With each step, the metal and gears and belts change, some to sand, some to drippy goop, some to black smoke. It looks like a big thumb is slowly wiping right through it.

The tool pusher and his friends take off toward it before any of us can scream at them to stop, but they get about ten feet before the engine catches fire. It's just a little fire, just a lick of a thing, but a fire on a rig is very, very bad.

"Clear the rig!" the tool pusher screams, waving his hands. He cuts right and grabs a red spray-bottle fire extinguisher while the other two just sort of stand there staring at it. He blows right past them with the big bottle in his hand, fiddling with a lever on top.

"He's gonna run right into them," Owen says. He turns to Caroline. "Stay here with Grant. I'll be back." Before Caroline or I can say anything, he puts his hand in his pocket and disappears. I try to step forward, but Caroline holds me tight. I look up at her, and I can see in her eyes that she's holding herself as still as she is me. She wants to be out there with him.

"I'm just gonna look," she says. "I'll still be right here." She disappears too. I watch the tool pusher running around hell-bent on getting to that fire. He has the spray bottle out in front of him. Caroline comes back. Her face is white. "They're all over," she says.

"Owen?" I ask.

"He's fighting them, but he can only push them away. He's gonna get overwhelmed."

Owen just about scares the snot out of the tool pusher when he blinks back right in front of him and takes him out at the waist. Both of them go down to the ground in a mess of limbs. Owen presses him flat, like a big invisible axe is passing over them both, and I bet in a lot of ways it probably is.

"Forget the fire!" I hear Owen scream. "It's too late for that! Go!"

The tool pusher is sitting as if he just fell smack off his bike and onto the concrete, and he's checking to see if he's still in one piece. So Owen just gets behind him and pulls him up and out of the way, his boots dragging through the dirt. And good thing too, 'cause that's when the engine starts making this heavy hammering sound, then a whine, and then it blows to pieces.

There are still men on the giraffe's back when the engine blows. It smacks all of them flat as pancakes. At first I think they're all dead because the bell gets heavy and I can feel it come together. I hold it real still until it passes. Then two of the men start to move on the ground, and I see the smearing of chaos souls moving toward them. The souls didn't stop at the engine. They don't want the engine. They want the people. At least three souls are cutting their way toward the crew like nails slowly scraping through butter. The giraffe makes a big groan, and its neck bobs a little to the right. I look back at the men crawling around on the platform. Sure, they could be like the guys at the man camp that said mean things to Owen and Caroline. But maybe they're guys like Pap. Little Paps. Working at becoming tool pushers. Guys with grandsons.

"I can't let them die," I say. And I run. I slip through Caroline's grip like we're playing Red Rover. She screams after me, but I'm pretty fast, and I'm already halfway across the grounds in a flash. I feel a whump of air to my right, and then she's right there keeping pace.

"I'm the only one that can keep the souls away from them," I say, before she can get mad at me. I glance up at her. She's not mad at me. She wants this as much as I do. We go wide around the body of the giraffe and up the metal steps on the far side from the engine fire. I'm up top first. There are three men, two of them rolling around and crying and one not moving at all. The souls are slicing butter our way. They're just a couple of feet from the one that's not moving. I start to go to him when Caroline grabs me.

"No," she says, and her voice is heavy. "He's gone. These other two. Stand in front of them."

So I do. I stand in front of them with my feet apart and set and my hands on my hips, and I feel the bell start to shine in my fist. Behind me, Caroline corrals the two men until they're in a row at my back, then she comes back to me and puts her arm around me. She squeezes. It makes me puff out my chest more.

The two men are shaking it off, touching their bodies and poking at their ears because I bet they can't hear nothin' but ringing. One gets up and weaves away behind us and off the platform, but the other has a cut-up leg. He left a trail of blood when Caroline dragged him behind me. He tries to scoot away, but Caroline grabs him by the scruff and leans down and whispers something. His eyes get all big, but he stays put. The three of us watch as the souls reach the dead man. One cuts right through him. It's exactly like you'd expect and worse. Just this past Fourth of July I brought out my firework collection and my bucket of army men and played war with 'em. I dug a pit in the sand out back of Pap's house and started a fireworks fire with a bunch of sparklers and threw in a few of the army men to watch them melt. I picked one up with a sparkler and it stuck to it, so I wiped it off on the wood edge of the sandbox. This is just like that, only more red. The man behind us screams, but he stays put. Thank God the guy was dead. If he wasn't, I'd probably be screaming right with him.

The bell shines real bright, enough to make me squint, and I know that the chaos souls are here. Right next to me. Maybe inches from me.

"Stay still!" Caroline yells. All three of us do. It's just like back in the desert. They can't get to me or any of us. But back there it was solid earth we were standing on. Here, it's a sheet of metal above the ground. It starts to bubble where I know the soul is standing. Then it melts and flakes away, turning to ash and dripping to sand at the same time. One hole forms then another, and the souls drop below the platform like a hot iron through ice, leaving a muddy, dead-bug streak behind them. Which would be good, 'cept that they're dropping on the guts of the giraffe.

I look down through the holes and see the drill pipe slice in two, and all of a sudden the giraffe is barfing oil. It blows out high

in the air in one big black spew, and then it shuts off just as quick. The blowout preventer clamped it down, and I have enough time to wipe my face and eyes off and look back down to see the blowout preventer start to bubble and shift like a soul is sitting right on top of it.

I look up at Caroline. She sees it too. The man behind us is throwing a fit. It sounds like he's making enough racket for two men. I turn my head to tell him to shush, but I see he's looking up the neck of the giraffe. I follow his eyes, and sure enough, there's another man. Way up high in the crow's nest. Sitting right on the head of the giraffe. He was probably repairing a line or something up there, which is just terrible luck. I don't know why he hasn't used the escape route. They usually have a zip line that leads all the way to the ground, but then I see the line dangling off the side like a leash, useless. At first I think he's hollerin' to get us to save him, but then I see he's hollerin' and pointing at the engine, because it's leaking gas in a long, burning line that's running right toward the bubbling guts of the giraffe.

CHAPTER 17

THE WALKER

The first thing I realize when I hit the water, other than that I want to hug my bird friend and punch him in the beak at the same time, is the feel of the souls.

The “water” isn’t even water, so to speak. It’s not wet. Which makes sense. I assumed this setup was a bit more complex than a bunch of souls floating down a river like rubber ducks. The feeling isn’t so different from the soul map, actually, the sense of being totally enveloped by a place. But with the soul map I’m sewing up the strings of those that leave—tucking away their connection to the living world. It’s cosmic housekeeping. The soul itself I don’t deal with anymore, because I send it here.

Well, here they all are. And, man oh man, do I have to deal with them. I try for a pencil- straight landing but screw it up and hit the river at a jackknife. And I’m surrounded by souls. Not all of them can get out of my way. Not all of them want to get out of my way. And the ones I end up touching sizzle with images and echoes of the lives and experiences that made them what they are.

I don’t think it’ll surprise you when I say they are in complete chaos.

Each brush against a soul brings me a rapid-fire slideshow of pictures that makes no sense to me. A car wreck as seen by a pedestrian, a slab of snow breaking from the side of a mountain, a roiling anthill, a broken tile set among a thousand whole tiles, a stream of water blown by the wind. Things like that, but millions of them, all in a blink. And there’s a feeling, too, coming from each

of them. It's just an imprint, an echo, but it's there. Each is a shade different, but they all rub me the same way. The closest I can come to explaining it is this: You know that feeling you get when you're driving your car and you come up on a wreck and you know it's a bad one? That feeling that you don't want to see what happened, but you do at the same time? Everybody has a little bit of that tendency in them. Back on patrol in Chaco, we'd get bad wrecks on the straightaways north through the flats, and sometimes we'd have to have one officer whose sole job it was to keep the rubberneckers moving through. It's human nature to have some interest in the mess and the destruction. Well, these souls have a lot more than just *some* interest. The feeling I get is that these are the guys that would stop traffic whole. Or maybe even cause another wreck from looking too hard. They feed off of it.

And after a while, it gets to me. I feel my own brain turning a bit. I'm getting panicky. I take a bunch of deep breaths, but I keep running into souls. They're everywhere, all around me, lighting the river a fogged-over, electric white. It takes me a bit to position myself to best avoid them. I shift and arch, ducking low and swimming high. The souls only illuminate more souls as I drop further. The pressure doesn't change, but the souls do thin out a bit as I go lower. I touch for the bottom with my toes. It feels spongy and soft, but it holds me. I start walking.

I get to the break Chaco was talking about after just a few minutes. The souls are slowly spinning around it, sort of like when you swirl water around a bottle and create a tornado. This is much more subtle, but it's here. The break is pulling the souls down into it. I watch one spin slowly, like a floating leaf, down, down, and then disappear. I walk up to the spot with caution. After all it took to get me here in the first place, the last thing I want to do is get sucked out.

I stand just outside of the pull and crouch down. The break is really more like a jagged tear. I wish there was something I could do to plug it somehow, but there's nothing here. The closer I get, the more pieces break away. I can see through it to the darkness beyond, and it's different from the darkness of the bottom of the

river. It's a dark I know. A desert dark. I get the feeling that in order to close this thing, I'm gonna have to get rid of the agents and the knife first.

I stand. Above me, another soul is caught in a slow, looping spiral downward. I skirt the edge of the break and pick up the pace down the riverbed. The souls zip and shiver and buzz and weave all around me. I keep my hands up in front of my face, partly out of self-defense and partly because I don't want to run into anything. From my perch on high, I saw that the river flattened to nothing not too far from where I jumped in—for whatever that's worth in a world that changes from moment to moment.

And just like that, I'm at the end. I don't hit a wall or a dam but a cavern. A huge, domed cavern. The river feeds into it at the bottom of one side. I thought the river was big, but now it looks like a little stream trickling into the ocean. I can see through the ether of the place, up, up, and all around myself. I feel like I'm a grain of sand inside a giant eggcup, the kind Gam used to have a pair of—porcelain things she always kept clean but that I never saw her use. Countless souls light the cavern a pulsing, electric blue. And hanging from the center of this massive eggcup is a big, black pearl that would fit nicely inside of a crater. It hangs like an earring and shines with a wicked black patina, and it's where all the souls are going. It's also where I see Parsons and Douglas.

The agents stand out like two floating specks of black in a snow globe on crack. Also, the souls seem to want no part of them, and especially no part of what I see in Parsons's hand, glowing green like a toxic splinter.

"Hey!" I yell. My voice is scratchy, and I clear my throat. "Hey, assholes! What do you think you're doing with that thing?" I kick off the ground and push myself forward, swimming up in the cavern, but they're even farther away than I thought. It takes a second for my voice to reach them, but it does, and Parsons turns around briefly. He has the book in one hand and the knife in the other, and at that moment, he slams the book closed and passes it to Douglas, says a few words, then takes off himself, pushing

upward, skirting the shimmering black surface of the massive pearl on his way to the top.

"Parsons! Whatever you're doing, cut that shit out right now! Don't be a dumbass! This place is way too powerful for you, or me, or any of us. None of us should be here!"

Parsons isn't stopping. He's floating up, his suit billowing around him. I can see the bone white of his legs above his black socks. I kick harder. I'm coming up on Douglas now. Fucking Douglas. Always my roadblock. How many times am I gonna have to run into this guy? He pops his shoulders back and squares up at me, but all I can look at is this big pearl. It's hypnotizing, so big that the curvature seems flat, and it shines like a black mirror. I feel like I get a taste of what drives moths to a flame. It takes an effort to pull up, to go after Parsons. Which is what Douglas was waiting for, of course, because he plows into me right as I stretch upward.

I fold over him like a piece of paper, and the two of us go spinning back out into the soup of souls. I lose my breath for a second, but without anything hard to land on, we just spin out into nothing until we slow down. He swings at me, but the momentum of pulling the punch back pushes him backward too. When he throws it, I block, and he does a somersault over my right shoulder.

Forget him. It's Parsons who has the knife. Parsons who's fixing to do something stupid. I kick off back toward the pearl, leaving Douglas behind.

"Parsons! Do you *want* to destroy the world? Is that what gets you off?" I kick harder, and I'm getting close until Douglas grabs my ankle. He yanks me backward and sails over my shoulder to try and get between me and Parsons, but I'm not about to let that happen. I grab his balls as his crotch floats over me and yank him backward again. I crush 'em up a bit for good measure. He curls around himself and groans, spinning in a crouch out to my right. Parsons is two-thirds of the way up the pearl. I go into sprint mode.

I'm sweating like a pig, swimming my ass off through nothing, surrounded by souls. While I gasp for whatever passes as air in this

place, I notice what the souls are doing. They're thinking. At least, that's what it looks like they're doing. They're spinning around the pearl thinking, and when they've thought hard enough, they either back off, flowing back toward the river, or they shoot forward and hit the pearl, cracking like eggs. I see it happen right in front of me. A soul zooms by and smacks into the pearl, spreading out like a yoke until it's absorbed and becomes part of the thing.

"Parsons! Hey! You pansy ass! Come fight me!" I scream, gasping and swimming. Hurling insults: the last refuge of the truly desperate. It's not the first time I've been here, but it's definitely the worst. Parsons doesn't buy it. I know he can hear me, but he doesn't care about me. I chance a look over my shoulder. Sure enough, there's Douglas. It's like he's on PCP. Nothing stops the guy. At least he has stubby little legs. He's not gaining on me.

But I'm gonna be too late. I know it. I think I knew it before I even entered this place. I think about what Abernathy said. How he asked if I'd ever considered whether maybe a knife that destroys the plan might also be part of the plan. True or not, right now it doesn't make me feel any better.

I scramble up the pearl, my hands and feet slipping. To either side of me, souls slam into its glossy surface. I get a little soul splashback. It's like climbing a mirror. I churn my hands and feet, anything to get speed. Then I get too much speed. I fly past Parsons at the top and let out a string of curse words. I flare out like a skydiver above the pearl, trying to slow myself. And that's how I see Parsons win—me floating above him like some sort of sweaty flying squirrel while he stands at the top of the pearl, holding on with one hand to the thin strand that connects the pearl to the top of the cavern. He watches me sail past without interest. Without joy. Without hate. He watches me like I'm a fly buzzing the picnic, on my way to do fly things.

There's a sleeve in the strand anchoring the pearl. Sort of like a pachinko machine, where you'd drop a token and watch it bounce off the pegs, only this thing has one path and one path only, and it runs down the outer side of the pearl. It's the only

seam that I can see on the pearl, which is otherwise an alien sort of perfect. Parsons takes the knife and slaps it broadside against the sleeve. He looks up at me again with his dead eyes.

"Parsons. Please. Whatever this thing is, let it lie." My voice is weak. I wouldn't convince myself. And I realize it's because I'm scared shitless again. "There's nothing but destruction in there," I say. And I know it's true.

For the first time, I think Parsons really sees me. He doesn't gloat or smile or laugh triumphantly. None of that. He actually shakes his head.

"No destruction," he says. "Only chaos." As if the two were different. As if I should understand that.

Then he drops the knife.

It slides with purpose, like it was built for that slot. An absurdly out-of-place memory hits me of when I used to play with a marble track as a kid. You dropped marbles onto it, and they'd slide up and down and around a roller coaster track depending on where you dropped them. They stuck like glue to that track. This is like that. The knife slides as smoothly as water down a spout until it hits a chunk of something, then it starts to hiss and bubble. I kick my way down after it until I get close and can see the stoppage is a chunk of rock on top of rock on top of rock like rolled steel, a lock as thick as my thigh. The kind of thing that would stand the test of eternity, unless you had the pick. And the knife is the pick. It burns into it, sizzling brightly like an acetylene torch under water. And it's working.

Before I can reach the knife, it cuts through the rock, breaking it in two. The pearl splits open a tiny bit. I see the fissure, and then I feel the fissure like the kickback of Dad's old twelve-gauge shotgun we used to shoot at yucca in the desert. I reach for the knife, but it slides out of reach, on its way down to the next lock. This one is bigger, nearly the size of my entire body. I think I can catch it there.

Unless Douglas grabs me around the neck, of course. I spin my leg around in a big, looping roundhouse kick that's meant for his face, but he catches that, too. "Dammit, Douglas! If this is how the

world ends, if it's because of guys like you, I'm gonna be really pissed off."

Douglas is smiling at me. It's a vacant, black smile shot through with brittle, white teeth. Whatever these two men once were, they aren't that anymore. They've hit ground zero. DEFCON 1. I pull the leg Douglas holds into my body and then snap out with my free foot. It's a pull-push combo, and it hits home hard. Douglas explodes off of me, spread-eagled and floating, falling, spinning until he's far out in the souls and beyond my sight.

I turn back to the knife. It's already halfway through the second lock. My own kick pushed me back a ways, so it takes me a second to get back to where I was and then far too long to get close to the knife. It's almost as if the knife is getting sharper as it cuts, like it's hitting its stride. It even looks different. It's no longer the homemade hack job I saw back in the desert. It's gone military. It reminds me unsettlingly of the scalp knife Danny Ninepoint always carried around with him. The knife that killed my grandmother and my father. And then it cuts through the second lock.

This time it's no shotgun blast that we get. It's a straight-up underwater explosion. It throws me end over end away from the pearl and out into the ether. I don't know which way is up. All I can do is spread out and hope the spinning stops, and when my body finally does stop, it takes another good while for my head to stop spinning. When I right myself, I'm at least a football field away from the pearl.

Like I said. I failed. Whatever it was I was hoping to do here, I didn't do it. Now the only thing left is to see how badly I failed.

The only comfort I have is that it looks like Parsons and Douglas were no more prepared for that explosion than I was. Douglas is about a hundred feet below me, shaking his head and treading ether like he's about to go under. I think Parsons had some sort of grand idea of standing on top of the pearl while his master plan came to be, but that ain't happenin' anymore. He got thrown damn near a hundred feet past me, and he's still spinning.

He has that floppy-rag-doll look of someone who's been knocked out.

I want to scream at them, but I don't think there's any *them* anymore. I think they've become tools, and there's no use screaming at your screwdriver. You just look like a fool. Instead I look back at the pearl. There is one more lock. This one is as big as a car. I can see the tiny white light of the knife burning through it, and it's already halfway done.

I don't know what kind of opinion you've formed of me by now. I'm sure it's not *great*, but I hope it's not garbage either. So I hope you'll understand me when I say I'm not the type of guy to go running into oblivion and believe me when I tell you that going after that knife would be oblivion right now. A stupid, foolish, admirable gesture of suicide.

That's not me.

I'm more the type of guy who says if the world is gonna end when that pearl opens, we need to find a way to tackle that problem on level footing. Not floating and spinning. In other words, I have this stupid notion that there's gonna be another day. Maybe that's what comes with a job that gives you a zillion and one days. And that's why I start booking it back toward the river entrance where I came in. My back is to the pearl when the final lock blows. I'd say it goes with about the strength of a car wreck, but I've never been in a car wreck. That's just the biggest, wrenching trauma I can think of in the silent, blue moment before the concussion wave hits me. It's like I'm a puppet getting yanked off stage, but instead of going up, I go down and out. Ass first and half-conscious, I'm flushed out of the eggcup and back into the river, along with a million souls, both agents, and—I catch a glimpse of it—the knife as well, glowing brighter than anything around me. I land on hard ground and flop around like a prize catch in some hick dynamite-fishing contest.

I black out. I'm not sure for how long but not long enough for the aching and buzzing to subside. Caroline's voice echoes in my ears, and it sounds close, but my mind has played tricks on me before where Caroline is concerned. The ground under me

shudders and keeps shuddering, which is what I think finally brings me back. I roll over on my stomach. Everything hurts in that way your body hurts before a really disgusting set of bruises shows up. The kind of bruises you have a really hard time explaining away. I'm gonna get those bruises, and I'm dead. That's how bad it is.

I expect to see the river, but what I do see is a trickle of a stream. The rest of the river is gone, and I'm lying on the dry riverbed. Splayed out not even twenty feet from me are the agents. They aren't moving. Around them a few souls linger like beached jellyfish.

In the middle of them all is the knife.

My first thought is to get to the knife, and I do try, but my body won't quite respond. I honestly think if I was alive, I'd be dead for sure after that, but since I'm already dead, my body has to adjust to being dead twice, which it isn't too happy about. I manage a few flops in the knife's direction before I have to steady my head again.

My second thought is to wonder where the hell all the souls went. There were millions of them. That kind of volume doesn't just disappear. I'm looking at one of them now like a stoned teenager, trying to piece my head together, when I hear the sound. It's a rushing sound, like a jet seconds from breaking the sound barrier. I raise my head enough to look down the river, and that's when I see the wave.

The explosion kicked everything out, but now everything is coming back, and it's coming back with force. The wave is higher than I was when I was having my pity party on top of the mesa. It's the biggest wave I've ever seen. It's a tsunami from hell.

I scramble up, forcing my limbs to get it together. I rake my hands and knees over the riverbed. I have to get to that knife. The sound is deafening, and I can feel the air sucking out like the tide would in the ocean. I throw myself toward the knife and grab it with my outstretched hand, but then I feel another hand clamp on mine. I look up; it's Douglas, his black eyes bleeding again. Then Parsons grabs it too, his eyes closed, as if feeling on instinct.

Together they raise the knife up, and I have no choice but to let them. The three of us hold the knife over the river bed as the soul wave bears down on us, and when I think I'm about to black out from the sound and the fury, I see Caroline. She's below me, through the break, like she's floating behind glass. I have to get the knife out of here. I have to get it to her. She'll know what to do, just like she did back at Chaco Rez. Just like she did with me.

I use every last ounce of strength I have to plunge the knife into the riverbed. I reach for Caroline. In my addled state, I think I actually feel her. Then the wave hits, and I lose my grip on everything.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

CAROLINE ADAMS

I'm going to be honest with you. I took up the crow totem and joined the Circle to find Ben. That's it. There it is. That's the splat of gravy on the kitchen table. Sure, I wanted to follow the rabbit hole. Sure, I was staggered by what I'd just seen with the bell and Ben dying and the crows and my sight coming into its own. All of that made me curious, but the reason I took the crow in that parking lot was to find Ben. Just like I know Owen did it to be near me.

Joey and Big Hill said looking for the Keeper would be dangerous. They said we might even die. In my line of work, I've been in plenty of situations where the doctor or head surgeon has to deliver that type of news to a patient, and when they do, usually one of two things happens: either the patient gets it, or they flat-out don't believe it.

You'd be surprised how many people flat-out don't believe that they are in the valley of the shadow of death. It's something about humans. We never believe it can happen to us. I saw it all the time back on the oncology floor. So you'd think I'd take it seriously when the warning happened to me. But *oh, no*. I thought of the Circle's warning like you think of those travel warnings the government issues at airports. *Are you feeling ill?* Yes, always. *Please notify the TSA if you are experiencing any flu-like symptoms.* I just got off an airplane. I'm a walking flu-like symptom. *You may be at risk for the H1N1 virus.* I think I'll take my chances at home, thank you. I'm a nurse. I'd know.

In other words, it could never happen to me.

But then it does. Then you realize you're gonna die on an oil rig in Midland, Texas. And Joey Flatwood's warning rings loud in your ears, and you wonder if it was all worth it. You start to stack up your life. List it—pros and cons. But you don't have time for that, because a thin stream of fiery fuel is snaking toward the blowout preventer ten feet below where you stand, and it's about to blow you and your stupid list right off the face of the earth. And you're scared shitless. So you look to your friends. And you find them looking right back at you. And then the thin scream of a rig worker stranded way up high at the top of the structure snaps you out of your inner monologue.

"Go!" he's screaming. "Run!" And you look back at Owen and you can see what he's thinking because at that moment he's the kindest, bravest, most beautiful idiot you've ever seen, and it's practically bleeding off his skin that he's going to try to save that man. He's going to tell you to run and to take Grant, and he's gonna try to maneuver his way up to the crow's nest using his totem, and he's gonna die trying to save a man he doesn't know because that's who he is. He thinks that his Hippocratic Oath somehow signed him up as a superhero and not a physician. If there's a one percent chance of saving a life, he's willing to take it. With me. With Grant. With the crows. And now with this guy, who is literally screaming at us to get away and save ourselves. The guy behind us gets it—he has a busted-up leg and he still starts shuffle-running away. But not Owen.

Owen reaches for his pocket, so I grab him. I grab him, and I kiss him. This is no little peck on the cheek, no adrenaline-fueled *let's see what it feels like* type thing, either. This one is the real deal. Now, what it means, precisely, whether I'm doing it to keep him from throwing his life away or because I'm falling for him, I don't know. That's 3:00 a.m. talk. That's not fiery-fuel-coming-at-me talk.

All I know is I want to kiss him. So I do. He freezes. His hand stops going for his pocket.

"You're staying with me," I whisper. And I pull him and Grant off the platform. With one of their hands in each of mine, I literally pull them after me, and I try to block out the screams of the poor man trapped on high. And in a lifetime of tough decisions and of dealing with those decisions, I know that this one will be the worst yet. I know those screams will tear at me forever, but I know losing Owen would tear at me more. Sometimes you have to make a goddamn choice.

We stumble down the warping metal stairs, and Grant instinctively pushes in front of us, holding the bell out straight, allowing us a chance to run into the black desert and at least giving us a fighting chance to avoid the chaos souls. I don't need to blink out to know that they are everywhere. I don't need to see the flare of the bell to know that they have saturated this place. When it blazes, Grant pulls us in another direction. We run through a minefield we can't see until Grant trips, or I trip, or maybe I'm just too exhausted to keep running, and we go down in a tumble right onto a yucca about fifty yards from the rig.

The plant slices at my arms and spears through my pants. I hit the ground hard on my wrists. I'm turned back around and facing the rig. I can see the man waving at the top, and the pain is dulled then replaced by another pain that stings me even deeper. *I'm sorry*, I think, looking at him. But I don't say it. Because that wouldn't do us any good right now. Still, I don't turn away. I feel like I owe it to the man to watch.

Owen screams something, but I'm not sure what. I'm watching the rig. And soon I have to shade my eyes, squint out to see through the blinding light of the bell. I know the souls are everywhere around us. Owen pulls me closer to Grant and tries to back away, but Grant grabs him.

"No!" Grant screams. "I have to protect you!"

"There are too many! You can't protect us. You must protect yourself. We'll be fine as long as we hold the crows!"

In a daze, I reach into my pocket and grab my crow. Owen does too. And in an instant I see that he's right. It's as if the blackest cloud of pollution you ever saw is being blended up

inches from my face. The souls are barely recognizable as individual figures anymore. Only a mass of jutting hands and heads and pressing limbs. I turn to Owen, and he grabs my hand, gritting his teeth. "Hold on as long as you can," he says, his voice warped and tinny. At our backs, Grant blazes white with the protection of the bell, but it's pressed so close to him that it's basically a sheath. We'll get no more protection there.

So it's me and the crow and the pain of the thin place. The second I let go, I know I'll be smeared into paste. But already the sting of the thin place is starting, like a dull pinch. I have this bizarre flashback to elementary school when every kid had to hold a chin-up as long as they could in PE, in front of the whole class. I held my head up until my whole body shook, then I fell to the mat below. I didn't last too long.

Already my body is starting to shake with the pain. But there's no mat below me this time. Still, I can't take my eyes off the man on the rig. It's almost worse seeing him through the lens of the thin place. His soul shines brighter. It's terrified, billowing with fear but also with relief that the three of us got away. It's like a cloud around him, as if it burns twice as bright knowing it has so little time left.

Then it blinks out. Just like that, it's gone. The rig explodes. I see it as a shattering picture of greys and greens and blacks, like a great crystal sculpture blown to pieces. It doesn't so much break apart as it fragments before my eyes into a billion different shards. The flame isn't red; it's black, but I feel it like a blistering shower. I cover my face and scream, and I hear Owen and Grant do the same. But Owen never lets go of me, and Grant never scrambles or runs. He presses closer to us, as if he could still save us, and he yells for his pap.

The initial blast of heat subsides and leaves me feeling raw and sunburned, but it doesn't stop there. My teeth are ringing with the pain of the thin place, and my eyes are watery, but I can see the souls still all around us, unaffected. A thin, splattering line of black shoots high into the sky—the oil itself, pressured to blow, and it, too, is on fire. Like a live wire straight from the guts of the

earth, it bellows black flames and rolling bursts of smoke into the air. Everything around us smells like burned hair and cloying oil. I'm gasping from the pain and the smells, and my knuckles are white against Owen's. He's tearing up beside me with the effort of holding his crow.

It's really hard to fight through pain when you know it's just prolonging the inevitable. I mean, if all that stands between you and death is pain, why the hell suffer pain? Everything I've ever said to the chemo patients who passed under my care about perseverance, grit, and positive attitudes—all of it sounds so hollow to me now. My words wash back over me, and I'm humiliated by them because I don't think I have the soul to back them up. My grip loosens.

Then Owen clamps his free hand over mine. His face is shaking, his brow ridged and sweating, his eyes nearly closed, but for the first time I think it's him that's reading me, not the other way around.

"You... never... know..." he stammers.

You never know? I want to ask him what he means, but the pain has clamped my mouth shut as sure as if I'm being fried in the electric chair. Why hang on?

Because Owen is hanging on. That's why.

"You... never... know... what..." Owen says again, until the pain courses through his face and the tendons in his neck jut out, and he throws his head back and screams, but he still hangs on.

And then I get it. I get what he's saying. And I get it because there's a *whoosh, pop* followed by a ripping war cry that I swear could have come from an entire canyon full of Navajo warriors but really comes from just one: Joey Flatwood. He's wearing nothing but leather breeches and eagle feathers, and his face is streaked in white and dotted with red. In his left hand he holds his crow totem. Under his right arm, he holds the rig worker from the crow's nest. He's carried him through the thin place, which I didn't think possible. He drops him, unconscious, to the desert floor, and still screaming, he lowers his head, his black hair streaming out behind him. He hits the cloud of chaos souls like some ancient,

powerful comet that's finally swung around the galaxy and come back for retribution. He clears through them like a wheat thresher. His cry alone is enough to make those nearest kick and squirm away.

It's like Owen was trying to say: you never know what one more second might bring.

I let go of my crow. Owen does the same, and we collapse onto the sand and let the warm desert night wash over us. Even the fuel-tinged air smells sweeter than an ocean breeze. We gulp it like water while around us Flatwood blinks in and out of the living world, each time with more speed and momentum than the last. Only minutes later he stands before us, dripping sweat, his muscles corded and shining bright with the distant firelight.

"*Ya'at'eeh*, Keeper!" he says, his face a jubilation. "Greetings!" Then he turns his face to the sky and screams, "They're here! Hill! Over here!"

I hear a thumping, lumbering sound, and for a second I think the rig is collapsing a second time. But then there's a *whoosh, pop*, and there in front of us, handkerchief in hand and on the verge of blubbering, is Big Hill the Bayou Bear.

"Friends!" he roars, reaching down and scooping all three of us up in his arms. He manages two seconds of a crushing hug before he starts sobbing. "I thought I'd lost you! But here you are. I knew the Walker chose true 'nuff when he said you was to guard the Keeper. And Keeper!" His blubbering reaches a new pitch. "Bah gawd, bah gawd, if it ain't you true and true," he says, as if he's known Grant for a lifetime. Grant, to his credit, is taking all of this in with wide-eyed appreciation. He nods numbly where I might have run screaming into the desert.

"The black souls regroup even now, Hill," Joey says, blinking in and out of view, as fast as lightning, and reappearing each time in a different place, his hands up and ready for a fight. Big Hill doesn't even seem to hear him. He's smiling and crying and snotting at the same time.

"Injun Joe come outta the air like thunder one day, and he says to me, he says, ÷Hill, we's gatherin' the Circle,' and I says,

÷Why?' And he says we gotta fight for the new kids and the Keeper, and that's all he needed to say to me 'cause I always will rememba' when the two of you stayed overn' Hill's Hill as the best time I had, and some o' the best catfishin' I ever had the privilege of fishin' was with the two of you—"

"Hill! Heads up, big man!" Joey says.

Hill looks up. "'Scuse me," he says, and he reaches into his handkerchief for his crow and blinks out. I grab my crow to watch, and Hill squares his shoulders and steps right up to a creeping line of black souls. With three swift haymaker swings, two from his right, one from his left, he belts the whole front line about twenty feet back. He turns back to us and folds his crow back away.

"Now, as I was sayin', at first when Injun Joe tells me this, I asked if you was hurt, and he said not yet but that you was fixin' to get into something soon. So this whole time I've been mixed up inside for worry. I mean, my gut wasn't right for *days* while we checked up on these thinnings. I had scuttlebutt and everything. But now we found you and—"

I think Big Hill would have gone on for a day, but he's interrupted by a spectacular cracking sound that seems to shut the whole desert up. Streaks of lightning feather the air just above our heads. Hill has to duck as tendrils of it flit right over us, and every hair on my body feels like it's doing the wave. The lightning moves toward the break, turning the desert purple.

"Hill, where are the others?" Joey asks, his voice quiet but his eyes wide and burning.

"They on their way," Hill says.

"That's good," Joey says. "We're gonna need 'em."

I hear a sound then, like the distant roar of a jet. I grab my crow and watch the lightning coalesce over the thin place, getting brighter and brighter. No more souls are dropping from the break, which should be a good thing, but in my gut I know something has gone badly wrong on the other side. A black line zips out from the break and transforms into a bird mid-flight.

"Chaco!" Grant yells, waving his hands. "We got help, Chaco! Look!"

Chaco caws three times and banks his way over to Grant. He pulls up in a whirl of feathers and settles on Grant's head. The two look at each other.

"Uh oh," Grant says, after a minute.

"What's ÷uh oh'?" Owen asks. "I don't like ÷uh oh.'"

"There's a wave comin'," Grant says. "Chaco says the Walker is on the other side of the thin place right now. Fighting for us. Against the agents. It's not going great."

I make a conscious effort not to look at Owen. Not to look at anything really, but I find myself peering hard into the dark, as if I could make Ben out across the veil. He's right there... but he's not. He's as far away as he ever was.

"We gotta make our way to the break," Grant says. "Be there for the Walker."

Chaco squawks loudly and caws three times.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of the souls now," I say. "And they're as thick as thieves under the break. We can't make it there ourselves. Even with Joey and Big Hill." But it's Owen I'm thinking of. Owen is the one who would throw himself into that mess headfirst. I didn't drag him out of a burning oil rig to see him off himself in a sea of black souls.

"Don't worry, Ms. Caroline," Big Hill says, rolling his ham-hock-sized shoulders. "Ain't no member of the Circle fights alone."

"Pardon?"

Joey Flatwood walks slowly up to the front of our line. "What my redneck friend is trying to say is that we won't be doing it ourselves." He wraps the beaded lanyard of his crow tightly around his ropey forearm. The stone hangs just off his hand, ready to grab. The wave sounds like a stampede now, a thundering herd, but below it I hear another sound: *whoosh, pop!* Then another. And another as the Circle comes to our aid. A tall African woman appears at my side, and the air broken in her arrival pushes softly at my hair. She looks tribal, with a series of thin brass rings around her neck and thick bone gauges in her earlobes. She is completely bald, and when she nods, the purple light glints off her head. She

faces the break and pulls a crow totem from her robes. It is wrapped loosely in a big green leaf.

There is another *whoosh, pop*, and an old man dressed in a three-piece suit walks out of thin air into the desert. He surveys the scene like we're standing on a chessboard. He turns to the break and twirls a cane in his right hand. At its top is a stone crow.

Whoosh, pop! A young man in fatigues drops a massive pack from his back and digs into the dirt with combat boots. He wears his crow around his neck, sandwiched between dog tags.

Whoosh, pop! A monk walks out of the sky like he's on a Sunday stroll and stops to set his feet on top of a small rock in a position that would have me falling right on my butt. He turns and smiles at me like a kid in a candy store, tucking his crow into the orange folds of his robes.

Whoosh, pop! A woman in a pantsuit and wearing high heels steps into the desert sand and sinks three inches. She steps out of them and with a gloved hand drops her crow into a designer clutch she carries at her side. She winks at me.

Again and again it's like this. Ten, eleven, twelve times. An Australian aboriginal lands twenty feet to my left and swipes a wide and perfect circle around himself with his right toe. His crow is in his hair; it seems to glow in the moonlight, wrapped in messy dreads. A small man wearing an animal pelt and with a beard so long and thick it obscures everything but his eyes steps out nearby. His crow peeks out near his chin, through his beard. He unclasps a coat that looks to be made of the wool of at least ten sheep and lets it fall to the ground before he screams bloody murder at the blackness underneath the break. I lose count of all those that arrive, each of them unique. Some elegant, some wild, but all dangerous. And all of them with one goal in mind: protecting the bell. And to do that, we gotta close that break.

The *we* strikes me as absurd. I have no place among these people, right? I mean, we've got warriors here. I'm a neurotic nurse. Not even a nurse anymore, technically. More of a neurotic RVer. I look over at Owen. He's too open mouthed to even look back, so I know he's feeling the same thing. But something about

the way each Circle member nods at us settles me. It's like we're already part of the team. Like we're at a big, crazy family reunion at the end of the world.

"*Ya'at'eeh*, Circle!" Joey cries. "Welcome! We fix the break today." It's not a question. Not an entreaty. It's a fact. We're *going* to fix the break. "We fight for the bell. We fight for the Walker. We fight for *this* place. This is *our* place." Joey scoops up some desert dust with his hand and sprinkles it over his head. He spits in his hand and wipes the paste under his eyes.

"Our place," he says again. He turns to the break. "We go."

Just like that. Not a pep talk for the ages, perhaps, but one that rings true. I know because anything that makes me want to reach up and rub dirt on my own face must be persuasive. I hate dirt.

Joey starts to run, and before he hits his second stride, he lets loose another ripping war cry of the sort I'm going to go ahead and say hasn't been heard for centuries. It's a thing taken from the top shelf of his people, dusted off, and pumped full of nitro gas. It would have sent a whole army of men running, but these things aren't men any longer. I find myself sprinting at them. Owen is right beside me, the Circle to both sides, and Grant at our heels clutching the bell in his hand. We run at them like our own rushing wave.

The chaos souls are actually drawn to us. I think they feel the energy, the coordination of the attack, and the unity of purpose, and they want to ruin it. So they come at us, and even with this crew, I can't see a way to get through the masses of black. But that's before I see how hard the Circle hits. It's the spinning cane of the older man that I see first. He's doesn't seem so old now, though, and his crow blurs in a turquoise circle like it's a flaming blue staff. When it hits the chaos souls, it shreds them like an airplane propeller. They are blown to black dust that is sucked back up and away.

Joey Flatwood is a force of nature. He walks through the thin place like it's his own personal garden and he's pruning dead leaves. He looks more at home here than he does in the real world.

The souls he hits are turned into Rorschach inkblots with the force of his fists. Even so, he's leading this charge, and there's a terrible moment where he's separated from the rest of us. The oily black pools around the back of him, and suddenly he's on an island. The bald woman yells and points, but it's too late. They're all around him, and even Joey can't guard the blind side of his back. Owen throws himself forward and lowers his shoulder into the souls, but he's thrown back. I can only watch as they reach for Joey's grip on his crow and manage to pry it away finger by finger. He fights like a bull but can't hold on and blinks back. A soul swipes at his chest, and its fingers rake into him, pulling flesh like sand. He screams and rips his crow back, blinking back in time to save himself, but he drops to the ground.

Big Hill is there. He is a human cannonball. A rolling boulder. He plows his way through the souls and reaches Joey. He picks him up like he's made of straw and sets him on his feet. He's frantic, crying and seething at the same time.

Joey shakes his head and pats Big Hill's chest. I see him nod. I am more relieved by this than perhaps anything that has happened to me on this insane day. The rest of the Circle sees Joey rise again, and a wild cheer goes up. We redouble our efforts. A host of different war cries washes over the desert, and all around me the turquoise crows glow bright in the hollow darkness of the desert in the thin place. The burn of holding the crow seems to lessen.

Grant walks past me as cool as a cucumber with Chaco bobbing along on his head. The souls shy away from him. He takes up my hand at the last second and tugs me along through a sea of chaos. I try to pull him back, but he's not having it. He shakes his head again and again.

Chaco screeches louder than I've ever heard him. The sound itself makes the press of souls back off. Grant nods in agreement. Grant says, "We only got one shot at this."

"One shot at what?" I ask. "And if you've only got one shot at a thing, maybe you should get Joey or somebody else. Anybody else."

Grant shakes his head. "Not Joey."

"Then get Owen." My mouth is dry, really dry. Not just because of the war going on around me but because I know where he's taking me. He's taking me right under the break. "Owen!" I scream.

Owen looks up from where he's attending to Joey's wound while Big Hill gives them cover. He makes toward us, but Grant shakes his head.

"Not Owen," Grant says. He tugs me along harder. Chaco turns and looks at me. He's right at my eye level, and he's doing that bird thing where his body moves with every step Grant takes, but his head stays dead still.

"We don't have much time," Grant says, pulling me faster. Now we're really in the thick of it. Grant blazes like a lighthouse, but I'm not so immune. They pull at me and go for my crow, so I tuck it under my armpit and throw my elbows like I'm breaking down a door just to take each step. Now that we're this near the break, I can hear the wave again, and it's like how I'd imagine sticking my head under the hood of a semitruck barreling down a mountain might sound. I can see up and through it now, and there on the other side I see the faint outline of three bodies. Two of them are bone white and dressed in suits. The other is Ben. They aren't moving. This evidently pisses Chaco off, because he caws about as loud as I've ever heard him caw. They shift a little bit. In the middle of the three of them sits the knife. The air smokes and bubbles around it.

We're right underneath the break now. No more souls drop through, but I know they're coming. They're coming on the crest of that tsunami I'm hearing. It's all I can hear now. The sound is so loud it's become a physical thing that vibrates my teeth and tries to push me back.

"He has to wake up. He has to get to the knife," Grant says, his voice dazed, his head cricked back all the way like he's stargazing. Chaco is staring at me. Then Grant turns to look at me too. "Chaco says you need to call him."

"Ben!" I shout. "Ben! It's me! It's Caroline! Please, Ben. You gotta get the knife."

He moves.

"Ben! Can you... can you hear me?"

The break is getting bigger. Pieces of the ground Ben lies on flake off and shift to smoke above us. I think of the last time I spoke to Ben. Of the kiss before he walked away from his body, away from me forever. They call him the Walker, but I remember the man who was dying from cancer and from the chemo that we used to try and kill it, vomiting in his back yard, giving everything he had left to try and find some closure for his family, for himself.

"Ben, we need you," I say. "I need you."

He shakes his head a bit and rolls onto his back. He's coming back, slowly. Unfortunately, so are the agents. Douglas is the fastest to orient himself. And to remember the knife. He reaches for it, and I see in his scarred face that he is intent on using it on Ben. But Ben grabs it at the same time. Ben has a better grip on the knife, and I think he's going to yank it free until Parsons makes a grab too. Then Ben is overmatched. My heart slumps. And that's when Ben sees me.

The sound is a high-pitched keening roar now. The three of them look like they're in a vacuum. Their clothes and hair are pulled back toward the force bearing down on them, and the agents' ties flip and turn. The wave is pulling everything out before it slams back in. Ben's black hair flutters out over his eyes, but he's looking at me, and I really see him for the first time in almost a year.

I wave.

I know. It's a stupid thing to do, but it's the only thing I can think of. So I wave at him like a ten-year-old girl saying hello to her grandparents. His mouth opens a little so that I think he may start to smile, but the agents yank at the knife. Whatever smile there was turns into a grimace as he strains to keep control.

"Catch," he says. Or I think he says it. I read it on his lips. All three hands slam down on the break. The knife slips through and tumbles from the sky, glinting green as it falls as if in slow motion,

spinning end over end. The agents follow it, reaching and falling through themselves, grasping after it like it's a golden coin dropped in the ocean. I step back from it, terrified to touch the blade.

Joey Flatwood catches it out of midair. His hand strikes out like a cobra, and he snatches it right by the hilt, one handed, despite his bleeding chest. The wave of souls is almost on top of Ben. I can see it like a skyscraper above him.

He reaches out for me. Reaches through the break. His hand comes through, floats in midair. I reach up and touch his finger. I swear I touch his finger. I'm not making this up. I know because it's not like I just feel the smoke of a ghost. I feel the rough fold of his knuckle and the smooth slip of his nail. Real things. He smiles at me. It's a sad smile. It's not the smile of a man who is coming back. It's the smile of a man who knows he has to go away.

Then the wave hits him, and his arm is snapped back, and he's gone in a blink. The sky shudders with a long, low rumble of thunder, and it feels like the very air is weighted down on our heads like a balloon seconds from bursting. Joey Flatwood takes the knife, jams it between two rocks at our feet, takes a big jump in the air, and lands square on the handle with both heels.

The blade snaps with a crack like lightning. The chaos souls are blown to dust and sucked instantly away. Every member of the Circle takes cover, expecting the thin place to blow apart, but the shattering doesn't come. Nothing comes. The sky eases back into itself, straightening, flattening. The break starts to knit, layers and layers of shining thread moving over and through the patch in the sky until there's nothing but the faint, vague thinning that made this stretch of desert what it is in the first place.

I don't know how long I stand staring at the empty sky. There is movement all around me, the men and women of the Circle calling roll and tending to their own injuries. I must look like a lost kid in a supermarket, but I don't care. I want to try to remember that touch. I want to think about it for a while.

Eventually Owen brings me back. He taps me lightly on the shoulder. I turn to him. He doesn't speak. No hint of anger or

jealousy mars his smoke. They might have been there once, but not anymore. Now there is understanding. And worry. And love. And a question that I don't give him time to ask, because he shouldn't have to. Not anymore. I lay my head against his chest, and he holds me.

"I love you, Owen," I say. But Owen surprises me.

"I'm not so sure you do, Caroline."

I look up at him, my brow furrowed. My mouth works, but nothing comes out. He just laughs and presses his lips to my forehead. Not a kiss, exactly, but something kinder. Something better.

"I don't know what we've got, you and I," he says. "But I'm willing to take a lifetime to figure it out."

I nod, pressing my cheek to his chest. "Me too."

"And what about these two crazies?" Grant asks, standing over by the agents, who lie still on the desert floor. Chaco squawks loudly.

"Get away from them, Grant," Owen says and reaches for his hand. He pulls him over to us. "They'll kill you as soon as look at you just to get that bell."

Grant squints at them. "I dunno. I think they might be... broken."

I creep forward with my hands raised like I expect the agents to pull a jack-in-the-box at any second, but when I get close enough to see their faces clearly, I think Grant may be right. They aren't dead, but they aren't with us, either. Their eyes are closed, but their faces look like they're being forced to watch something horrible. Douglas twitches minutely, almost as if he's trying to shake his head. Parsons's eyes flit wildly underneath their pale, black-veined lids. His mouth looks like it wants to turn down but can't.

"They both look like they want to cry or something," Grant says.

Joey Flatwood circles around and watches them with his arms crossed over his chest. His wound seems not to bother him at all. In fact, it sort of goes with his look, like a wolf or maybe a bear

swiped a claw across his pec right before Joey kicked its ass. And that's not too far from the truth.

"It's the knife," Joey says. "They put too much of themselves into it. When it broke, so did they."

I know I should throw out a "serves them right" and walk away. These two have put us through unrelenting hell for a year now. Parsons tried to kill me, and nearly did kill Owen. They're lunatics. Obsessive. They walked over us in their quest for the bell and would do it all again if they had the chance. I try to turn away and leave them for the coyotes and the rattlesnakes, I really do, and I'm sure if I were the first to turn away, the others would follow. Even now Joey looks at me, and his smoke says, *Your kill*.

But it's not in me. I surprise myself by kneeling down over Parsons, and before I know it, I'm sweeping over him with my other sight. I've never been this close to the agents without being afraid for my life, and now that they're here, I can see that they still smoke. Meaning they're not dead. Meaning they still have souls somewhere in there. Parsons's smoke is black, true, but it's a broken black now. I scoop some of it up, and it pools in my hand. I look carefully at it. There is definitely another color in there, underneath the black. I see flashes of it, like a gemstone buried in mud. It's a soft yellow. Not unlike Owen's was when I first met him. Professional. Straightforward. Meticulous.

I picture the yellow in my mind and all the things that yellow could represent. A man with a job he was proud of. A man who worked hard. Perhaps too hard. A man who was swallowed up in something but before that might have been like us. And with all this in my mind, I blow on the smoke in my hand... and the black dissipates a little. And with it, the pulsing twitch at Parsons's temple calms.

I know what I have to do.

I move around Parsons to his head, where I see his smoke at its root. I'm not sure how the soul works or where it leads, but I see a clear connection here to the other plane in everyone, and Parsons's is still roiling in broken black smoke. I put my hand on his forehead, and I hear Owen stir. He wants to come take me away

from this man. He took a bullet from this man for me once. I look up at him and smile.

"I can do this," I say. "It's what I do."

He calms himself with a big breath and crosses his arms. Chaco watches me carefully but nods.

I picture the yellow again. Parsons's yellow. Driven, practical, meticulous, perhaps overbearing. But pure, uncorrupted. Then I place my hand over his face and brush upward toward his forehead. It's a strange, plucking sensation, like I'm pulling a rotten sheaf from a head of corn, but underneath is the pure yellow. And with each inch, his tremors still, and before my eyes, his color returns. The white fills in, the black veins fade away. With one last push, I dissipate the black smoke fully, and it falls away entirely.

He calms. His body stills, relaxes into the warm desert floor. He takes a big, shuddering breath. Then he opens his eyes. They are clear and green. Owen steps forward along with Joey Flatwood, but I hold up my hand. They pause.

"Parsons?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. His eyes find me and focus then blink. He takes me in then turns his head and marks each of us surrounding him. He pushes up onto his elbows, and I step back a little bit. He rubs at his face and his eyes, then he looks back at me.

"Who the hell are you people? And what have you done to me?"

"It's a long story," I say. I try not to smile, since I know that would probably seem creepy to a man who just woke up from a nightmare to find himself in the desert surrounded by a strange host that includes an Indian, a man as big as a hill, and a boy with a crow on his head.

He looks over at his partner, still on the ground, still twitching.

"Allen?" he asks, trying to get up and nearly collapsing. "Hey! Allen!" He turns to me, frantic. "Is he okay? What have you done to him?"

"He'll be fine, soon enough. We didn't do anything to him. We're here to help you. What is the last thing you remember,

Parsons? Think back to the last thing you did. What case you were on."

Parsons looks strangely at me. "Case?"

"Yes, you were tracking a man named Joey Flatwood. You thought he was running drugs."

"Flatwood? Drugs? What the hell are you talking about? Allen and I are archivists."

"Get the fuck outta here," Owen blurts out in the dead silence that follows. I glare at him. He coughs. "Sorry, it's just... you guys? Librarians?"

"Not librarians, *archivists*." Parsons stands slowly and dusts his hands off. He walks carefully over to Douglas, and I see the worry in his eyes. He gasps at the scarred claw marks that rake Douglas's face. I move over to Douglas and start focusing to find his hidden color. I hear Owen talking in the background of my mind.

"It's just that we thought you guys were FBI agents. You had badges and suits. And you were pretty handy with a gun," he says. "For a librarian."

I see Douglas's color. It's a pale blue. I almost think I have it wrong, because what I see is a kind-hearted man, gentle, not at all in line with the brutish thug I know. If anything, he is too meek. Too soft-spoken. The type of man who would take easily to being told what to do. I focus on that color and push away his darkness. He comes back to us by degrees just like Parsons did. Even the scars on his face fade, although they don't disappear altogether.

Parsons drops to his side and grabs his hand. "Allen? Can you hear me, Allen?"

Douglas opens his eyes. They are clear and blue, not unlike his smoke color, with no hint of the trauma that left him bloody. The hard lines of his face are gone. The scars are soft pink. His entire person has softened.

"James? What happened?" He slowly sits up, with our help. He looks all around him at the desert night. "Where are all the books? Oh, dear. Did I have too much wine again?"

Parsons pauses. He looks over at me, still holding Douglas's hand. "That's it. Books. We were at work. We do work for the

government but not like you think. We're senior archivists at the Library of Congress. Which I take it is not anywhere near where we are right now."

"You're in the west Texas desert," Grant says.

"That's a long way from the stacks in DC," Owen adds.

"Yes!" Parsons says. "The stacks! We were retrieving a book in the restricted stacks! It was a little thing, almost like a lady's black book or something. A strange thing. It was unmarked..."

"Yes," Douglas says, nodding. "It was an old, leather-bound book. I remember pulling it from the stacks, and taking it from its sheath, and handing it to you, and... that's it."

"I tried to read it, to check it was the correct volume, but every page was blank. I felt very odd, though, like the words were just out of sight. Looking at it made me feel a little ill, so I put it away. And then I heard something. Something calling my name. I *felt* something. Right there with us. And..."

"And?" Owen prompts.

"And that's it. Just like Allen. Here I am. In the desert. With a splitting headache."

Each of us mutters a curse in our own way. We were that close. Whatever it was Parsons and Douglas retrieved, it is the key to understanding this whole thing. The attack on the veil. The knife. Their obsessive mission. All of it. Without it, we're just shell-shocked survivors of a battle we don't quite understand. I see the colors around me, the smoke of the Circle, dampened by disappointment. Only Grant seems undaunted.

"Well, where did you put it away?" he asks.

Parsons looks over at him, at the crow on his head, and blinks. "Put it away?"

"The book. You said you put it away. Before the other thing came up on ya."

"Yes..." Parsons pats at his pants pockets, then his jacket pockets, then reaches into his breast pocket. He freezes.

"Oh, shit," he says, his eyes wide. He slowly pulls his hand out, and in his grasp is a small, leather-bound book, black as night,

about the size of an address book. "I took it from the stacks," he whispers.

All of us stare at it. Chaco shivers his feathers. I sense no power in the book itself, no malice, but it is a heavy thing, despite its size. It has weight to it that spans across the planes, just like the bell, although if the bell is like solid silver, this is like solid lead.

The book might look blank to others but not to me. Its title is written in smoke that I can see quite clearly. It says *The Book of the Dark Walker*.

"Oooh, James," Douglas says quietly. "You are *so* fired."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

THE WALKER

I'm gonna let you in on a little secret.

I wanted the knife for myself.

Yes, I know it was ripped unwilling from the vein of the earth. Yes, I know that the turquoise was perverted when the agents hammered and chipped it into a weapon. Yes, I am aware that it nearly destroyed the balance between the living world, the thin world, and the world of the dead. All of this I know.

But it was a key. It was my way out, back into the land of the living, if I so chose. Not sayin' I would choose that, but it'd be nice to have in my back pocket. The whole time I was getting my ass kicked by Douglas then stranded on top of the mesa then chasing after the agents down the river, in the back of my mind I was thinking, *How can I get these assholes out of here but keep that knife?*

Then Caroline looked at me, and all that went out the window. That's all it took to give it up for the greater good. She looked at me, and I *think* she even touched me. I knew then the only way I could stop the balance from breaking and the world from spinning out of control was to give her the knife. So I did. Like a prisoner who finally snatches the cell keys from the wall then decides to chuck them out the window.

At least I didn't have long to think about it. A tsunami of souls smashing into your body will do that to you. Back at Chaco Rez, we'd usually get one or two big snowstorms every winter, and afterward Gam, Mom, and Dad would take Ana and me to this

place south of the Arroyo where the basin leveled out but there was still a good-sized hill for sledding. We'd drive through the Arroyo proper to pick up Joey, and Gam would stop by to check on a few people. At the time I thought this was just her seeing friends, but looking back on it, I think Gam wanted to make sure the Arroyo old-timers survived the storm, which wasn't a given back then and ain't a given now either. Then they'd set up camp at the top of the hill with the other families and watch the three of us kids sled and sled and sled. I mean hundreds of times. All day long. And every time we'd make sure they were watching, and they'd wave and then go back to their knitting or their beers or their magazines.

Ana was just little, so she couldn't do much more than roll around and slide a little down the hill, but Joey and I built big jumps and competed with each other for who could take the one good tube down the hill fastest and get the biggest air. One time we built a kicker too well. This thing was perfect. Joey wanted to be the first down, but I grabbed the tube from him and got a running start and everything just came together. I was flying. Then I hit the kicker and basically rag-dolled. I lost my gloves before I even hit the ground, and when I did hit, I lost my boots and my hat and my jacket ripped open. I was spinning and spinning and spinning, and then all of a sudden I couldn't breathe, there was a huge thump, and everything went white.

That's what it was like when the wave of souls hit me. If I had gloves, they'd be halfway across the world right now. If I had a hat, it would be in another dimension. On the hill, turns out I couldn't breathe because I had snow in my throat, and everything went white because I was stuck ass up in a big drift at the bottom. My throat opened after a panicked half minute, and Joey was there to pull me out of the drift. Gam patched me up. We kept sledding.

This time what chokes me is the weight of billions of individual images. The imprints of thousands upon thousands of souls. I'm crushed by them without them ever weighing me down, and this time there's nobody to pull me out. The pure emotional attack is

too much even for me to take—and I walk a map of souls for a job. Thankfully I still have that fail-safe off switch: eventually I just black out.

When I come around again, I'm back in the cavern. The wash has driven me all of the way down and under again. I'm floating around like a dead fish near the top, where the pearl is connected to the eggcup by that long strand. I actually bump my head against the pearl. It's what wakes me up, and it's not forgiving.

When I look around, it seems to me like everything is back to normal. The souls have settled in their own way and are back to their slow spinning circle around the pearl, and after blinking and rubbing my face to get some sense back, I kick off toward the inlet where the river lets off. Two visits to this weird-ass chaos globe are plenty for me. I'd be perfectly fine never seeing this place again.

It's only when I chance a look back over my shoulder to see the whole of the cavern one last time that I notice that things are definitely *not* back to normal. As a matter of fact, things may never be normal again.

The pearl has split wide open. I couldn't see it from the back, but it's opened like a massive clam from the front, right down the seam where the knife blew through those locks. I sort of float there, staring at it for a minute. Once I'm reasonably sure it's not gonna blow up on me again, I swim toward it.

I stop at the edge of the pearl. The shiny veneer is pretty thin, actually, only an arm's length or so deep on a thing the size of a domed football stadium. The rest of it looks like it's made up of thick, black coral pitted and grooved with tiny rivulets and pathways, almost like veins, leading from the outside inward.

I look back toward the inlet, where the shore lies just beyond. Nothing but floating silence out there. I look back inward, to the center of the pearl. Nothing but floating silence in there, either. And when you're stuck between two empty places, you'd be surprised how willing you are to check out the one you haven't seen. Even if it is spooky. Either way, whatever the agents wanted is in here. I'm not leaving until I figure out what it is.

I kick along with one hand lightly touching the inner wall. I get sensations from the touch that are sort of like when a soul hits me but less powerful, more diluted. As if these thousands of capillaries etched along the inside of the pearl are sifting the emotions and echoes, refining them. The grooves get bigger the deeper I go. Soon they are the thickness of my arm, then my leg, then my whole body. When I see a vein the size of a car, I start to sweat. This thing is looking more and more like the shell of a living creature. I kick harder, shooting toward the center. The veins get bigger and bigger, and soon they're the size of a school bus... and then they stop.

By now the light from the souls floating around outside is very weak, so it takes me a second to see what happened. The main veins collapse very quickly into a hundred different cones. The cones start wide, but they narrow fast, and as I swim forward, I see them for what they are. Needles. They're essentially needles that channel the chaos souls from the outside, refine them, and then shoot them right to the center.

I want out of here.

I'm tearing forward to see what's there, then I'm getting out. This whole place is messing with me, scattering my thoughts. I can hardly keep moving in a straight line. Even the echo of what was here is enough to muddle my brain. I focus on swimming. I focus on things I know. Ana, Joey, Owen, Caroline.

And then I'm there. I'm at the center of the pearl. And what finally makes me turn around, what makes me hightail my ass out of there at double the clip I went in, isn't that I find what the agents wanted. It's that I find nothing at all.

Literally, I find a hollow. But it's a hollow in the shape of a person. All the chaos energy from all the souls that have ever existed gets shot into here. Right into this hollow. And the hollow is empty.

The locks weren't set on the pearl to keep something from getting in. They were set to keep something from getting out.

And now it's out.

*

I'm following footprints in the sand, and they aren't mine. I noticed them as soon as I kicked my way out of the river of souls and got back to the beach. At first they were hard to follow because the ever-changing landscape at the chaos end of the river messed around with their placement. The earth shifted under me, and I lost them for a time. But I reasoned that whatever came out of the pearl was on its way down the beach, so I ran, figuring I'd pick them up again after I got out of the crazy fun-house nightmare of the chaos end of things.

I was right. Now that the riverbank is more level and the world isn't bucking under me, I can see that the footprints are human. Look to be male. The gait is such that it's a tall guy, or a man running, but the pressure points don't suggest running. Just a big fella with a big stride.

Just when I'm about to congratulate myself for the old cop instincts kicking in, the footprints change. I don't mean change pace. I mean they change entirely. Now they're children's footprints, barely bigger than the palm of my hand, and they indicate a quick step. Then, impossibly, the tiny footprints space farther and farther apart until this child is walking with the gait of a giant. Then something bigger than a giant. Then they change again. I stop and stare at the print where the change happens. The front half is the print of a child's toes. The back half is a hoof. I stare at that one for a while. The next print is a full-on hoof. Then the hoofprints are spaced wildly apart.

Then come the claw prints. I break out in a cold sweat at these. No way around it. They give me the shivers, which is why I nearly bury my head in the sand when I hear a snapping sound and see a dark line shoot out of the river like an obsidian spear chucked from below. I'm seriously halfway dug in with my feet before I realize it's just Chaco. He spies me and soars my way.

"Hate to cut your vacation short, Walker," he says, "but there are, like, a hundred thousand souls backed up in the pipes here, man, and you gotta get back to work."

"How'd you get here? I thought I sealed the break. Not that I'm not overjoyed to see you."

"I'm a thinning. I can travel through all thin places. I don't need no stinkin' break. But seriously, what the hell are you waiting for? The veil is almost back to one hundred percent..."

He trails off as he gets closer to me and sees the dark imprints of the tracks. This claw print would be hard to miss, even from the air. He flutters down to my shoulder, and we stare at them for a second.

"Who let the dinosaur in?" Chaco says, finally.

I point my finger down the way I came. "Dinosaur-thing, goat-thing, demon-spawn child-thing, big-ass man-thing. Lots of things."

"And one thing," Chaco says. We follow the trail in silence. The claws dig huge rivets in the sand... until they don't. About a hundred yards down, they change into a man's footprint again in a single step. They continue for another ten paces, then they disappear. I look at Chaco, and he takes off, shooting down the beach toward dead center, where I left the veil. He flies for a time, sweeping low, his head snapping this way and that, as if he's looking for a mouse to eat. He goes on down until I can't see him anymore. Then, after a time, he comes back. He pumps his wings to gain speed then flares out right before me to plop on my shoulder again.

"Nothing," he says.

"What? What do you mean nothing?"

"I mean nothing. Nada. Zilch. No more tracks. Not at the veil, not past the veil, not anywhere."

"You're telling me this thing just disappeared?"

Chaco is eyeing the tracks with unblinking bird focus. "He didn't use the veil. And he didn't cross over through a thin place, because I would know. So... yeah. He pretty much disappeared. I don't get it."

"Great. I thought you got everything. That's been our MO. I fuck around and nearly destroy the world, and you patch it all up after me with your timeless wisdom."

"You fuck around with the best of intentions, of course," Chaco says, absently.

"Of course."

"Where the hell did this thing come from, Walker?"

"A big pearl in the chaos eggshell."

"Say what?"

"It came from inside a big black pearl at the chaos end of the river."

Chaco snaps his head back to me. "What did you say?" He sounds deadly serious. "Did you say a big black pearl?"

"Yes, bird. That's what I'm saying."

He walks slowly along my shoulder until he is inches from me, then he tilts his beak down and walks closer until his feathered head and beady eyes are centimeters from mine.

"I want to be very clear here. Super-duper clear. This thing came from inside the black pearl? You're sure of it?"

I've tilted my head back as far as it goes, but Chaco doesn't move. He stares me down.

"Yes! The agents broke the locks to the pearl with the knife. It blew us out of the chamber when they broke. We fought for the knife on the riverbed, and I tossed it through. The tsunami hit me, and I blacked out. When I came to, I was back in the chamber. The pearl was open. I swam inside to have a look around and found a sort of sarcophagus thing that looked like it once held a man. I swam out here and found these tracks."

Chaco stares at me for a good ten seconds.

"So what is it?" I ask.

"I don't know." That's twice now Chaco has been stumped, and it feels as unnatural as these claw prints look. "The pearls anchor the river. Chaos on one side and order on the other. It's been that way since the dawn of time. Since before the dawn of time, actually, because I came around at the dawn of time, when the river started wearing away at its banks and bed, which rivers will do, and created the first thinning. Yours truly."

"So this thing is... older than you?"

"I didn't even know there was a *thing* there. I've only ever seen the pearls. I thought they were just inanimate lightning rods for their respective types of souls. Maybe inside was millions of years of soul goo. That's it. It never occurred to me that an entity could be in there. Much less an entity that makes tracks like this."

"So we know where it came from," I say, trying to talk through things, to order them in my mind and keep me from running around doing something stupid—which is usually what happens when I panic. "The next question would be—"

"Where the hell did it go?" Chaco says, taking the words from my mouth.

And this is one question that shuts us both up.

*

I get back through the veil. Actually, the veil seems all too eager to get me back on the other side of it where I belong. It basically pulls me in and through itself once I get within arm's length of where it billows at the middle of the river, robustly red once more. I fall out on my ass in the middle of the desert, right where the thick of the mess happened. I see the whole gang still here, patching themselves up, gathering themselves, but once again, I'm in my own world. They can't see me, they can't hear me, and they can't touch me.

Yep. The good ol' days are back again.

The first thing I notice is that the agents don't look like the agents anymore. They look more like overworked accountants, and they're talking to the Circle members like they've never seen anything like them before. I know immediately that this is Caroline's doing. That she fixed them or helped them in some way, because that's what she does, what she was made for.

Then I find Caroline. She stands next to Owen. He has his arm around her shoulder. Between them is Grant, and I don't need to case the place to realize that the Keeper has a new family now.

I try to get jealous. I try to get pissed. I can't do either. But I do ache. My body aches, and my heart aches. I don't begrudge Owen anything. That man has been a class act since day one. But I

do begrudge his arm. The arm that he has resting around Caroline when mine would pass right through her. It's the little things that get to you.

Chaco is already resting on Grant's head. "He's right over there," Chaco says, nudging his beak my way. Grant stares into the open space that is me on the side of the living, and he gives a small wave. He smiles, too. It's an awesome smile. I wave back, even though I know damn well he can't see me.

Caroline asks him who he's waving to. "Nobody," he says. Which tells me he's more perceptive than I thought. That maybe he figured out about this whole mess of hearts without anyone saying anything and doesn't want to get involved. But Caroline knows. She looks my way too, and she smiles. It's exhausted and a little sad, but it's genuine. It hits me that she's sad for me. Caroline feels sorry for me.

If you ever want to light a fire under a Navajo's ass, or under any red-blooded man's ass, really, all you gotta do is tell them you feel sorry for them.

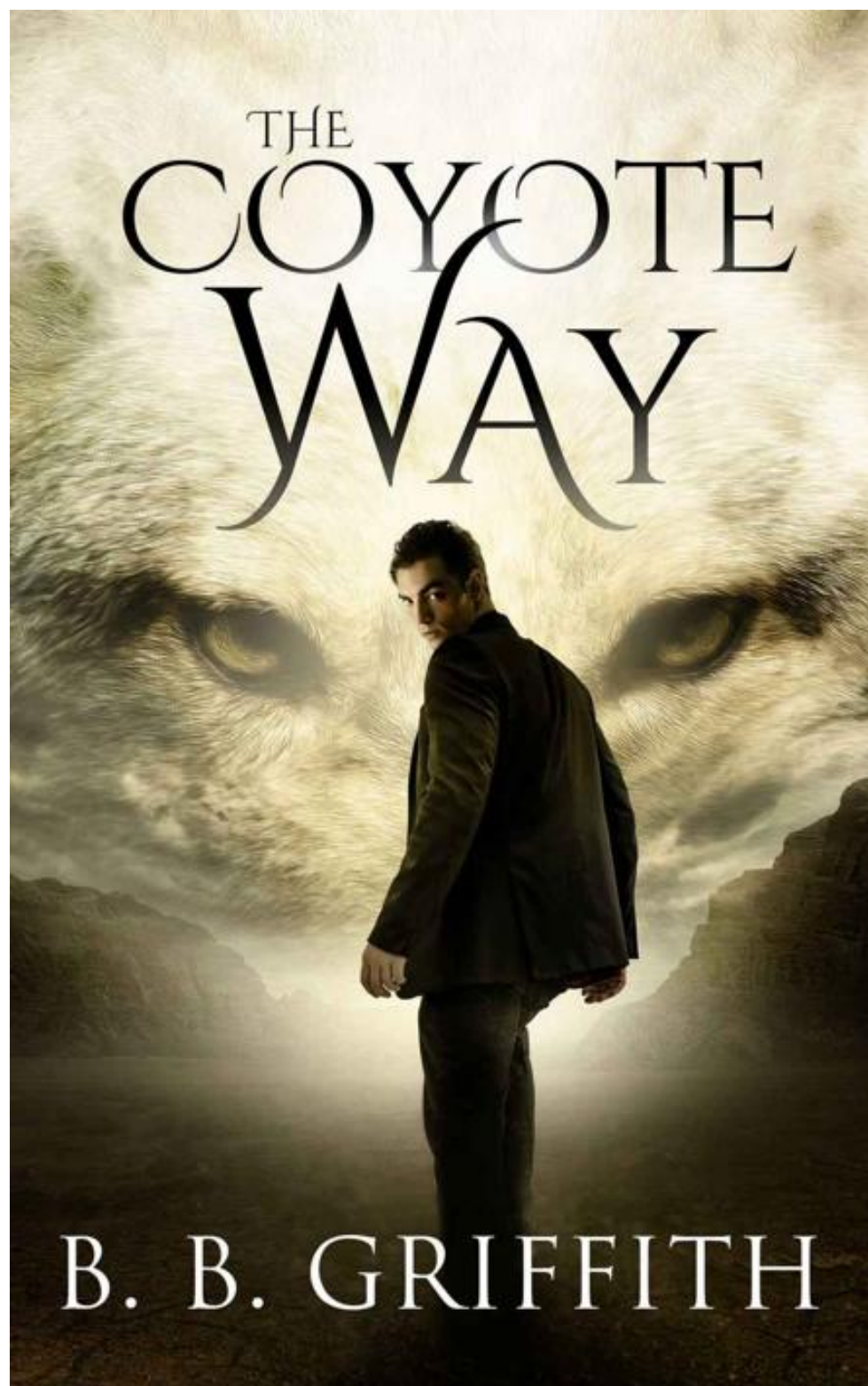
I straighten up. I roll my shoulders back until I hear a crack. I ball my fists. Chaco looks at me and puffs up as well.

I got work to do. I got souls to settle. Then I got a monster to find.

And since you've been along for this whole ride so far, I might as well stick with the honesty thing. I want to find this creepy Other Walker for two reasons: First, because I want to right the balance of the river. It won't do to have millions of souls swirling around an empty pearl for too much longer. Even I know that.

Second, because I want to see what it is. Specifically, how it can just flit in and out of worlds. And I've got a completely selfish motive for this one. I've got a strong hunch, a near certain hunch, that this thing, whatever it is, is walking the world of the living.

And if it can walk with the living, maybe one day I can too.



OceanofPDF.com

THE COYOTE WAY

VANISHED: BOOK THREE

B. B. GRIFFITH

GRIFFITH PUBLISHING
DENVER

OceanofPDF.com

THE COYOTE WAY - TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter 1: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 2: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 3: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 4: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 5: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 6: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 7: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 8: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 9: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 10: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 11: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 12: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 13: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 14: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 15: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 16: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 17: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 18: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 19: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 20: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 21: Caroline Adams</u>
<u>Chapter 22: The Walker</u>
<u>Chapter 23: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 24: Owen Bennet</u>
<u>Chapter 25: Grant Romer</u>
<u>Chapter 26: Caroline Adams</u>

[Chapter 27: Owen Bennet](#)

[Chapter 28: The Walker](#)

[Chapter 29: Owen Bennet](#)

[Chapter 30: The Walker](#)

[Chapter 31: The Walker](#)

[Chapter 32: Owen Bennet](#)

[Chapter 33: Grant Romer](#)

[Chapter 34: The Walker](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

To Ayo. Welcome to the family.

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

“Coyote is always out there waiting, and Coyote is always hungry.”

-Navajo Proverb

[**OceanofPDF.com**](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CHAPTER 1

THE WALKER

There is a room at Green Mesa Psychiatric Hospital in Los Alamos, New Mexico, called the Serenity Room. Attendants deliver medicine in soft whispers, waking dozing patients only when they must. Some patients read, some mutter, some simply sit by the huge bay window that faces the chunky orange cliffs of the Pajarito Plateau. The Serenity Room is a place set outside of the day-to-day, where the driving white noise the world makes as it turns can't be heard. Where the sick can live out the remainder of their troubled lives undisturbed.

Then I walk in.

I do my job alone—nobody can see me or hear me or touch me—but over the past six years that I've walked the soul map, snipping frayed threads and sending the dead through the veil and on their way, I've noticed that some people do seem to sense me. For instance, babies don't much like it when I'm near. They start fussing pretty bad. Everyone in the living world can pass right through me, but once a blind guy in Rome walked around me. I stood there blinking like a sheep while he went on his way. A deaf woman at a call I answered in Reno, Nevada, pricked her ear my way when I was talking to myself. I swear that sometimes the very old can track me with their milky eyes, although I'm not sure they know what they're looking at. Stuff like that. But by far the most perceptive are the insane.

The two men who were muttering to each other in the corner a second ago? Now they're crying. The woman who was putting

together a puzzle, one that she's been working on diligently for nearly a year? Now she's dismantling it piece by piece. The young man who's been reading the same book over and over again for months? Now he's ripping the pages out and letting them flutter to the floor. It's because of me. Because of what I am. I make them uncomfortable when I'm nearby. They're already half in and half out of the world they live in. They fight every day to cling to whatever frayed strings of sanity they have left, and I'm the type of guy whose job it is to cut threads.

The staff can't figure out why this happens every so often, and they never will. They can only curse under their breaths and scamper around trying to keep these delicate people from falling apart like dried flowers in a sudden wind. One of these dried flowers, perhaps the most delicate of all, is my mother.

You heard that right. Death has a mom.

Mom sits in a decorative wheelchair with a plump pillow at her back, staring blankly out of the bay window at the soft pink New Mexico sunset. When she left us, not long after Ana died, she cut her long black hair short and spiky. It's grown out again now, down past her shoulders, and it's as white as snow. She neglects it, but her attendants don't. It's pulled back and banded behind her head with a beaded leather thong. One of the handful of things she kept from her life before. Something Ana made in school. She wears a clean and neat dressing gown of blue and gold, one of several that the staff rotate throughout the week.

She's not sickly looking, or gaunt. Her skin still has that Navajo cinnamon coloring, even if it's a bit ruddy at the cheeks. In a lot of ways, she looks just like the woman she was back when we all lived in one half of a little duplex on Chaco rez, about an hour north of Albuquerque. The same woman who bundled Ana and me up for the walk to school, who packed our lunches and washed our clothes. Who helped Gam cook dinner and kept Dad's drinking at bay. Who tanned my hide when I chipped a tooth racing around the campers out at the Arroyo at dusk, Joey and I weaving in and out, slapping the corrugated metal of each with the flat of our hands and tearing off before we got something chucked at us,

laughing like hell. Our twenty-first-century, dirt-poor version of counting coup.

On the outside she looks just like she did back then, just older. Inside, she's a mess. Many of the patients around her fuss and fidget and mewl as I walk toward her. She takes no notice. Just stares forward until her eyes water and she's forced to blink.

I come here a lot in between calls, but not because I feel I owe it to Mom. I know that she's well taken care of at Green Mesa, which is just about the cushiest extended-stay psychiatric hospital in the Southwest. They have cucumber water *and* lemon water *and* lime water in the front lobby. Water trickles into little ponds, and fountains burble everywhere. The only people who work harder than the doctors around here are the groundskeepers. The place costs a fortune, but the Navajo Nation is footing Mom's entire bill. Medical costs, room and board, extra expenses, the whole thing. The Council took pity on her after she lost everyone. With the Navajo, you take your mother's clan. The Dejooli branch of our clan is going to end with her. It sucks, but in a twisted way it's kind of fitting. Dejooli is Navajo for *up in the air*. I always took it to mean *gone*.

So Mom hasn't paid a dime since the day she got here, almost six years ago now. Good thing too. Mom's broke. But worse than that, she no longer has the wherewithal to pay anything anyway. I don't even think she knows where she is anymore. The day Ana disappeared, Mom started to fade. She backed away from Chaco, and eventually from the Navajo Way altogether. I found Ana, eventually, right as I died. Turns out she was the one who came for me, to take me away, just like I'm the one who will one day come for you. Except I rang a special bell, took her job, and set her free. Mom was already cracked, but when she saw that happen, it broke her.

I take a seat next to her, away from the rest of the patients, who start to settle now that I've settled myself and it turns out I'm not coming for them. I'm barely taller than her, and only slightly thicker. Danny Ninepoint, my old partner back at the Navajo Nation Police Department, used to say that I have tricky muscles,

which was his way of saying I look like a wuss but somehow could still hold up my end of a fight. I still wear an NNPD uniform, but it's all black now. It looks out of place, here. I think there's some sort of rule against the color black at Green Mesa.

"Hi, Mom," I say, knowing full well she won't answer. She continues to stare out of the window. Her right finger twitches a little. I cross my arms and watch as a murder of crows spans the horizon, flying away. It's midsummer. Not crow season in this part of the country. But lately the crows have been gathering anyway. Which is never a good sign.

When Mom first came to Green Mesa she didn't need a wheelchair. She was in a state of shock from losing her family, but she was functional. She even showed signs of getting better. She made a few friends, spoke to each of the attendants and doctors by name, had a few lunch dates at the fancy buffet, but then, just about a year after her arrival, she started going downhill. Stopped smiling, then stopped talking. She eventually stopped eating on her own, and then stopped walking. The doctors are at a loss, but I'm not.

Right around the time she started to withdraw, a turquoise knife nearly ripped a hole in the fabric between our worlds. Caroline, Owen, Grant, and I managed to shore it up, but not before something came through. I think she felt it. As whatever *it* is grows in strength, she is weakening.

It is some form of chaos. That's all I know. Since it broke through into the land of the living, it's disappeared, but I think it has some sort of connection with sick people like her. Broken minds are attuned to it. My mother more than most. She's had more exposure to my line of work than your average mental patient. Hell, both of her children ended up as Walkers. She was there when the bell rang and I started my watch. She shares my blood. So you see, I have an ulterior motive here. These visits aren't just one-sided social calls. Mom is a canary in a coal mine.

I look over at her again. Her pointer finger is twitching still, more like scratching now. I try to put my hand over it, to calm it. I pass right through her. Her eyes water, and she blinks free a

rivulet of tears. It rolls down her cheek. I try to brush it, but my finger cannot touch her.

"I know, Mom. I can feel it too. Whatever's been simmering for the past five years is about to come to a boil. The chaos thing, the Dark Walker, it's making its move, but I can't find it. Chaco can't find it. Nobody can find it."

I watch the crows wheel and float in the distance like a flock of starlings, which is entirely unlike them. The sun is setting with this feeling of pressure, like it's trying to jam itself into a horizon that's already full up and ready to spill. I think about the river of souls. Five years' worth of souls following a path down the chaos side of the river, swarming around an empty pearl. We stitched up the walls between worlds, but the balance of the river is off. The thing that anchors the chaos end of things is walking free as you please in the world of the living, has been for years now, and it's eluded all of us.

When I turn back to Mom, she's looking right at me. I nearly jump up from my seat. Her finger is still. Her eyes are focused. The canary senses something coming from the depths of the mine.

"Go home, Ben," she whispers in Navajo.

I reach for her again, my hands shaking. These are the first words she's spoken in years, and the first Navajo words I can ever remember her voluntarily speaking. I reach out as if I could grab them, maybe keep them in my pocket. She still looks at me.

"Go home," she says again. She uses the old Navajo word *Bikeyah*, which means *homeland*. The place of my people. Then she turns slowly to the window again, where the crows have disappeared into the gloaming.

"Mom?" I ask. "Mom, can you hear me?" I repeat myself again in Navajo. Nothing. Her face is blank once more. But my canary has spoken, and moments later I get a tug from the soul map. I stand and swirl it open then turn back to her. My mind races. These things are connected. I raise my hand in a farewell she's blind to, then I step through.

I walk the rope of intertwined souls, looking for the break that calls me, looking for the dimming of a life that needs to be set free.

I see it, like a flickering bulb in a sea of warm light. I step up to it, swirl the map open once more, and by this time I have a pretty good hunch about where I'm going to step out. It's the *why* that I can't figure.

The day is coming to a close, but the desert is still hot under foot. It creaks a little, like a massive settling house, with the roof open to a sky that goes on forever. It smells like baked clay and untouched wind. It smells like home.

I'm back on the rez.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

CAROLINE ADAMS

I'm about the last girl on earth you'd pick as having a little black book. Seriously. You could count on one hand the number of guys I've hooked up with, and you wouldn't need your thumb. To be fair, I'm not exactly hitting the scene these days. I hang out in an RV with two people most of the time, and one of them is a fourteen-year-old kid with a bird for a best friend. The other is Owen Bennet. If what I carried actually *was* a little black book, his name would be the only entry on any of the pages for the past five years, which would make it less of a "little black book" and more of a "penmanship exercise," but like I said, what I carry isn't a little black book.

Sure, it *looks* like one. It's small, thin, and bound in black leather (or at least what I really hope is black leather), but it's also a key. A clue. A map. Some sort of Rosetta stone that can help explain what came through to our world when the barriers broke down all those years ago. The cover says *The Book of the Dark Walker*. Ben is called the Walker too. What I'm really hoping is that somewhere inside I'll find a little bit about Ben Dejooli, about how his world works, maybe even how I can reach him. I don't tell Owen about this last part, of course, but I don't have to. He knows. And it makes me feel like a bad person.

"Does that make me a bad person?" I ask James Parsons, heretofore Agent Parsons and now of AJ's Villa, a four-star bed-and-breakfast on the West Sound of Orcas Island in upstate

Washington. It's a bit of a bear to get here, if you're not traveling by crow. That's exactly why James and Allen chose it.

"Well, it doesn't make you a *great* person," James says. He's setting the breakfast table. It looks like they have two couples staying with them.

"It's not my fault I'm the type of girl who needs closure. Ben and I shared something that changed me, but he died before I could figure it out," I say, flopping down on one of their puffy living-room chairs that face the bay.

"Did you just blame a guy for dying of cancer?" James asks. He adjusts the alignment of a fork.

I put my head in my hands. "God. Maybe I really am a bad person."

"Don't listen to him, Caroline," Allen chirps from the kitchen. I hear the sizzling of eggs and bacon and the clunk of the oven door opening and closing. "He's just grumpy. It's completely normal to take five years to figure out where your heart lies."

I hear the *glugluglug* of coffee being poured. Allen Douglas comes around the corner with two mugs. He uses neutral cover-up to mask the light-pink scarring that Chaco left on his face back when Allen was trying to kill all of us. He's gained weight since then too. Happy weight. He holds one cup out to me.

"I can't tell if you're being serious or not." I take a sip. The mug is a ceramic pineapple. The decor here is a little too tropical for my tastes. The San Juan Islands always struck me as more *hot toddy* while AJ's is clearly channeling *mai tai*. But their coffee is outstanding, and Allen is a heck of a cook, and the view ain't bad, either. I watch the sunrise over the choppy waters of the sound, always hoping to see an actual orca. I haven't seen one yet, but I do see lots of crows. Even way out here. I phase over here sometimes when living in an RV day after day with Owen and Grant starts to grate on me. Don't get me wrong, I love the guys, but Owen is too bright to be as bored as he is, and Grant is... well, Grant is fourteen.

"I *am* being serious," Allen says, sitting down for a moment then getting right back up when something dings in the kitchen.

"Just look at the two of us. This took five years," he says over his shoulder.

"That doesn't count. You were in a fugue state," I say.

"I'm just saying," he calls back.

"Have you at least gotten rid of that disgusting book?" James asks, turning to look at me. I reach involuntarily to my jacket pocket. He notices.

"Caroline Adams," James says, in a remarkable imitation of my mother. "What did I tell you about bringing that thing into our house?"

"It's not gonna hurt you. It doesn't *do* anything. That's the problem."

"You mean besides push you and Owen apart? When it's not brainwashing people?" He lowers his voice and glances toward the kitchen. These two hate the book, with good reason. They were following it when they broke through beyond the veil, but whatever they saw in it has been wiped away, along with their memories. Allen in particular is terrified of it. He has the scars as souvenirs.

"I can't just throw it away," I whisper. "It's says it's the *Book of the Dark Walker*. What if it helps us catch that thing that came through?"

"It's blank inside, Caroline. Has been for five years," James whispers. "Whatever we were reading, it's gone."

"What if it comes back?"

"If you ask me, I think you're less interested in finding whatever came though and more interested in seeing if it'll tell you how to find a certain Walker in particular. One named Ben Dejooli."

I can't claim otherwise, so I hide behind a big sip of coffee. I dream sometimes that it's a two-way journal. That I write things in it and they go to the other side and Ben can read them, and that Ben can write things in it that I can read. Things about that last kiss we shared before he died. Or the time our fingertips touched through the thin place. Chaco says the agents followed it like a

map when they were beyond the veil. A map can lead to a lot of things. Maybe even to Ben.

"Are you two whispering?" Allen asks, bringing out steaming bread in a covered basket in one hand and a plate of food in the other. James turns back to the place settings. I prolong my sip of coffee.

"This is about that awful book, isn't it?" Allen asks primly, setting the bread basket down with a bit more force than necessary. "We already told you we can't read it. I don't even remember carrying it. It's blank to us too, and God willing it will stay that way forever."

"I'm sorry Allen. I just..."

"Can't let it go. I know. But be careful. That's how it starts." Allen pats my shoulder kindly. "Now eat. Before the guests come down and we have to explain you away. You look thin."

"I'm definitely not thin. You should see Owen. *That* is thin." But I take a hefty bite anyway as Allen refills my coffee.

"Maybe it's those crow totems," James says, sitting down next to me. "Watch out with them. You need to get outside. Less thin place. More sunshine."

"We know what we're doing with the totems now," I say, but now that he mentions it, I do look paler. I was never a tan girl to begin with, but these days I have that milquetoast, sat-in-front-of-the-TV-all-day look. I think it's less from the phasing, though, and more from the fact that we've been spinning our wheels for a while now, going from place to place, always stuck in transition. I wear a lot of loose, functional travel clothes, and my hair is in an endless string of ponytails. I look rootless. I *am* rootless, and it shows.

"Don't listen to him," Allen says again. "You look beautiful. He's just grumpy."

CHAPTER 3

OWEN BENNET

You would be absolutely flabbergasted if you saw how many wires and circuits are in a large RV. Ours is technically called a motor coach, but let's not glamorize things: it's a single-wide on wheels. Still, looking at this fuse box, you'd think I was driving the space shuttle *Endeavor* around the country. I've never really had a good look at the guts of it before. Aside from the handful of times Caroline's tried to dry her hair while Grant's played his videogames and a breaker got tripped, I've really had no cause to go rooting around down here. But then I decided to do my little project.

Caroline thinks I'm losing it. Like this is my *Bridge to Nowhere* and I'll be chipping away at it until I die because I've got nothing better to do. Fine. Let her think that. While she's off obsessing over that book I'm here trying to plan a future. Grant is indifferent, but he's indifferent to most things lately, except the color black. I do catch him occasionally watching me tinker, wearing this look like he's watching a squirrel bobbing around on one of those trick bird feeders.

After ten years in medical school, another ten years working the hospital floor, and another five travelling the country carrying the crow totems and the bell—tools that are essentially the nails that keep the tapestry of the living world hanging straight—it's amazing how much you *don't* know. Like how to wire a trailer hitch for a 240-volt electrical system, for instance.

I'm lying on my back on the floor at the rear of the RV, which we affectionately call the boat, the top half of my gangly frame

stuffed awkwardly under the aft paneling, one hand holding a green wire. I've got a penlight in my mouth. I'm about to make a risky soldering decision when I hear Grant from up front.

"He's back," he says.

I freeze. I mumble around the penlight, "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

I sigh, scoot out front underneath the paneling like a dog scooting along the carpet, then sit up. Grant is looking at me with one earbud still in, the other dangling down his front. He gestures out the big side window with his head.

"What is with this guy?" I ask. It's rhetorical, of course, but these days Grant isn't one to skip an opportunity to fire off a droll answer.

"I think you know. I think we all know. If it's not this guy, it's the weird lady back in Pagosa, or that hick in the Pawnee Buttes, or those drunk college kids in Mendocino. They've all got the same thing."

I button my shirt up and straighten my rolled cuffs. "The itch. Yeah, I get it. Thank you, Grant."

Grant nods. That was sarcasm, but that seems to roll right off Grant these days as well. He's only capable of giving it, hasn't quite figured out how to take it.

"Stay behind me, out of sight," I say, moving toward the door. Grant gets up anyway and follows me, but he does stay back. *The itch* is a term I came up with, one of very few new diagnoses I do these days.

If Caroline were here, she could use her second sight to see what is bothering him, figure out exactly what to say, exactly what buttons to push to make the guy go away. She could see the script written in his "smoke," wafting off him in waves. If Chaco were here, he might be able to scare him off by virtue of being an enormous crow perched on top of the RV, but he's off too, looking for the thing that came through. So as it stands, it's just me. The only thing I can sense wafting off this guy is booze.

"Can I help you?" I ask, stepping down from the RV and closing the door behind me. He wears a tattered red T-shirt under

oil-stained coveralls. His work boots are frayed at the steel toe. The guy looks like a mechanic, but then again, that's sort of the de facto dress code at this RV park. For all I know he could be the mayor.

"Whatcha buildin'?" he asks. His eyes flit to the trailer addition but always settle back to me and then behind me, to the right, where Grant watches behind the curtains. He's got the itch all right.

Most people are completely normal around the bell. Most wouldn't even know Grant carries the thing. But every now and then somebody gets the itch. These people, they come in all shapes and sizes, some mean, some just curious. Mostly mean, these days. It's been getting worse and worse ever since that thing broke through. They're troubled people, drawn to the world beyond ours. Drawn to the bell that could get them there. They end up in front of the RV without knowing why. They're the reason Grant, Caroline, and I have to pack up and head out every couple of months. They're the reason we can't ever establish ourselves anywhere.

"Just a trailer hitch. Now, I think you should move on, sir," I say.

"Uh-huh." The man nods without seeming to hear me. He takes a step forward.

"Stay back," I say. "I'm warning you." I'm not really sure what I'll do. I was not a fighter before I met Caroline. I've been in a fair amount of scrapes since, but every time I'm confronted with another one I feel like a mathlete trying to talk down the captain of the football team. I wish I'd kept the soldering iron. I could at least threaten to solder the man.

"I just want to check it out," he says. I don't think he means the trailer hitch. He steps forward again, and this time I take no chances. I step into him and try to push him back, but he hangs on to me. I'm taller than him, but he's bigger than me. He could bowl me over if he wanted to, but instead he just flails behind me, like I'm a stuck turnstile. He's got a one-track mind, this one. This is as focused as I've ever seen an Itch, and I'm dreading what I'll have

to do to subdue the guy, when the door to the RV opens and Grant steps out. He has a gun.

"Get the fuck away from us," Grant growls. He levels the gun at the man. I don't know a thing about handguns, only that I hate them. This one looks as heavy and gray and dully evil as the rest of them. Grant is decked from head to toe in black, and with his shaved head he looks like that crazy type of fourteen. Child-soldier fourteen. I'm so shocked that I put my hands up right along with the Itch. Grant furrows his brow at me.

"I didn't mean nothin'," the Itch says. He blinks. His eyes seem to have cleared a bit. I can see that he's not quite sure how he got here, only that he needs to get out. He backs away for several paces then turns tail and scampers. I'm still holding my hands up.

"You have a gun?"

"Put your hands down, Owen."

"You have a *gun*?"

"Come on. That dude'll be back. They always are."

I step up and into the RV, close the door, and lock it behind us. Grant looks sheepish now, much more like the young boy from Midland that I know.

"Grant, this is not acceptable. Does Caroline know about this? What does Chaco think?"

"It's fake. See?" He points to a plastic ring around the muzzle. "Stop freaking out." He tosses it on the couch. I lean against the wall, less relieved than I thought I'd be. Grant sounds disappointed that it's fake. "I traded some kid at the edge of the park a bunch of games for it. And good thing, huh?" He looks up at me pointedly.

"I could have de-escalated the situation," I say.

"Uh-huh."

"And now we have to get out of here, of course. So there goes that."

"Good. This place sucks anyway. It smells like dog food." He flops down on the couch himself, which is something he does when he's frustrated. He learned it from Caroline.

"And stop cussing. You never cussed before. Don't start now. It's classless."

"I had to get my point across to the Itch," he says, rubbing at his head. I see a flash there, at his wrist. A bead bracelet. I have one of my own, a gift from a Navajo girl I treated back at the Chaco Health Clinic. I'm not naive enough to think he wants to be like me, though. The only thing Grant likes more than the color black is Joey Flatwood. He worships the man. Grant collects crow feathers wherever we go, swapping out for the best ones. I want to tell him that if he plans on weaving them into his hair like Joey, he'd better start growing it out, but no doubt that would blow up in my face too. I decide to leave well enough alone.

I step into the cockpit and fire up the boat to warm up the engine. "Batten down the hatches," I say. Grant gets up and starts to pack the RV away while I do a perimeter sweep, picking up a few loose odds and ends. I text Caroline *on the run*, which is our code for a quick getaway. I'll text her again when we fill up the tank outside of town so she can phase back to us. I survey the camp one more time. We've been here for three months, but I'm not sad to go. It does smell like dog food.

CHAPTER 4

THE WALKER

There's no room for coincidences in the Navajo Way. No such thing. So all I can do is nod when I step out of the soul map and find that the tug takes me to Chaco Canyon. In a lot of ways, the whole reason I'm here is because of this canyon and what came from it.

Chaco Navajo Reservation is named for Chaco Canyon, which is this big jagged scoop in the earth in northwest New Mexico. The wash from the canyon created the Arroyo to the north, which edges up to the main camp of Chaco rez, and which is where all this began for me all those years ago when I started digging for more info on an Arroyo man everyone called the gambler. The old-timers and hard-line Navajo that ring the Arroyo in their tents and car camps like to say that they are the Chaco Wash themselves: they are the stones that rumbled down from the canyon over the years in the great rains. They are the pure deposits that were unearthed and the strongest that remain.

The old Chaco River chopped the canyon up into a bunch of jagged mesas to either side of the banks. They look sort of like teeth from far away, and they harbor a lot of old Pueblo and Navajo ruins in their ridges and flats. I'm standing in the shadow of the west mesa, I'd say about forty miles from the rez as the crow flies, and I'm looking at a dead Navajo man.

The soul map tells me this man is Bidzill Halkini. I knew Bidzill Halkini. He was a sheep farmer. An eccentric guy that we occasionally drove out to check on when I was with the NNPD. He

wore a New York Yankees baseball cap all the time and wanted everyone to call him Bill instead of Bidzill. Every rookie at one point or another had to make the drive to check on Bilagaana Bill, as we called him. *Bilagaana* is a sorta loaded word we Navajo use for white people. It's not bad, exactly. But it's not good either. With Bidzill Halkini it was a joke because he was about as Navajo as they come—I mean, he was a sheep farmer, after all, and he lived more or less alone for most of the year in what was basically a lean-to out here near the west mesa. Just him, his animals, and the Navajo Way. But he had the Yankees cap and wanted to be called Bill, so there you go.

And now, here he is. But something about him doesn't sit right with me.

The Bilagaana Bill I knew was a desert-hardened, savvy Navajo. Not the type of guy to end up in the middle of Chaco Canyon, miles from anything, without so much as a stitch of supplies. Where are his sheep? Where is his sheep switch? Where is his Yankees hat? And most of all, where the hell is his soul?

I perch my hands on my hips and furrow my brow. I feel this strange, creeping dread that's timed perfectly with the slow wash of the setting sun as it coats the canyon in front of us, cutting a dividing line between the open canyon and our dark corner. I don't know as much as I'd like about how death works, even after all my time walking the map, but I do know that when things in my profession don't line up, it's very bad news. For everyone. And it usually starts like this. With little glitches in the system.

I drop in as the soul pops out, so it should be here somewhere close by. I scan the canyon. Nothing. I turn around and trace the edges of the west mesa where the fading sunlight is strongest. Nothing. I look up in the sky. Nothing. Which is another strange thing. The New Mexico desert is hard country. When something dies in it, something that could provide food for the creatures that live out here, it doesn't take long for the animal kingdom to realize it. Starting with the birds. But there are no birds in sight. No flies, either. No bugs of any kind. It's as if everything is avoiding this man.

"Hey!" I yell. "Bill! Come out! I wanna talk with you!"

Nothing. Not even an echo. This is a strange place even for a wanderer like Bilagaana Bill to end up, and without even a water bottle to his name. His car camp is at least five miles north. Time to do a little rewind, see exactly how he got here.

One of the best perks of walking the soul map is that if I want to see the story behind a death, I can track back the soul thread. Basically just rewind the life of the recently departed. I do this more than you'd think. More than I need to, that's for sure. The last moments of people's lives give me a lot to ponder. A bit ghoulish, I know, especially coming from a Navajo, where we're taught to stay the hell away from death, but I don't exactly have a lot of entertainment options here. You binge-watch TV shows. I do this. So sue me.

I swipe backward on the map, watch the dead man carefully. Swipe backward some more. Keep watching. The guy is still face down on the desert floor. The wind rustles his hair and kicks some dust up against his cheek, but that's about it. For hours he's like this. Which makes the lack of carrion feeders all the more suspicious. Then it's sunrise past, and all of a sudden I see a coyote. A mangy, feral-looking thing. Maybe even rabid. I take the thread back a bit and watch it approach. It senses the dead man and raises its hackles, but it keeps moving forward, almost like it can't help it. Once it's even with the body, it lunges at the dead man's mouth like it was shocked in the haunch, rips around a bit, then takes off down the canyon. I follow it for a few steps, but it's hauling ass and I'm not getting any closer to settling this soul, so I turn around.

I trace the rest of Bilagaana Bill's soul back, and as far as I can tell, here's how he died: He got up from his lean-to, neglected everything he owned, from his water to his gear all the way to his hat, then he walked out into the desert in complete silence for five miles, where he laid down right here and died. And then nothing came out.

Now I'm starting to freak out. We've got a body with nothing to tie it to the world beyond. I let out a big breath. Take another

one in. And then yell as loud as I can for my bird friend.

"Chaco! Chaco, I need some help here!"

I wait. Wait some more. I start to get a little sweaty thinking about how I'm gonna deal with this on my own, and just when I suck in a breath to yell again, I hear the telltale *snap* of Chaco breaking through the plane. There he is, just a thin black line in the sky, until the line whips back on itself and sprouts wings and tail feathers and a sharp-beaked head. He spots me and dives right for my face, hoping I'll flinch. I don't flinch anymore. He pulls up and catches himself on my shoulder.

"Walker," he begins, already annoyed, "I got a lot on my plate these days. If this is another one of your sob stories, I'm gonna peck your face off."

Chaco doesn't understand how I can get wrapped up in my work sometimes. I admit I tend to get sentimental. Especially when I use rewind. But this ain't no sob story. Not yet.

Instead I just point at the body. "What the hell is that?"

"You're the expert and everything, but it looks to me like a dead guy."

"I know that, thank you. He's Bilagaana Bill. But where's his soul?"

"Billa-what?"

"His soul never left him," I say, holding out my hands, staring at the space between them as if it holds the answers.

Chaco twitches his head like he's shaking off water. "That's ridiculous. Of course it did. You just missed it."

"I didn't miss anything. Could the map be wrong somehow?"

"The map has never been wrong. *Never*. And it's been around *forever*. Walkers, on the other hand, have been known to fuck up a fair amount. No offense."

I crouch down again, and Chaco walks up my shoulder to perch on my head. Both of us peer down at the body. "I ran his thread back all the way. He walked out here and died, but nothing came out of him."

Chaco hops off my head and flutters down toward Bill but then flares his wings out at the last second. "Whoa, whoa," he

says, skittering to rest on the dirt beside him. "He doesn't smell right."

"Well, he is dead."

"There's a right dead smell and a wrong dead smell. This is a wrong dead smell. And probably why none of my kind are anywhere near this thing." Chaco scans the sky above him with little ticks of his head.

"I thought that was strange too. Although there was one coyote..." My eyes trace the path the coyote took when it bolted. I feel like I'm missing something vital here.

Chaco looks up at me and tucks his wings in to make his back streamline straight, almost like he's pointing at me. "You're sure that you ran this thing back?"

I nod.

"And you're *sure* that you looked all around this place for his soul?"

I nod again.

"You'd better be really sure, Walker. This isn't *where the hell did I put my car keys?* stuff. This is *you're telling me up is down and down is up* stuff."

"I'm sure. And you know as well as I that for the past five years, up has seemed a little down and the other way around."

"Maybe the veil took it without you. Maybe your department is getting downsized, as they say. Maybe this is your cosmic pink slip and they got a robot to do your job."

"Ha ha. I gotta cut 'em loose first, asshole. There are rules. You know that."

"Yeah, yeah. So what are we gonna do?"

"Maybe we should call Caroline in," I say, trying to seem nonchalant. "See what her sight shows her. Maybe she picks something up that we can't see."

Chaco is quiet, and I pretend to be looking the body over again in the silence until it drags out too long. When I glance at him, he's staring right at me. "What? It's just a thought," I say.

"Uh-huh."

"Am I wrong? She's very perceptive."

"She's also deep in the trenches of some *matters of the heart* that seem to continuously feature you, despite the fact that you both know you're dead."

"I can't help that." I'm glad that I don't have the blood to blush.

"You could by leaving her alone," Chaco says, taking slow bird-steps around the body until he's on my side again. He looks askew at Bilagaana Bill and puffs up his breast in a sigh. "But you're right. We gotta get this straightened out. And the crew is on the move again anyway. Maybe they can swing by here."

"I'll be here," I say. "And Bill ain't going nowhere."

Chaco gives me one last look that says *watch yourself*, and I know he's meaning around the body, but also with Caroline. But Chaco isn't my bird, and I don't work for him either. We're just two poor saps trying to keep the balance between worlds, and I'll take any excuse I can to see Caroline. He's up, up, and gone, and then it's just me and Bill and the rez. All of us waiting.

CHAPTER 5

GRANT ROMER

We pick up Caroline at a 7-11 outside of Pueblo, Colorado. She phases into the parking lot behind the boat, where I'm sitting watching the gauge at the gas pump tick over again and again. She blinks into reality mid-stride. She's getting really good at it. Both of them are. I remember when I first met them, they couldn't hold on to the thin place for more than a few minutes at a time, and if they walked in the thin place, there was no tellin' where they'd end up. It ain't that way no more. Sorry. It *isn't* that way *anymore*. I'm working on that. How I talk. I'm tired of people thinking I'm some dumb hick from Nowhere, Texas, especially when that place isn't my home anymore.

"Itch?" she asks, glancing toward the store where Owen is stocking up.

"Yep," I say, fingering my bracelet. Joey Flatwood gave it to me when we crossed paths a few years ago. He's always off somewhere with something to do, someplace to be. We're always off somewhere too, but the difference is we never seem to know where we're going.

"That was quick," Caroline says. "What, two weeks?"

"Three." But Caroline was only there for two of them. The rest of the time she was chasing after what might or might not be inside that book. She's quiet until I look up at her and find her watching me.

"Shit," I mutter. She's reading me again. "I thought you said you weren't going to do that."

"Watch your language, buddy. And I said I'd *try* not to read you. I didn't say how hard I'd try. And I'm already well aware of how you and Owen feel about the book."

The gas pump finally snaps off. Caroline and I look at the total, and we both clear our throats. Owen isn't gonna like that. He's been more and more concerned about cash lately, which I think means we have less and less of it.

"It's Owen who doesn't like that book. I don't care about it." Which is true. If it could help us find what came through, or figure out what the Dark Walker of the title is, we'd know by now. Personally, I think it ain't much more than a creepy doorstep. Although I do think it's a convenient way for Caroline to get away from us and call it "research." Or maybe just get away from me. Because I have a tendency to be a bit of a drag on people who end up taking care of me. Even before I got the bell and became the Keeper and started attracting all sorts of weirdness that makes us pick up shop every few weeks, I was a problem. Pap had to come out of retirement to provide for me after Mom and Dad died. I always muddy the waters wherever I am.

Joey doesn't need anybody. He can fend for himself. I can't, yet. But I will be able to one day. Sooner rather than later. Caroline is looking at me still. I don't know how much of this she can read in my smoke. Not all of it, but enough. My look is a challenge to her, to tell me otherwise if she understands me. She looks away.

Owen comes around the corner with two baggies full of drinks and gas-station food. He passes each of us a scratch ticket. This is his gas-stop ritual. He calls it our only chance at retirement, and I think he's only half joking.

"Welcome back," he says to Caroline, letting his words linger for just a second. He gives her a delayed hug. I can't take the awkwardness, so I push around them and walk up into the boat. "How are the agents?" Owen asks her, both of them stepping up after me.

"Oh, fine. Not a lot of help, as usual. They hate the book more than you do, but it's good to see them anyway." Caroline settles in

the co-captain's chair up front. She kicks her shoes off and tucks her feet underneath her, rummaging around for her sunglasses. The August sunshine cuts right through the enormous front window. You get a full-body blast when you sit up front, which is why I never do.

"I don't hate it. I just don't trust it," Owen says.

"It's a book, Owen. Not a car salesman."

"I don't like how much of your time it takes up," Owen begins, before stopping himself. "But you already know that, and you know that I've said everything I'm gonna say about that thing. Did you know Grant has a gun?" he asks, completely throwing me under the bus just because he can't talk straight with her.

"Fake gun," I say quickly as Caroline turns to me. Owen does this stuff sometimes when he gets annoyed. Throws out hand grenades to see if Caroline has already picked up on their smoke. "It's an air gun, Caroline. No big deal. Jesus. And it's how we got away from the Itch too."

"So that's what you two were fighting about," Caroline says.

"We weren't *fighting*," Owen says, starting the boat up with a rolling roar of the engine. "Guys don't *fight* like that. I was just letting Grant know that I don't like guns. Of any kind." His pale skin blushes bright red. He was always pale, but he's gotten paler. It's a side effect of being good with the crow totem. Well worth it, I'd say. I'd love to have that freedom. To go across the country in a few steps, see some friends, be back whenever I wanted. The bell is sort of the opposite of that. It hangs around my neck and keeps me here. It's heavy. It pulls other people toward me, in fact.

Caroline sets her hand over Owen's for a moment, tries to get him to look at her, but he's flustered. He doesn't shake it off, exactly, but he gently moves his hand to the steering wheel, and hers falls away. I take notice of these things. I've been tryin' to figure the two of them out for years, and I'm still guessing. I think I have it figured out, then one of them stops talking to the other, or Caroline blinks out for a couple days, and it's just me and Owen and an awkward elephant in the boat.

One time, about a year ago, I walked in on them having sex. In the boat there's not a lot of privacy. They have the back bedroom, and I have a couch bed that pops out of the side and can fold up for some extra space. For whatever reason, the door to the back bedroom was open, and I came home early from walking to get dinner at the burger place that was across from the Alamo Placita RV park where we were camped at the time, and there they were. Owen was on top of Caroline, his skinny white back to me. Thankfully his butt was covered by the sheets, but it was definitely moving. Caroline practically threw him off of her when she heard the outside door open, and then they scrambled to cover up, but I saw basically everything. All that evening Caroline was too embarrassed even to talk to me, and Owen talked too much: explaining everything at once in birds-and-bees style like I was still ten years old.

I know what sex is. I know how it works. And it's not like I was scarred or anything. It's not like I walked in on my parents. Owen and Caroline aren't my parents, despite what they sometimes think. They're more like my older friends. So it wasn't gross, just awkward. The next day during homeschool Owen still hadn't come off it. He was babbling and stammering and trying to explain penises and vaginas using terms like *genitalia* and *ejaculate* and *menses*. I sat there and nodded, but all I was thinking about is how it'd be nice to have someone to do that stuff with. Or even to hang out with, without the sex.

There's been no repeat of anything resembling that little run-in since, though. At least not that I've seen, and I've been a bit more on the lookout for it. If anything, it seems like they were the ones that got the most awkward about everything. Now there's that extra little half-beat pause before they hug, or when they decide to hold hands. Like they're thinking too hard about it.

Day in and day out I have to see this stuff, and then they wonder why I want to just put on my headphones or zone out with video games or go off by myself to see what other kids are doing. Then I end up trading games for an air gun and suddenly they get pissed? Thank God for Chaco. Having him around reminds

me that the world is a lot bigger than the boat, which makes me happy but also makes me a little sad since so far I haven't been able to experience any of it. Oh, I see a lot of it all right. It's rolling by underneath the wheels right now. But I can't *touch* any of it.

"Bird incoming," I say, and Owen looks back at me from the rearview mirror and nods. I get up, pop open and slide back the large side window, and Owen slows the boat a bit. I hold out my arm and watch the wind flutter the loose tie straps of the bracelet Joey gave me. Don't worry, I double knotted it and made Joey promise that if I somehow lost it he'd make me another one. But I don't lose things. Ever. I'm the Keeper, after all.

Chaco isn't there and then suddenly he is, pumping his huge black wings and flattening his arrowed head until he's level with the window and on pace, then he reaches out and snatches my arm. It doesn't hurt. He's pretty good at it by now. I carefully pull him inside the boat, and he walks up my arm to perch on my shoulder. He used to be able to perch on my head in the boat, but I got taller, and he's not exactly a small bird.

"On the move again, eh?" he says, moving down to rest on my knee as I sit back on the couch. Only the Walker and I can hear Chaco. His voice is like a thought in my head. I answer him the same way, without ever opening my mouth. He's what he calls a thinning. Some creatures are closer to the thin world and the land of the dead than others. Cats, bats, some dogs, supposedly elephants and sloths too, according to Chaco. And crows, of course. Chaco represents all of them. He's their presence across the planes. It's his job to protect the Keeper. Me. He's been around in one form or another since the dawn of time, but if you heard his voice, you'd think he sounds like a twenty-something beach bum.

"It was the fat mechanic guy," I say. "He came back." I talk aloud this time to let Caroline and Owen know. And to gloat, a little. I'd warned them about that guy a week ago when he was hanging around the cigarette shop across from our parking spot for hours every day. Owen was too busy working on his trailer, and Caroline was too busy with her book.

Owen looks back at me through the mirror and rolls his eyes. "Hey, Chaco. Where to now? Any thoughts?"

"It doesn't matter where we go," I say. "We'll last two or three weeks, if we're lucky, and then we'll run away from there too." I eye Chaco's feathers. They're huge. They'd be great for my collection, but Chaco knows what I'm thinking and squares up to me with a *don't even think about it* look.

"We're not *running away*, Grant," Owen says. "We're making a tactical move. For the good of the bell. Tell him, Caroline."

Caroline looks up from her magazine and blinks. "Hm? Oh. Tactical, yes. Although..."

Owen stares at her for a little longer than is safe when you're piloting a ten-ton vehicle. "Although what?"

"I was just thinking about Ben's grandmother, you know. The last Keeper. She stayed in one place for decades."

"Yeah, the rez. In the middle of nowhere. And that was before that thing came through," Owen says.

"Well, maybe we should go to the rez," I say softly. I finger my bead bracelet. I think of my crow feathers. Two of the strongest men I know came from the rez. Maybe if I go there, I can figure out how to hack it like they did. Like they do. Chaco titters and fluffs and watches me carefully.

"I don't think you know what you're saying, Grant," Owen says. "Chaco rez is not like some teepee camp where the Navajo ride war horses and hunt buffalo." He shakes his head, almost laughing. "And it's not exactly an easy place for a white kid to grow up. Tell him, Caroline."

Caroline is looking out of the side window at the crows on the horizon, the slow passing of the plains, and the even slower passing of the sheet-flat clouds in the distance.

"Go ahead, Caroline," Owen says again.

"I dunno," she says, shrugging.

"What? Are you serious? You were the one who wanted to leave that place five years ago. Remember?"

"I can leave whenever I want, now. I can go anywhere. And I can come back. This is about finding a place for Grant to stick,"

Caroline says, with an edge to her voice. "Might as well give it a shot. Worst case scenario, we're out of there in a couple weeks."

"Chaco," Owen says, turning briefly to look at him properly before facing forward again. "Can you talk some sense into these two? Neither the rez nor the surrounding areas are what I would call a great place for an outsider to grow up. Right? Heck, even Albuquerque is questionable depending on who you ask."

Chaco hops up to the couch and settles there in a plop of black. "Funny you all should say this," he says. "Because I was just with the Walker. And we were just in the Chaco canyon, where we found something."

Now he doesn't want to look at me. I narrow my eyes.

"What kind of something?" I ask.

"Something I was hoping you could check out. Someone, actually. And maybe *identify* is a better word."

"What are you two talking about?" Owen asks. "What's he saying?"

I contemplate repeating Chaco word for word, but Owen is already jittery about the move and Caroline can and often does change her mind from second to second. I gotta jump on it.

"Chaco wants our help checking something out in Chaco canyon."

"Well," Owen says acidly, "isn't that convenient. Right on the rez. How about that."

"Yeah," I say. "How 'bout that."

CHAPTER 6

CAROLINE ADAMS

The dead guy in the desert doesn't bother me so much. I've seen a lot of death, unfortunately. When you work on an oncology floor for as long as I did at ABQ General, it's hard to avoid. It comes to you. Walks your halls. Sometimes seems to perch at the corner of every bed, waiting patiently. You never get used to death, not exactly, but you do eventually get so saturated with it that you become a little blind to it. And that was before I knew it was essentially Ben waiting there. Ben perched on the bed. I wonder, if I had known then what I know now, would it have been any easier working that floor?

Probably not. Cancer sucks. Always has. Always will.

This body looks like it's a set piece. It seems to have drifted down to earth from the sky in the middle of a wide canyon, like a piece of paper carried by the wind, and I'm having a hard time focusing on it because all I want to do is stare at the place where I know Ben is standing. Right now. I know Ben is standing there because Chaco is looking there, speaking with him, then relaying all this to Grant, who interprets for us.

Back at ABQ General we used to have this service called the IP: the Interpreter Phone. We'd get a lot of Navajo and Mexicans coming in and had only a handful of people on staff who could effectively speak Spanish and basically nobody who spoke conversational Navajo. Big problem, right? But fear not! IP was there for us. We'd dial a special number on our shift phones that

would patch us through to Spanish and Navajo interpreters, hand the phone to the patients, then get the scoop ourselves.

Chaco is sorta like an interpreter phone with wings. And Grant is like the nurse doing the relay, like I was, standing there getting the scoop, telling it to the room. Ben is the lifesaver on the other end that you can't see. The one tapped in to another world. I have to stop myself from staring into his space. I can feel Owen watching me. Owen's smoke is a strange color these days. When we started on this trip, all those years ago, it was this beautiful aquiline blue, like his eyes. It's changed since then. Not in a bad way, not exactly, but different. It's tinged with a weary color of earthen brown. There's a lot wrapped up in that color. A bit of jealousy, a bit of regret, a bit of sadness, but mostly that unique weariness that comes with Owen's kind of determination to do what's right by us. It's the color of a man growing older. I know that sounds bad, but it's not. Not entirely. In a way, it's just as natural as the blue was, but it's still a little sad.

"The Walker says he just found the guy here," Grant says. He's trying to play it cool, but I can see he's enamored. Ben, like Joey, is a rock star to him. I don't think he's blinked since we got here. "Just like this," he says, pointing at the dead man. "No trace of a soul."

Chaco chirrups then caws. "The Walker wants to know if you can see anything," Grant says, looking to me.

I kneel closer to the body. Look all around it. I cup my hands over his heart, touch his forehead. I stand and turn back to Grant and Chaco, both watching me intently. My eyes flick over to the empty space that is Ben. "I can't see anything," I say, and the sad weight that comes out with the words makes Owen shift uncomfortably behind me. He knows I'm not just talking about the body, I'm talking about Ben too. "But that's not surprising," I add, standing from my crouch then slapping my hands together and rubbing them on my jeans. "When a person dies, their smoke goes with them. This man's soul has gone somewhere."

"You're sure?" Grant asks.

I nod, thinking of Oren Dejooli, Ben's father. When I came across his body in Ben's backyard, after Danny Ninepoint went on his killing spree, his body was just as empty as this man's in front of me. "I can't say where it went, but it went somewhere."

Grant slumps a little. Chaco mimics him on top of his head. "Well that's just great," Grant says. "What good are we if we can't help out when the Walker needs us?"

"Hey," I say sharply. "Take it easy. I can't make smoke where there's no smoke. I don't know what to tell you."

Grant moves over to the body and kicks a rock near its hip so that it clatters against the canyon wall. I can tell Chaco is trying to talk to him. Grant has been getting more and more pissy lately. I always thought boys were supposed to be the easy ones to navigate through puberty. Although I know I'm not exactly the best navigator. Sometimes I feel like I'm still going through puberty myself.

"Did Ben trace back the string?" Owen asks, startling me. I'd forgotten he was there for a moment.

"He did," Grant says. "The guy acted weird. Basically just came out here and gave up."

"That's it?" Owen asks. "Nothing else?"

Grant listens. "Well, there was this coyote." Chaco flutters to the ground near an incoming stream of paw prints. He follows them over to the body, but then he looks lost. There's some back-and-forth, and Grant looks confused.

"The tracks are gone," Grant says. "They go up to the body, but then they disappear. The Walker says he saw the coyote take off down the canyon. There should be tracks."

All of us move in closer to the body, which by now should at least be putrefying a little bit. It's sundown on the second day. We should be seeing some swelling of the gut or staining of the face, but instead it looks eerily fresh.

"No tracks? Then what the heck is that thing?" Owen asks, pointing at the canyon floor just beyond Grant. We all turn to look, and there, sure enough, is a paw print. A single paw print leading away from the body, down the canyon.

"Chaco says that wasn't here before," Grant says quietly. I can almost feel Ben rushing over to it along with us. Almost.

I can't quite believe what I'm seeing. The paw print looks like it's sitting a hair above the sand, and it seems to glow slightly in the shadow of the mesa. Grant slowly drags the toe of his sneaker across the outer edge. The movement cuts a rivulet through the desert floor, but the track remains whole. Chaco hops over and peers closely at it, then he looks around, no doubt thinking what all of us are thinking. Where are the rest of the tracks?

Grant takes a tentative step past the paw print, farther into the Canyon shadow. The first track fades as he passes it, but a second is illuminated. Chaco hops behind as Grant walks. Each print is illuminated, then fades as he passes. The blurred edges of each print remind me of the tracks the chaos souls made as they smeared their way across the desert back in Texas. My stomach does a little roll.

"It's the bell," Grant says, pulling it out and grasping its chain in his hand. "They light up when it's near." He waves it over the sand, and the prints illuminate, then fade. Chaco squawks, and Grant listens, then turns to us.

"This guy had a run-in with something bad," Grant says.

"Our monster?" Owen asks. There is wary hope in his smoke, that maybe we've found a trail worth following after all, but he knows as well as I do that this stuff never comes easily. Our new jobs make our old jobs look positively orderly. Night shift at ABQ General was a game of croquet compared to watching over the bell and the Keeper. But I still get my hopes up. Why can't something break our way for once? You know, just fall our way without a fight? Without the world teetering on its edge first? It happens to other people all the time. Open, closed. Why not us?

"The coyote took off into the canyon," Grant says, twenty feet away now, following the prints. The tracks cut to the canyon wall, much harder to see in the light. If you weren't looking for them, you would miss them. They trace the edge, until they jump up on a rock, then to another a bit higher. Grant follows the tracks as far as he can, peering closely at the rock face, until he hits an old gravel

slide. The tracks race up it, but Grant can't get far. Nobody could. I'd guess it's at a forty-five-degree angle. "Looks like he went up and out."

"What's up there?" I ask, my voice wavering.

"There's the canyon visitor's center a few miles that way," Owen says, pointing.

Chaco caws once. "That's not where it's going," Grant says.

"No, I don't think so either. Another few miles past that you start to hit the rez proper."

Chaco caws again.

"That's where it's going," Grant says, nodding.

We all crane our necks to look up the canyon, as if we could see out and beyond the lip. After a minute, Grant speaks again.

"The Walker says it just looked like a damn coyote. Nothing more."

Owen shakes his head. He looks over to where I think Ben is standing, but only briefly. As if even the empty space is too much for him. When he speaks, his voice sounds defeated already, although I don't think it has anything to do with our monster. "If there's ever a place where a coyote isn't just a coyote," he says, "it's right here."

CHAPTER 7

THE WALKER

I know I'm not supposed to play favorites in my job, but you'd better believe I'm nicer to some souls than I am to others. A lot of assholes die every day. With the assholes, I play into the Death stereotype a little more. Ham it up a bit. I try to make it easy on the good people. Help explain things when I can. Sit with them or pray with them or chat with them for a bit, whatever they want to do, until the veil comes.

I'm especially partial to Navajos. Surprise, surprise.

When Caroline, Owen, and Grant leave Chaco Canyon to go call in the body, I stick around. It's just the two of us. Both of us dead, and in a way, neither of us able to move on. It's kind of depressing to realize how much I have in common with this stiff out here in the desert. I'm still not sure what was going through Bilagaana Bill's mind when he walked out here. I don't know what the coyote was, or why it came to him, but I do know that this man was someone, once. He lived on the fringes, but he had a place on the map. There's one less Navajo walking the Way right now, and that hits me hard. So I sing for him.

I sing an old song Gam used to sing to me. It's not a mourning song, or a song about good-byes or anything like that. I don't know any of those. It's actually just a song Gam always sang to Ana and me when we were young to get us up for school. It's about the sunrise, and it's the only song I know by heart. Whenever I'm called to Navajo deaths, I sing this song with the soul as we wait for the veil. It seems to help. Even with the

younger generation, who sometimes don't give a shit about the chants or songs or even the Navajo Way, really. Until they're dead. Funny how once they're dead they start to care real quick.

As I sing I get to thinking. I've been singing this song a lot recently. A whole lot of people die every day, and I'm there for every one of them. When you walk the soul map, you have to be a lot of places at once. That's what happens when you clip well over a hundred thousand souls a day: they start to blend together. But this song takes me back to all the Navajo I've been seeing out, and it seems to me like I've been working overtime in this neck of the woods lately. A lot of singing. And I don't like it.

My song done, I swirl open the map and step through. It's time to do some digging and find out where Bill's soul went. I take a few steps and walk out onto my old street at Chaco rez. Here seems as good a place as any to orient myself to the rez once again.

My family used to live in one half of a split duplex on a quiet road about a quarter mile north of the police station. We were pretty broke, all things considered, but the place was always clean and neat. Comfy in its simplicity. Because of Gam. Her mind was as ordered as the rugs she wove, and she was the Keeper of more than just the bell in her time. She kept the house too. Especially after Mom left. Danny Ninepoint ruined all that. He turned our home from something beautiful into something stained.

My people wrap death and dying up in all sorts of superstitions. One of them is ghost sickness. We think death is literally contagious. Even the young generation, the kids who say they're scared of nothing and think more about their cell phones than the Navajo Way, even they won't stick around a place like this. It's been over five years since Gam and Dad died here, and nobody on the rez will touch the place, not even to tear it down.

Joey and I used to laugh at the old-timers who seemed scared of death. These were supposed to be the champions of the Navajo Way. Men and women who walked in balance, who were so even keeled that if the entire rez was on fire they'd nod and smoke and sweat and say to themselves, "Well, the world can't hold

everything.” But then when someone dies they won’t mention their names because they’re too afraid that person’s *chindi*, its restless spirit, might come back to haunt them. Might touch them and give them ghost sickness and then they’d die too. The Arroyo crew’ll tell you don’t even look too long at the dead. Don’t even stand too long where they died.

Crazy, right? Stupid superstitious nonsense, right?

I thought so too. Up until I saw a restless spirit wandering the desert five years ago, his soul cut by the turquoise knife we destroyed. I thought so too, right up until I jumped into a river of restless spirits, and I touched them, and I felt like their chaos was catching. Up until restless spirits tried to kill my friends. If Gam saw those things and how they acted, she’d be calling them *chindi*.

I don’t laugh at the old-timers anymore. They claim the world can’t hold everything. I

know it can’t. It’s my job to keep it balanced. Which is why I’m not especially surprised to find a coyote waiting for me, standing in the shadow of my front porch, looking right at home in the gloom.

The coyote’s paws rest on piled leaves, its tail swishing through little fragments of broken glass. It’s the same brown and burned-orange color as the faded graffiti that streaks across the door.

If you ask a Navajo about Coyote, the Coyote of our legends, you’ll get all sorts of answers. Some will tell you he’s funny, some’ll say he’s tricky. Everyone will agree he’s trouble. Coyotes are bad omens. Old-timers say if a coyote crosses your path, turn back. Forget your journey. So I’d take notice even if the damn thing wasn’t staring right at me.

I can’t see its tracks without the bell around, but I’d bet my best hat that if I had the bell in my hand, this old house would be lit up with glowing paw prints. This is our dark visitor. And it’s waiting for me. It’s expecting me.

“What did you do to Bilagaana Bill,” I ask. I don’t know why I expect it to answer. I talk to things all the time in my job. People, rocks, clouds. I’ve never expected an answer until now.

I don't get one. The coyote looks like it's chewing on something that's giving it trouble. In the low light it looks blurry about the face. Like it's shaking its head really fast. Then it freezes and stares at me again. Then it shoots off into the street at a dead sprint. It moves so fast I can't even react. I watch it stop on a dime in the intersection, oblivious to traffic, like a rabid dog. A car swerves and honks, missing it by an inch. It shakes its head in a blur again. Waits. It turns to stare at me with unblinking eyes the color of gold coated in oil. Then it yips at me a bunch of times in succession, and the sound gives me shivers. It sounds like a thing laughing as it's dying.

I follow it. I get to the end of my block, and it's already moved a hundred feet farther down the street, almost to the service route that leads to the main drag and the NNPD station. It's really twitching now, and not just like it needs to be put down either. It seems like it's double exposed. It keeps gnawing at itself, then something seems to grip its attention and its head snaps up. Down the street there's a couple walking toward the main drag. A boy and a girl, maybe in their twenties. They're facing away from us and don't notice the coyote. It prowls toward them.

"Hey! What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

It prowls a second step, looking back at me like a mischievous two-year-old holding a glass of red juice over white carpet.

"Don't you take another step. Leave them alone. I don't know what you want, but I'm the one you gotta deal with out here."

It doesn't take another step—

It flat out takes off. It sprints after the couple in dead silence, flying over the hard packed dirt in bounds that seem way too long for its legs. Its big ears are flattened to its head. Its tail jets out like in a streamer behind it. All I can do is yell after it as it leaps to collide with the girl and nails her square in the small of the back with the crown of its head, sending her sprawling to the ground. In a blink it's at her face, snapping and chewing. Its growl is high pitched and whiny, like a power drill.

The man she's with kicks at it. He's calling her name over and over again. It sounds like Polly or Molly. I can't quite tell through

his panic. He lands one, then two solid kicks right to the torso of the coyote. The third connects just as I get there and finally pops the coyote away. It scrabbles in the dirt, flailing like a dog running in its dreams, then it flips itself up.

"You little bastard," I growl. I have my hands out like a grappler and reach for it, but my fingers pass right through, which surprises me. This thing and I had a clear connection. But now that I'm close to it, I think maybe I was seeing things. The coyote looks as surprised as the couple, and it's in a good deal of pain too, from the kicking, that it doesn't seem to understand. "What did you do that for?" I ask, pointing at the girl. She's on her back, her hands up in front of her, while her partner strokes her face and calls for help on his phone. Blood from her wounds trickles into her mouth, and she coughs it up right into the man's face.

The coyote is wide eyed, startled. It's trying to slink away. Run from all this. If it ever saw me, it doesn't anymore. It looks like it woke up in the wrong county with a malt-liquor hangover. It takes a few tentative steps before it limps its way off without looking back.

My gut tells me to leave it. I turn to the girl. I hold my hands out, as if I could touch them. Help them. As if I could even offer words of support. I still sometimes forget that I can do none of these things, even after all these years. They wouldn't want the kind of help I can give. It's a bit more permanent than a coyote bite.

The girl is bit up on the left cheek where it looks like the coyote tried to get at her mouth, but other than that she's not terribly hurt. Nothing a few stitches and a bunch of rabies shots can't fix. Already I see a group of people jogging her way down from the service route. I hear a siren. I turn to the guy, wishing I could pat him on the back. Buy him a beer. But he's gone. His bright-red shoes are beating down the opposite side of the street toward the oncoming group. He's hightailing it. Then he cuts across the street at the last second and nearly plows into them, two women and another man wearing the black polo shirts of Manuelitas—the tamale shop a few blocks away.

I look down at his girlfriend. She moans, unaware. Red Shoes hugs one of the women like he knows her, which is lucky. Then he gets real close to her, which starts a shoving match with one of the men. Maybe not so lucky, after all. Of all the times to pick a fight, right?

Red Shoes gets knocked to the ground and has his hands up in protest. I can't hear what he says, but it's enough to mollify the man, who points toward us. Red Shoes gets up, shakes himself off, and starts running back our way. The man follows, along with one of the two women. The third woman, the one Red Shoes hugged, stands stock-still. The other three don't seem to notice that she's not following them my way. That instead she's staring right at me.

I take a few steps toward her. Her eyes definitely follow me. The group rushes right through me on their way to the girl on the ground. I notice that Red Shoes seems a bit disoriented. He looks behind him like he's trying to figure out how he ever left her side. He looks an awful lot like the coyote did after it got up. I start walking toward the Manuelitas girl, and soon I'm close enough to notice that her face is a little twitchy, her cheeks a bit stretched as if her skin is colored just a touch outside the lines of her face.

"Don't move," I say, but it doesn't come out too strong. I've got goose bumps running up my neck that make me want to jump around in the hot desert sun for about an hour. I take another step forward, she takes one back. I take another step, she does the same. Her eyes light up with manic glee. She smiles so hard I think it's gonna break her face. Then she winks at me. Before I can react she takes off at a dead sprint down the street away from me, her strides longer than they should be. She covers more ground than she should, just like Red Shoes did. Just like the coyote did. Before I can get even fifty feet after her, she's turned the corner in front of the police station onto the main drag.

I turn the corner barely a minute later. I find her, but already I know that whatever possessed her is gone. She's leaning against the chipped stucco of the Navajo Gas building barely twenty feet away. Her hands are on her hips. She's taking big gulps of air and trying to figure out how she got there. I'm right in front of her, but

she doesn't see me. I spin around, scanning the crowd. An awful lot of people are out here today. A lot of trucks. Flatbeds loading and unloading things. A van of tourists crawls by, not knowing where to park or where to turn off to get to Old Town. A lot of movement. I don't see anybody else looking at me, but I can feel the thing. I can feel it here, and I can see evidence of it everywhere. Two men start arguing in front of Manuelitas. Just a disagreement, or something more? What about the young guy perched at the mouth of the alley half a block down, weaving and drinking from a bag? Is he looking at me, or just drunk? A souped-up sport truck peels around the corner, north toward Wapati Casino. Just some kid trying to swagger a bit? Or maybe the Manuelitas girl got up in his face seconds before? The street seems chaotic—it's everywhere you look, once you start looking. And I think I know why.

Gam used to walk everywhere back when I was young. She'd sometimes take me with her on easy little hikes around the pinon hills not far from the house. They're more like lumps than hills, actually. I'd race around the lumps and cut between the yuccas, thinking I was following animals when I was only tracing the path the water made when the rains washed everything out every year in late summer. I'd never stray too far from Gam, who walked in her slow way, her bony hands clasped behind her back, but I can remember one time when I was running around and she yelled at me to stop. Gam never yelled. She got plenty angry sometimes, but she wasn't a yeller. So you better believe when I heard her yell my name I stopped in my tracks.

I waited as she walked up to me in her own time and then looked down at the path I'd been following. She pointed down at a little furrow there where it looked like someone had run a stick along the dirt. My little shoe print cut a waffle in the dust right next to it.

"You know what this is?" Gam asked, speaking in Navajo.

I shook my head.

"Snake. That's a snake track," she said, tracing it all the way back into a hole on the nearest hill with one sharp finger. "And

you just stepped over it.”

I stared up at Gam, trying to divine if she was joking with me or scolding me. With her it was sometimes hard to tell. With most old-timers it still is.

“Scuff it out,” she said, scraping her leather boots on the dirt to show me. When I asked why, she said, “Because if you don’t, the snake will follow you home.”

I started scuffing that dirt like my life depended on it. And every time I crossed a snake’s path after that I scuffed the track out. All my life. Maybe after I died I got lazy. Maybe I got cocky. Because I crossed something’s path beyond the veil, on the shores of the river, and I forgot to scuff out my tracks.

And maybe it’s being back here, surrounded by everything I used to be, thinking about Gam and all the other old-timers and their little sayings and wards and superstitions, but if you ask me, I think I got a pretty good idea whose path I crossed.

A coyote can be a lot of things.

If Joey and I got caught raising hell around the rez or goofing off at school and Gam really wanted to scare some sense into us, she didn’t talk about snakes. She talked about shape-shifters. Things that could take the form of coyotes, if they wanted. Things that could move faster than people. Things that snuck up on you and took you down, then moved on to sow more evil before you even knew what hit you.

There’s one thing that the Navajo hate talking about even more than the names of the dead, and that’s witchcraft.

Gam spoke of these witches in low, cautious quiet, telling me how they’d get me if I didn’t stop screwing around. I was terrified of them as a kid. As a teenager, I stopped being afraid because I convinced myself that Gam was just telling me stories to keep me in line, to get me to finish my chores or do my homework. That she didn’t actually believe them herself.

I was wrong.

Gam called these creatures by their Navajo word: *at’latai*. Kids these days use the English slang: skinwalkers.

I think I crossed paths with a creature of chaos beyond the veil, and I think it followed me home. It's wearing the lore of my people like a disguise. Preying on the Navajo like a skinwalker would. Taking on the most dangerous form of Coyote. The trickster. The witch.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

GRANT ROMER

We'd intended to go all the way up to Chaco City proper, but Owen got lost on the Navajo roads, and we ended up swinging too far southwest. We have no phone service, and since Owen shorted the dash GPS doing all his trailer-hitch tinkering, we drive for over an hour through the flats with our asses in the air, Caroline trying to politely tell Owen he's completely lost and Owen trying to politely take her advice without turning the boat into oncoming traffic.

Then we start seeing crows. A lot of crows.

We end up pulling in to a rez town called Crownrock, on account of all the crows we see flying overhead, and also so Owen can get out of the boat before he busts a button on his collared shirt.

The dinged-up Navajo Nation sign off Highway 371 says the population of Crownrock is three thousand. At first glance I think that may be generous. I notice the population number is written on an interchangeable metal plate. I'd say it's due to be knocked down a peg. Still, I'm excited. I can't tell if it's the bell stirring itself on my chest or my heartbeat shaking it, but I haven't felt this excited about a new place since we left Texas.

The crows are flocking here for some reason, and wherever crows flock, something is out of whack. They line the side of the street and watch us pass like a crowd at a parade. They hop out of the way of people and cars a little slower than they ought to. They perch twenty and thirty deep on the overhead wires, and bunches

of them swarm here and there, worrying at scraps of trash in the gutters and road kill on the shoulders.

The thing about crows is, they're not bad, but they're not good either. They're just crows. They've got their own agenda. Chaco will be the first to tell you. Most of the time it's in line with ours. Sometimes they just want to sit back and watch the carnage and wait to clean up. But wherever there are a bunch of them, something's up.

The whole town isn't much more than a mile across. We spot a KOA-style campground a little ways in where we can plug in and dump out the boat, and all of us get out to stretch our legs and wait for Chaco, who's gone ahead to get the lay of things. I can see him soaring above. The crows here are like ribbons of smoke in a wildfire, but he's impossible to miss. I want to start checking things out immediately, but I can see both Owen and Caroline are exhausted.

Wandering around a new town like zombies won't do any of us any good. They pack it in, and I busy myself in the main room, listening to music, playing video games, messing with my feathers, until eventually I nod off too.

Owen wakes me up on his way outside. I'm shocked at how late it is, already mid-morning. I must have been more exhausted than I thought.

"I remember this place," Owen says, stretching his back. He starts doing old-man calisthenics right there in the middle of the parking lot, and for the first time in a while I thank God I don't know anybody here. "Crownrock. Yeah. We did some off-site work here for the CHC back in the day. House calls and all that. Mostly smiling and shaking hands. Checking insulin pumps and blood pressure levels. Making the Tribal Council look good. Pretty quiet town."

"Well, something's going on," Caroline says. "This place feels... troubled." She walks out to the street and carefully watches the people walking by. She shakes her head. They look fine to me, a little twitchy maybe, but that's about it. Then again, I can't see feelings like she can.

What I can see is tracks. Faint paw prints everywhere I step, fading in and out of view.

"Uh, guys," I say, pointing. Owen and Caroline say nothing. They just stare. A definite path of those weird paw prints runs down the main street.

"Looks like our coyote beat us here," Owen said. "Damn backcountry roads. Would it kill them to put up a few more road signs?"

"I'm sure the Tribal Council is all over that. Top of the list," Caroline mutters, kneeling down to get a better look at the crisscrossing tracks in front of me. "But I don't think it matters how fast we got here. These things are layered all over one another. The coyote has been all around here for some time."

"Looks like a bunch of coyotes to me," I say as Chaco floats down our way in big, looping pinwheels. He lands with a series of hops and surveys the tracks, ticking his head along them like a typewriter.

"This thing has been all over the rez," he says to me. "The Walker is up north, in Chaco City. He ran into the bastard itself yesterday."

"What?" I yelp, causing heads to turn. "Did he catch it?"

Chaco shakes his head.

Owen clears his throat. "I'm guessing this has to do with Ben," he says, and there's this tiny sigh in his voice.

Caroline watches Chaco and me intently as Chaco relates the story. I can't quite believe it myself, and I'm sure I sound as confused as I feel when I tell it to Owen and Caroline.

"It's a shape-shifter. Jumps from body to body, leaving hell in its wake. He says it's a lot like something the Navajo call a skinwalker. Fast, strong. Can be anywhere, or anyone."

Owen grimaces. "Skinwalker, huh? I think I liked it better when we called it just your garden-variety Dark Walker. Or the *thing*."

"It looks to me like it prefers the coyote," Caroline says, following close behind me, eyeing the prints. If the bell could light up the whole street, it would look like a coyote run.

"So what's it want?" Owen asks.

"This thing came from the black pearl," Chaco says to me. "Its job is chaos. That's what it's doing. Problem is, chaos takes many forms. This bad boy tricked the agents into breaking it out of the pearl. It fought its way through the veil. I have a hard time believing it's just here to start street fights and make everyone nervous, or even to kill someone like Bilagaana Bill. It wants more."

"Something big," I say, translating. "It wants a big meltdown."

"And there's another thing," Chaco says, perching on my shoulder. "It could be anywhere in the world. It's clearly fast as hell, and it can disguise itself as anyone. But it's here. Right here. On the rez."

"It's personal," I say, turning back to Owen and Caroline. "It wants chaos, and it wants us to be in the middle of it. All of us. The Walker too. It brought us all here because it knows you have history here. The Walker is from here." I didn't add that it was essentially my idea to get us out here. There's no way this coyote could have known that, right? About how I'd always wanted to see where Joey and Ben came from myself? About my feathers? I fiddle with my bead bracelet. Does it know about that too? It's been here for five years. What if it was watching us the whole time?

"So it's leading us into a trap?" Caroline asks.

Chaco nods. "Smells like it to me, but what can ya do?" he says to me. "When you don't know the game, you gotta get played a bit until you can figure it out." Chaco spreads his wings and lifts off in three slow blasts. "I can see better from up high. Coming in here, it looked like a lot of people headed thataway for some reason, down the street."

"A lot of the coyote tracks go that way too," I say, stepping forward, studying the ground. Owen and Caroline get that I mean to follow, but I look back at them anyway and wait for them to decide. Sometimes I think they like to think they're still in charge of what happens here. Owen particularly.

Owen puffs out his cheeks and lets out a breath, shrugging. "By all means the smart thing to do here is follow the coyote's exact steps into whatever trap it's setting. Sounds completely rational to me. A lot healthier than a candy trail into the oven, that's for sure. In terms of sugar intake."

Caroline lets out a snort, and I turn around before he can see me smile. I know he's kidding. His sense of humor is drier than the desert sometimes. But I bet Ben and Joey ain't laughing at a time like this. Chaco ain't either. Sorry. *Isn't*. Chaco *isn't* laughing.

"All right, then. It's settled," I say.

We start following the tracks.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

OWEN BENNET

When CHC would have us do courtesy calls across the rez, we'd sometimes come here to Crownrock. You can count on both hands the number of towns across Chaco rez that have more than a thousand people in them, and we made it a point to visit each at least once a year. Memories come back to me as we walk the street. There's a great hole-in-the-wall Mexican food joint somewhere here. It doesn't have a name, just "Mexican Food," but it does the best Christmas-style enchiladas you'll ever have. Half green chili, half red. One hundred percent glorious indigestion. The volunteer crew would stop there whenever we passed through, usually me, another resident, and a nurse looking to help out a community we had no idea how to approach. We were full of righteous medical science then. There to make a difference. We were looking for *Heart of Darkness* experiences. To get deep in it. We were convinced we were the real deal, and everyone else was just a tourist.

You wouldn't know that looking at me now, walking down the center of Crownrock like I'm lost in Manhattan. All I'm missing is the oversized map and the sandals with black socks. The man I was would watch me now with narrowed eyes. At least until I was able to explain to younger me about Caroline. About how she still looks to me every now and then like I know what I'm doing, like we're back on the hospital floor and not out here navigating the rest of life together. About the way we sometimes find ourselves holding hands without meaning to. I think the man I was might

start to understand. I didn't know Caroline back then. That was years before she came to ABQ General. But I had a place in my heart waiting for her.

Young Me might ask about Grant too. *Your kid?*

Not exactly, I'd say. Definitely not if you go by what he says. And as for Caroline, she's not in that place with me. Might never be. When we have sex it's more like the kind of sex you have because you're stranded on an island with someone. You have your pride and your principles in one hand, and in the other you hold some small part of a beautiful woman's heart. All that she's willing to give right now. At first you're stalwart. You insist you'll wait for true, fully reciprocal love to seal the deal. Then the days turn to months and the months turn to years and you're still on the island, and all of your principles start to seem foolish. Eventually you take whatever piece of her she's willing to give you.

I hope it's worth it, Young Me would say. What would Dad say? What would Grandfather say?

I think about it every day, I'd reply. They'd tell me to weigh what was lost when I forwent my cause here to be with her. And I do think about it every day. And it's still worth it in moments like this one, when she nudges me softly with her shoulder as we walk side by side, following Grant as he scampers after the tracks. It doesn't seem like a lot, man. I know. But it is. You'll understand one day.

"Everyone is going over there," Grant says, pointing at a big square building one block off the main street. It's built of whitewashed concrete inset with thin windows at regular intervals. It looks like a prison, but it's actually a school. Crownrock High School. We used to hold community health meetings there and give our little talks about heart health and weight management. We had to give out free pizza to get people to come. Which is sort of counterintuitive, if you think about it.

We pass row upon row of trucks in the parking lot, most of them battered F-150s, which we used to call the Chaco state car. We fall in with a steady line of Navajo walking toward the open

double doors of what looks like a big gymnasium. It has a large stenciled eagle on one wall and Home of the Eagles written in thick black lettering underneath. We always did our presentations in the classrooms. We never got this much attention. This looks like some sort of town forum. Grant stares up at the eagle until I have to pull him along. I'm more interested in the three NNPD squad cars parked front and center near the entrance.

Inside, the hallways are scuffed and narrow, the lockers are dented, and the paint on the walls is chipped and cracked. The school has that stale basement smell that seems to permeate all high schools. Above a leaking water fountain the wall is peppered with signs for the upcoming Enchanted Desert Homecoming Dance along with several flyers that read, "If you live in a shelter, a car-park, abandoned building, or train station *you may qualify for certain benefits under the federal McKinney-Vento act.*"

The doors to the gymnasium are propped open, and on each hangs a big, colorful poster advertising the upcoming Native Market of Santa Fe. It occurs to me that this might be a community gathering in preparation for the market. It's a pretty big deal. I went a couple of times back when I lived in Albuquerque. Hundreds of Indian artists with works of all kinds, from beaded dolls and woven coasters all the way up to sand-cast silver and turquoise jewelry that can run you in the thousands. It's also a bit of a zoo. Santa Fe tourism cranked up to eleven.

At a glance I'd say the gym has about two hundred people in it already, and more are filing in with us. Someone is already talking at the front of the room, and it takes me a second to recognize that it's Sani Yokana, the NNPD chief of police. Back at ABQ General we'd see a fair number of Navajo with criminal records. The guys that were repeat offenders in our neck of the woods were often repeat offenders in Sani Yokana's as well, so I had some dealings with him. I remembered him as a stout, powerful-looking man with a wide head, like a stone mountain with long gray hair. I'm shocked to see how much older he looks. His bulk seems deflated. His long hair is grayer and receding a bit at the temples, but he still has that flinty gleam in his eye that

hints of the kind of mettle that's kept him in his position for all these years. He's addressing the crowd, and the tension is palpable. His tone is flat, professional, and deliberate.

"You know me, many of you personally. I'm telling it to you straight, and I'm telling you what I know. That's why I'm here today, because there are a lot of rumors out there already, and people are getting concerned. First, the facts. We have three separate incidents here where we've found unmarked bodies, two men and one woman, all three Navajo. One in the Escaveda Wash, another south of Nageezi, and now this third in Chaco Canyon. Without going further into it, suffice it to say we think all three are connected."

The crowd murmurs, hushed and low. I notice teenagers here too, standing with their parents. Most likely Crownrock students. This is definitely a neighborhood affair.

"Now it's important to note that all three were discovered in remote locations. Not within the cities or even the settlements. We've doubled the officers on each shift, and they're out patrolling Crownrock and the other towns right now, nonstop. This is a time to remain vigilant, not a time to panic. Normally we'd keep all this in the department, but recently everyone seems to be on edge and talking anyway, so we're going around to head off rumors and calm some fears."

"Is it a serial killer? One of our people?" someone shouts from the crowd.

Yokana flinches as if the thought physically twinges him. I'm sure he, and any number of the other old-timers here, think the idea of a Navajo killing another Navajo is basically tantamount to treason.

"What did I just say about not panicking? About rumors?" Yokana says. "*Serial killer* is about as loaded a word as my job's got. I wouldn't use that, no."

If the NNPD found three bodies in quick succession, and they are in fact connected with Biligaana Bill, then they don't need to worry about the killer being Navajo. The killer isn't from this world at all. The way that Caroline squeezes my hand, like she's on a

rollercoaster ride about to drop, I know she wants to tell Yokana as much, just like me. Grant is pointedly not looking at us, as if he might give us away if he did. All of us want to say it. None of us can. At best they'd think we're insane. At worst they'd think we're involved. I called in an anonymous tip from just outside the canyon, and Chaco says he brushed our prints from the scene, but that wouldn't matter if we start talking like we know what happened to Biligaana Bill.

"Three dead," Caroline whispers to me, her lips brushing my ear, confusing my body. "Busy couple of nights for Ben."

"Is the market still on?" comes another shout from the crowd.

"Yes. I want to be absolutely clear here," Yokana says, holding up his hands. "The Native Market is on as planned. Our department is teaming up with the Santa Fe PD to boost security there and help keep an eye on our people. If you've participated in the Native Market, we urge you to do so again. It's important that the Diné are represented."

The faces I see are flat and unreadable in that uniquely Navajo way, but I see determination in the way heads nod. I think it would take a lot to shut down the Native Market, or even to postpone it. The market is a serious source of revenue and publicity for the rez, and not just for the Navajo either. Hundreds of tribes gather in Santa Fe. One of my first years at ABQ General I helped coordinate a medical tent for the market thinking I'd be helping out the rez. I spent seven straight hours giving water to fat white people who had too many margaritas and forgot they were at eight thousand feet. 150,000 people came that year. That's a lot of water for a lot of sunburned tourists. I was sort of put off the whole experience for a while. I'd planned to go back and drink and shop on my own, maybe buy some art I definitely didn't need, but then I met Caroline.

More people are shouting out questions now, but Yokana preempts them by saying he's said his piece but will stick around for a while to speak with whomever wants to chat with him. I wish I had his dogged calm. A lot of it comes from his heritage, but a lot of it is learned. I need to work on that. I used to have it, but I think

it's left me. On the drive over here yesterday I was about ready to chuck myself out of the driver's-side window listening to everyone's thoughts on how to find our way back to the 387. We've got a coyote prowling the countryside that can change shapes, for crying out loud—the fact that I made a wrong turn or two means nothing in the long run, but we're still at each other's throats. This whole rez is on edge. It's infectious.

Most of the crowd disperses. A few of the latecomers stick around to speak with Yokana in person. He addresses each of them in turn, quickly but warmly, shaking hands and patting backs. I turn to corral Grant so we can get back to the boat and talk this over, but he's disappeared again. He does this more often, now. You'd think we have bars on the boat the way he scampers away whenever we park it somewhere and open the door.

"Did you see where Grant went?" I ask Caroline. She's looking carefully at every single person in the room. Testing for smoke like a drug dog at the airport. It's important, I know, but so is Grant. He's our first charge, after all. I think Caroline senses my annoyance, because she focuses on me again.

"He's around here somewhere," she says, scanning the room for his smoke. She senses something, peers around a crowd of Navajo speaking to each other quietly in their rhythmic way, as if every word was already written and they were just reading it out loud to one another. I walk around them and stop. Grant is in the far corner of the gym, with the other kids, talking to a Navajo girl. A girl his age. And he's *smiling*. I mean, he looks like he doesn't know what to do with his hands, but he's smiling.

"Dr. Bennet, I thought that was you." Yokana steps over my way after disengaging himself. "I wasn't sure we'd ever see you again our way," he says. He grasps my hand warmly, and although I know he doesn't intend it, Yokana's words hit me with a wave of guilt, as surely as if Young Me were standing in the corner, watching, shaking his head in disappointment.

"Are you in town for the market?" Yokana asks.

You were a tourist after all.

"No," I say. "We're... we're back for a while."

Yokana looks pleasantly surprised, and I feel a bit better. Young Me shuts up at least.

"We?" he asks.

"I'm with Caroline Adams. I'm not sure if you remember her. She worked the CHC too. And that one—" I point to where Grant has now thankfully put his hands in his pockets while he's talking to the girl, instead of holding them out like claws. "He's with us too. Checking out the school and all."

Yokana nods. Thankfully doesn't delve. I've always loved that about the Navajo. I disappear for five years and show up with a fourteen-year-old kid, and all I get is a placid nod.

"Crownrock High is a good place. Open enrollment. They'll take him if he's interested. It's not very diverse, but that's the rez for you. And you've never had a problem with that."

It takes me several seconds to realize he thinks Grant wants to attend Crownrock High School. I look over at him again, surrounded by kids his age for once. Yokana is right. There's only one other white kid that I can see. He's watching Grant carefully.

"Dr. Bennet," Yokana says, quietly drawing my attention again. "If you're here for a time, I was wondering if you might do me a favor." Suddenly he looks tired. As if he's spent all his energy keeping his face together for the crowd, and now that they've mostly dispersed he's drooping.

"Sure," I say. "Name it."

"We have three bodies at the CHC morgue that nobody can make heads or tails of, in terms of cause of death," he says softly. "Maybe you could take a look at them."

"Me? I'm not sure what I could do."

"As strange as it might sound, I'm not all that surprised to see you here, Dr. Bennet. These cases, they give me the same type of feeling that I got with Dejooli and Ninepoint. Before they disappeared. Back when you were nearly killed. And if we don't get it settled soon, it's gonna attract the attention of Gallup, just like last time. Or something worse than Gallup. Maybe you'll see something the morgue missed. You and Ms. Adams are quite... perceptive."

I can't tell how much he knows or believes about what happened the last time we were all at Chaco rez and the agents hit the hospital. Certainly not the whole of it, but maybe little parts. By Gallup he means the FBI. They've got a station there. Parsons and Douglas couldn't be traced back to the FBI, but Yokana didn't see what we saw. He was convinced they were federal operatives of some sort, and he doesn't want their kind of trouble again. The way he says *or something worse* makes me wonder if he doesn't sense a bit of what's at work here now. He's an old-school Navajo, after all. And a cop. That's a double whammy.

"Sure. I'll check it out." I give him my phone number and tell him to call me to arrange a time. He nods again, takes a deep breath, and puts his face back on.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have two other towns to visit on this little tour, and then I've got to go try and make sure a hundred thousand tourists get what they pay for at the Native Market, and nothing more. Good seeing you, Dr. Bennet."

He turns and makes his slow way to the exit, stopping here and there to say good-bye to everyone who greeted him.

A hundred thousand people. That's a lot of bodies that could harbor our coyote shape-shifter. That's a lot of potential for chaos that I don't think it would pass up. My stomach sours, and I turn to Caroline. She's watching people, but she catches my gaze, shakes her head. No skinwalker here. But still, I feel like it wanted us here. We followed its tracks here, after all. Maybe it wanted us to hear about the trouble it's already causing. Maybe it wants us to think about what it could do if it had a real crowd to whip into a frenzy. Say, a crowd of over a hundred thousand people at the Native Market.

When we finally get Grant's attention and take our leave, the afternoon has settled over Crownrock like a heavy blanket, and pinning it down along the edges are rows and rows of silent black crows.

CHAPTER 10

CAROLINE ADAMS

It's three in the morning, and I'm making a list for us in case one of us gets snagged by the coyote and turns into a skinwalker, so we'll know. I have two columns next to each of our names. The first is for the tell, the hint that we need to pick up on in order to realize that we're no longer ourselves. The second column is tips for how to take us down, if it comes to that.

First, Grant. I was going to say watch out if he drops his accent, but he's been doing that already. When we finally had to pull him away from the gaggle of kids he'd found at Crownrock High he was speaking slowly, carefully, making sure all the drawl was gone. He sounded like a politician. Devoid of accent. I suppose if he comes out dressed in any sort of color, or maybe if he were to ask either Owen or me how our day was, that would be major red-flag material. Very out of the ordinary.

How to take him down? Give him a hug. It paralyzes him. He hangs there like a sheet drying on the line.

Next, Owen. I'd know things were amiss if he wore his shirt two buttons down or untucked. Other than that, I suppose if I caught him dismantling his Trailer to Nowhere after nearly killing himself running an electrical line to it, I'd know he was a skinwalker. Or if his smoke ever stopped reaching for mine. If that ever happened, I'm not sure what I'd do. I'd be too shocked to even try to take him down.

As for me, it's easy. If I ever get a good night's sleep, you need to take me out back and shoot me because I am not in my right

mind and am most likely a skinwalker. Worry and insomnia are the normal for me. I worry about Owen, about Grant, about how my new family can fit with Ben. All of it. Sometimes when Grant is quiet or moody I ask him what he's thinking about and he says *nothing*. What the heck is that? How can you think of *nothing*? What's that even like? Is that like what a cow thinks of? What I wouldn't give to just go into cow mode when I'm up yet again in the middle of the night. It gets so bad sometimes that I even miss Big Hill's moonshine. The stuff tasted like socks, but even a thimble of it would put me out for the count. I'd wake up feeling like poo, but sometimes it was worth it. Come to think of it, that's how you can take me out if I'm a skinwalker. A shot of moonshine. Either that or take away my magazines. Or you could make me cold. I hate being cold. I'd just complain a lot and then be really easy to shoot.

I'm actually listing all this, by the way. Writing it all down in my journal under the thin blue light of my bedside lamp. Owen is sleeping softly next to me, one long arm wrapped under his pillow, the other tucked in to his chest. He doesn't fit this bed. His feet hang over by a few inches, which would drive me nuts, but he's never complained. He doesn't complain about anything. Ever. Even when I can see it on him, in his smoke, that the Ben situation makes him feel like a fool. He's outrageously in love with me. Every fiber of him. All he wants is the same in kind from me. And I do love him. Just not with every fiber. Some fibers are wrapped up elsewhere, and he knows it, and it makes him feel like a chump.

Owen thinks I'm obsessing over this book because it offers me a link to Ben's world, and I want that connection because I want Ben. But it's not like that. At least not completely. I'm not some love-struck tween. I know how long five years is. I know the life I chose. More and more I just want those fibers back. I want to close that chapter. And to do that I need to see Ben again. I need to speak with him. But Owen wouldn't understand that, even if I found the guts to tell him, and the words came out the way I wanted them to.

What Owen does understand is that we need to figure out a way to stop these murders and corral this coyote. And for that, we need the book.

I think.

The truth is, I have no idea what's in the book, and I'm no closer to figuring it out than I was when the agents gave it to me five years ago. It might be a detailed history of the coyote we seek, or step-by-step instructions to cross between the lands of the living and the dead like the coyote did, or maybe it's a book of its favorite Crock-Pot recipes. Nobody knows. Not Chaco, not Ben, not Joey Flatwood or Big Hill. I've used microscopes and magnifying glasses. I've used blacklight and firelight and UV light. I put out an APB to the Circle for ideas and got a bunch of shrugs. The general consensus was don't worry about it unless it starts causing trouble.

Now people are dying. We don't have the luxury of blank pages anymore. If there's any way the book can help us, I need to figure it out right now. So that's what I'm gonna do.

I slowly sit up, my legs hanging off the bed. I ease open the flip lock on my built-in nightstand, I pull the book out from under the makeup and lotion and even a few condoms that I set on top of it to discourage Grant, or anyone else, from browsing. Not that it matters. Grant couldn't care less about the book. He's got a big bird that serves as his connection to the other side, if he wants it, but he'd rather listen to his music and play video games. He's got other things on his mind. Most likely that Navajo girl he was gawking at over at the school. Basically all the condoms do is serve to remind me that I'm not having enough sex with Owen, or that I'm having too much sex with Owen for the wrong reasons. Did you know it's possible to have too much sex and not enough at the same time? Neither did I! Then Ben and Owen happened.

I shove those thoughts out of my mind and flip through the book. Blank as always, but the pages have felt a little different ever since we crossed over to the rez. They feel heavier, like before we came they were your standard-issue paperback, and now they're that fancy pressed paper chock-full of weird fibers that costs a fortune at the stationery store. I think it's reacting to the

coyote, being close to the thing, surrounded by its tracks that seem to stain the very air and refuse to go away.

Which got me thinking about the agents. They've got a few marks of their own that don't seem to wash off, and I'm not just talking about the special mark Allen's brunches have left on my heart. Or even the scars on his face, although they aren't going anywhere. I'm talking about the searing marks they have on their palms, where they held the knife that ripped a hole through the veil. They hide them well. I mean, how many times do you look at someone's palms, after all, but they're there, and when you see it, you see it. The knife had some serious firepower behind it. And when they held it, they could also read the book. Maybe it's a coincidence, maybe not, but it's all I've got to go on.

Now, since the knife is gone forever and we're immensely better off for it, I need to use the next best thing: my totem. The knife was made of the same vein of turquoise as the totems. In the past, I've only held the book while phasing in and out of the thin space. Once or twice I gave it a glance while travelling but saw nothing. This time, I'm betting things might be different if I stick out the cold burn of the place and really hunker down with my crow totem and refuse to quit.

I look over at Owen as I slide my totem pouch from its spot underneath my pillow. He doesn't stir. He breathes softly, his lips barely parted. I loosen the pull on the worn leather bag, the first gift Owen ever gave me, and one that matches his own. I take a deep breath and tighten my grip on the book with one hand then reach inside the bag with the other.

The world snaps into a windblown sepia color around me where all that I see are faint outlines and shapes of the living world, like a rough-draft artist's sketch. Owen's own totem glows warmly beneath his pillow. In the next room I can see Grant sleeping splayed out like a ragdoll, the covers on the daybed askew, but the bell around his neck glints and shimmers with a drowsy power. It's asleep now too, but it's always waiting.

The pain is already starting, but I've gotten used to it by now. Living people like you and me aren't supposed to hang out in this

in-between space, neither fully dead nor fully alive. It's unnatural, and our bodies rebel from it after a while. The stinging cold used to take my breath away instantly, but I'm not such a lightweight anymore. I've got the body to prove it too. The agents were right, my skin has this super-attractive midwinter coloring that seems to stick around no matter how many hours I lay out on the roof of the boat under the summer sun. Owen calls it Arctic chic.

I flip open the book one handed and leaf through a couple of the pages. They're still heavy, but in the thin place they glisten too. As if they're running with invisible ink. I put the book right up to my face, as if I'm an old lady with a dinner menu. I think I see something, but it looks more like those little floaties you have at the corner of your eye, the little strings of pearls that flit away from you when you look right at them. I flip through another few pages with my thumb, staring, and then another few. I'm starting to get a headache. I pull myself away from the book, muttering all sorts of swear words. I massage my temple with the hand that holds the crow, but the headache isn't going away. The stinging burn of the thin place is strong. Stronger than it should be. It comes at me in a wave, like the stinging pinch of getting a shot at the doctor—at first you don't feel it at all, then the pain comes, then it comes hard and you try not to embarrass yourself by crying as a grown woman. I drop my crow.

I snap back to the bedroom. The crow lands on the book with a thump that makes Owen shift around for a second before settling again. The boat feels wonderfully warm. I realize that I'm trembling. I look at the clock on my nightstand. It tells me nearly thirty minutes have passed. That can't be right. I was in the thin place for two, three minutes tops. Maybe Owen shorted out the clocks or something doing his "improvements." I light up my phone, and the time checks out.

I was in the thin place for half an hour. I've never been in it for that long. What happened? It's as though I was in some sort of trance. The book bewitched me. But I was so *close*. I could see something! I could see the place where letters would be, if they weren't... not there. Sort of like in the old days when you used to

use correction fluid to cover mistakes but unless you really coated your paper with the stuff, a hint of the word shone through. I was getting hints!

I lay my hand flat and hold it out in front of me. I watch it shake, then tremble, then shimmy, then twitch. Then nothing. When it's as calm as a lake, I grab my totem again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

OWEN BENNET

I'm back at ABQ General on the ninth floor, and I'm late for my shift. I slept in, forgot to set my alarm, doesn't matter how. All that matters is that I've left all my patients on the line. I had a full schedule, twenty-minute visits through to lunch, half an hour for lunch and charting, then a full afternoon of twenty-minute visits. I've let them all down—they'll have to be rescheduled too, so I've let down my staff as well. The other oncologists, my nurses, Caroline in particular. I'm running around the floor, going door to door to try and catch up, papers flying everywhere, my lab coat fluttering behind me, but I can't find anyone I'm supposed to see. All the patients look the same: faceless lumps in hospital gowns staring silently at me as I run. All I can hear is this strange tapping noise, like a man with a cane following me. Or maybe the clicking claws of a coyote.

I sprint around the *U* shape of the floor, trying to match my appointments with the charts on beds and on exam-room doors, but everyone is staring at me in faceless silence. There's only this tapping, and it's getting louder. I spin all around trying to find the source of the sound. My heart feels like it's in my throat. I have no idea how I can save these people if I can't see them, if I don't know who they are. The tapping burrows into my skull—

I shoot up from bed. My head is pounding, and my chest heaves with great big breaths of air. The tapping continues, rattling everything, and it takes me a moment to understand that it's Chaco at the window. He looks like he's trying to break in. Just

then Grant bursts into the bedroom, his hair sleep-crazy and his boxer shorts crooked. The bell on its chain bounces off his bony sternum.

"Where's Caroline?" he asks.

Before I can answer that she's obviously right here next to me, he's already at her side of the bed, flipping the covers back. And her side's empty.

"Where did she go, Owen?" he asks again, his voice cracking in panic.

I haven't worked moisture into my mouth quite yet, but my eyes are focusing, and the first thing I see is her bedside drawer open and the book gone.

"She took that damn book somewhere," I say. "Maybe back to the agents?" Chaco is still slamming his head against the window again and again. He lets out a raucous trio of caws. "What's his problem?"

"He says she's not gone. She's here. She's stuck phasing or something."

"Stuck?" I ask as Grant swipes at the place where Caroline should be, and finally everything clicks into place. I reach under my pillow, tear at the tie to my pouch, and grab my totem. The cold sting of the thin place slams over me, and suddenly I see her. She's right there, sitting on the bed. Grant is swiping right through her. I call her name, but she doesn't answer. My words sound as though I'm screaming through a windstorm. I carefully pivot myself around the bed, taking care not to walk in this place, or else I might find myself a mile away in the blink of an eye. She's upright, and her eyes are open—staring, actually—and they glisten with an icy film. She's shivering uncontrollably, the black book tremoring in her hand. She has her crow pressed to the page like it's a penlight.

"Caroline! Let go!"

She hears me, but none of my panic registers. She looks up at me slowly, like a sloth, and the white in her eyes slips a little as she recognizes me.

"I can almost read it, Owen," she says. "I get whispers. It's beautiful and it's awful and I..." Tears well in her eyes and freeze

to pearly drops on her cheeks. "I can't look away." She slowly reverts her gaze to the book.

"Help me," she whispers.

I fall upon her hand, tearing at her crow while holding my own in place, but her grip is locked. Frozen. It's as cold as a butcher's block. She lets out a frightened sigh that's oddly sexual, as if it's both pain and pleasure in one, and I see that with both our crows on the book, the page is darkening in waves of a script, like a scrolling computer code full of characters new and ancient. The effect is like when your brain shifts to finally comprehend those 3-D pictures, only this picture is the equivalent of the Sistine Chapel if it were painted above the devil's own throne. It paralyzes me, but the characters only click for a minute, then they scramble. The sight of them drills into my eyes like windblown sand. The pain is immense, but I don't care. I'm only thinking about how to get Caroline out of here.

If she won't let go of her crow, maybe she'll let go of the book. I wind up and slap the black book with a flat-palmed forehand and it goes spinning from her, vanishing from the thin place back into the living world, where it falls to the floor like lead. Caroline crumples, and I seize the opportunity, punching her crow from her grip. She blinks back, and I follow in the next instant.

Caroline falls forward and off the bed like a badly positioned mannequin. Grant catches her head before it bounces off the floor. Chaco is frozen, staring through the window at her, not even blinking. I whip our blanket off the bed and wrap it around her, trying to warm her hands in mine, pressing my cheek against her forehead. She feels like she's just been dredged from the bottom of a lake. At first she's still, her eyes on the book, her blue lips trying to form words that won't come, and this is when I'm so scared I think I'm going to vomit. I'm going to vomit from fear. It's a new sensation for me, the thought of such horrible outcomes, such terrifying potentialities, striking me in the stomach with the force of rotten meat. I think I'm going to have to grab the trash can, but then she starts to shiver. Trembling at first, but then she starts shaking so badly the blanket slips off her. I battle my nausea

down. Shivering is good. Shivering means her body is still with it enough to fight, to contract to keep her warm. If she can fight she can live.

I take off my shirt and bear hug her. Grant unhooks the window so Chaco can hop in and float down inside, then Grant steps between Caroline and the book and sits down. Something about Grant—and the bell—being between her and the black book finally snaps her out of her trance. She blinks and looks up at him, and this time the tears are able to roll down her cheek instead of freezing there.

“What did you do?” Grant asks, his eyes wide, confused. Almost like he’s angry at her. “Why did you do that? You could have been killed.” I see in his eyes that he’s grappling with the same fear as I am. Likely he feels about ready to vomit too.

“It... it was like staring into... the darkest part... of the sky...” she stammers. “The sky between stars. It... sucked me in...”

Chaco walks over to the book and nudges it open with his beak, tittering to himself. The cover thuds to the ground, and moments later Chaco squawks loudly and hop-flies backward, settling in a crouch on Grant’s head. Grant turns around and goes to the book. He picks it up, unafraid. He holds it out to us, open to the first page. The one Caroline was looking at. The one both of our crows illuminated in the thin place. I flinch, expecting to see the flowing of those horrible words, but the page is white again, except for three words scrawled as if by a dripping pen quill across the top.

It reads: The Coyote Way.

CHAPTER 12

THE WALKER

In between work calls I walk the streets of Chaco looking for our coyote. I jump around to the different rez towns and off-map settlements at random: Matagorda, Ponca City, Wheeling, Las Cruces. I drop in on Crownrock a fair amount too. I don't feel like so much of a stalker now that I actually have an excuse to check in on Caroline. But I spend most of my time in Chaco City, my old stomping grounds. I used to walk all over these streets as a kid, both the pretty paved main streets and the beaten dirt outskirts. I know the people and the feel, so it's easy for me to see how much the coyote has changed things. I got called to two other deaths not long after Bilagaana Bill, same scenario. Unmarked bodies without souls. The coyote ramped up its game real quick. The way things have escalated feels chaotic, which would be in keeping with the thing, but part of me also feels like it cased this place for years. Maybe waiting for us.

When I was a rookie at the NNPD, back before I got partnered with Ninepoint, I had to use my own truck for calls. We only had so many cruisers, and they went out based on seniority, so I puttered around the rez in a beater Toyota that Mom left me because I think she was embarrassed to be seen in it in Santa Fe. It had a couple hundred thousand miles on it and desert dust caked into the paint job. The AC had all the power of a panting dog, and the whole time I drove it I kept thinking how I wanted a new one. Soon enough the universe started rubbing it in, because I was seeing new trucks everywhere. That's what it's like now with the

coyote's trail. I haven't seen anyone outright staring at me, but now that I'm looking for it, I can see evidence of the thing everywhere. I can feel it in that plucking sensation you get when you know someone's staring at your back, but when you turn around nobody's there.

This used to be a tight neighborhood, but now people don't talk to each other on the streets. No *ya-at-eehs*. No tipping of the hat. When people do run into each other it's prickly. People seem rubbed raw. Hungover without being drunk first.

If you didn't know better, you'd think that the upcoming Santa Fe Native Market was the reason. People are working on their booths in the streets and alleys. Loading trailers and packing up artwork. Some are painting signs and assembling costumes. Especially on the main drag, where the more established pottery and rug places are located to catch tourists. The market runs all weekend, but the first day is the big day and the big party night. Most of these people can't afford a hotel in Santa Fe during the winter dead season, much less during the market, so they'll be driving in and out all weekend. Two hours each way. Usually everyone does it happily. The market's where they make a good chunk of cash for the year. But nothing about them looks happy now.

I see people muttering to themselves, shielding their work from others, closing the blinds of shops and galleries, rushing boxes to and from trucks, locking the doors each time. You'd think the market is a big competition with one winner instead of a huge celebration.

Now, I'm not crazy about the Native Market, but I know how important it is to a lot of people on the rez. There's a lot of shuckin' and jivin' going on there, true. You see a lot of stunning pottery and silver and whatnot, but sometimes it's right next to mass-produced corn-husk dolls and beaded jewelry that you'll swear came from China. And I won't deny that pretty much everyone selling there is hoping the white people with the twelve-dollar frozen margaritas take out their wallets, but the market is more than that. It shines a spotlight on a group of people that the

rest of the country seems to constantly want to forget. It's supposed to be an opportunity to bring together a bunch of tribes and peoples, always has been, so I know all this shade everyone is throwing is coming from something else. From the coyote.

I feel the pressure pop of Chaco coming into my plane. I don't break stride as he flares his wings out over me and settles on my shoulder, just like the old times, back before he had a Keeper to look after. His weight feels good. Substantial. I live in a world where sometimes I wonder if I have any weight at all, or if I'll float away one day like the souls I bring to the veil. Chaco seems to understand this in that silent way he has of reading me. He fluffs up and plunks down harder.

"How is she?" I ask.

"She's fine. Still drinking a lot of hot coffee."

I knew she'd recover fast. Caroline has techniques of pulling others out of tailspins, knitting together broken hearts and frayed souls. I have no doubt she used them on herself. Any other person who spent that long in the thin space with that book would be dead or insane. Except maybe Joey. But he's a little crazy already. Always has been. After I heard what happened to her I stepped over to see her for myself, but it's too hard to watch her in pain when there's nothing I can do. After the fourth time I tried to touch her hair and my hand slid right through her, I got up and left. I told Chaco not to tell anyone I was ever there.

"Nothing more from the book?" I ask.

Chaco shakes his head and sighs, puffing out his chest feathers. "It still just says *The Coyote Way*, and we're still drawing a blank. Caroline wants to take it to the Circle, maybe someone has some idea. I don't know, maybe it's some dark self-help mantra. You know? Like a twelve-step program to achieving your inner chaotic potential?"

"I don't think so, bird."

"Oh yeah? And I suppose you got a better idea?"

"I might," I say, which surprises him. "What, you think I just walk around all day in between calls, taking in the beautiful views of backwater Chaco?"

"No, you spend a lot of time staring at Caroline too."

"Shut up. Here, follow me for a second."

Before he can reply I swirl open the soul map and step through. He shoots in behind me. It's a quick trip, just a skip away on the map, the souls shooting by us like stars in warp. I hold up my hand to stop us and swipe my way out again. Chaco blinks onto the scene a heartbeat later. He flops onto my shoulder again and looks around us, the sunset reflecting off his eyes like red marbles in a bucket of black.

"The desert? So what? I've been seeing a lot of desert lately. Been hoping for less desert, actually. More beach."

"The Arroyo is behind us, about a quarter mile back, where a lot of old-timers and hard liners live, alongside your run-of-the-mill bootleggers and meth cooks." I start to walk up a low rise, and when I crest it we see a broken string of rounded huts in the distance. The sunlight cuts just over their tops, where you can see a black opening in the ruddy brown mud ceiling of each. Three of them are close to us, but none of the three are standing the way they should. They're slumped, half exposed, their wooden bones bleached by the sunlight.

"The hogans?" Chaco asks.

I shield my eyes from the last of the sun.

"I've been thinking a lot about Gam. About the old-timers back down the way. About how Joey and I used to laugh at all the things they used to tell us. The old ways and the old warnings and all that. None of that seems so funny now."

I know Chaco thinks a lot about Gam too. She was his last Keeper, and no matter how much he loves Grant, he was with her for decades. He watches the hogans quietly. He looks tired. He has to keep tabs on Grant on top of all this coyote business. Gam was an eighty-year-old woman at the end. Grant offers entirely new challenges, of the exhausting teenaged variety.

"What happened to them?" Chaco asks, his head bobbing along with my steps as I walk toward them.

"There used to be six here that I knew of. They were pristine. Status symbols for their clans. They used to meet here from time to

time. Perform ceremonies and cleanses. Or just sweat it out. But then the elders kept dying and the younger kids stopped caring so much."

"That sucks," Chaco says.

"It happens. Every generation thinks the old ways are forgotten, lost on the young shits running around in their lifted trucks blaring their rap music. But it ain't the end of the world. The Navajo seem to go through cycles. Tipping too far off the path, then eventually coming back to what's in our blood. We can never stray far from the Way for long. It's a balance. Or at least it was until the coyote came to town."

We pass all three run-down hogans. Hollow, brittle shells of themselves. Even the smoke stains are barely visible.

"I gotta tell you, Walker, I don't see what you're seeing here. This place looks forgotten to me."

"Not totally," I say. "Not yet."

We pass around the third hogan, and we're faced with about a thousand feet of desert, clumped and pitted by shadows that looked bigger than they are, the sunset playing tricks on us. At the edge of the sunlight, just now plunged into darkness, stands a complete hogan, smaller than even the broken ones we'd passed, but tended and whole. As we approach it, I point out the smoke hole up top, patched and trimmed. I point out the eastward-facing door, the mud fresh. I pass my hand through the mantel above it and can almost feel the pollen there. We walk in, and I can almost smell the traces of pinon smoke. I know Chaco can, because his beak noses this way and that. The fire pit is brushed clean, and its rocks are placed neatly in a circle. The dirt floor looks swept.

"This one is still used," Chaco says.

"This is my clan's hogan. Gam brought me here once, when I first found out I had cancer all those years ago. She sang over me. Performed a Way chant that I thought was for healing. But now I'm not so sure. I think she knew I was going to die."

I point at the swept floor beyond the fire. "Two old men sandpainted the Holy People right there, but there was a fifth figure in addition to the four. A dark figure with turquoise eyes. I

saw Ana during the chant. Up until about a week ago I still thought she was a vision. Now I think maybe I really saw her. I think the chant called her and opened my eyes for a short time. Maybe Gam wanted me to see what was in store for me so it'd be easier for me to take it when the time came."

"A Way chant," Chaco said softly.

"That's right. We have a bunch of them. The Blessingway and the Evilway are the most famous, but there are a ton more. Enemyway, Nightway, Shootingway. There was even a Ravenway and a Dogway a long time ago, and more that are lost to time. Each calls the Holy Family's attention in a different way, for a different reason. Brings them to the song."

"The Coyote Way," Chaco says, amazed. "It's a song. A Navajo chant."

"Why not? And think about this: the coyote is untouchable right now. It's a skinwalker. It can be anyone and anywhere. But what if we could bring it right here? Right to this hogan. What if we could call it?"

"We could trap it," Chaco says excitedly.

"Why not?" I say again.

Chaco and I stare at the cold fire pit in silence. It's the logistics of the thing that are tricky. If there ever was a Coyoteway chant, it's an ancient memory now. The instructions might be in the black book, but is it worth risking Caroline's life for them? And even if we did know what to do, what to say, it takes talent and preparation to sing. Gam brought Ana to me, but she was an accomplished Singer with decades of experience under her belt and a full Singer's pouch. And what if we actually catch the damn thing? What then? We got a lot on our plate, and time is running out.

Still, I can't help but smile a little. Maybe we caught a break. And what's more, maybe we can catch another. Somebody is keeping this hogan clean. If we can find them, maybe they can help us before this becomes coyote country once and for all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

GRANT ROMER

I'm talking to Chaco on the way to school. That's right. I'm going to school. And not school where Owen is the math teacher and the science teacher and the history teacher and whatever other teacher, either, with Caroline showing up every now and then to tell me I should read more literature and do some art. Like she reads much more than her magazines anyway. No, this is a real school, with real kids, and real lockers, and real desks, and a real football team.

Chaco ain't so keen on the idea. Sorry. He *isn't* so *happy* with the idea. Texans get *keen*. Other people get *happy*. He sort of slow-floats above me, riding thermals, but we still talk. Every now and then he passes behind a slew of other crows floating the thermals too as they careen to get out of his way.

"Something is wrong with this place," he says. "I can feel it."

"Something is wrong with every place," I say, muttering some of the words, thinking the rest. I've been doing a lot of talking out loud to Chaco when I don't need to. Now that I'm around other kids, I need to keep him on the downlow.

"You know what I mean, bro." And he's right. I do. I can see paw prints all around Crownpoint High if I look close enough. The town itself is pretty bad, but this place is bad in particular. It's a good thing nobody else notices what I see. They might not leave their houses. Which would suck because I want to meet them. That girl in particular. I didn't catch her last name, but I sure remember her first name. Kai. It sounds good. It sounds like how she looks. I

don't speak any Navajo yet, but if I was to guess, I'd say a *Kai* is that little tiny smile she has on the corner of her mouth. Or maybe a *Kai* is when you wink your eye without winking your eye, like she can.

"Well, you watch my back, right? I mean, if something is going on here, one of us needs to figure out what."

"I can't always be there for you. I do my best, but you're growing up, man. You're in all sorts of different situations now, and it's all I can do just to keep up."

"Maybe I don't always need you lookin' after me," I say, and the way Chaco suddenly gets distant, in the sky and in my mind, makes me immediately regret it. After an awkward silence Chaco chimes in again.

"The things that are coming after you aren't always as easy to spot as the agents. Snakes don't always look like snakes, Grant."

"I'll be careful, man. Why can't you be happy for me? I'm finally off the boat."

And with those words hanging in the air, I walk under the eagle painted above the doors of Crownrock High for my first day of school.

They pair me with a white kid to show me around the place, which I'm sure they think will make me more comfortable or something, but it isn't exactly what I was looking for. His name is Mick, and he's as pale and scrawny as I am. He wears these baggy gangster clothes, big printed T-shirts that go down past his butt, and baggy b-ball shorts with huge work boots, and they sort of swallow him up. We talked for a minute or two at the town meeting in the gym. I meet him in the hall outside of the front office after I hand in my enrollment papers.

"It's you," he says. "I wondered if I'd see you again. Thought maybe you'd be scared off the place."

"Scared off?" I ask, trying not to sound nervous. "Why?"

"Well, you saw. At the meeting. There aren't a lot of white kids here. Matter of fact, I think you're number ten or so in the whole school now."

"I don't mind."

"Not yet you don't. But you just walked through the doors."

I don't know what to say to that, so I just shrug.

"C'mon," he says. "Your locker is over here."

We walk down the halls and everything is quiet. Mick is quiet. I can feel Chaco nearby, but if I can't see him I have trouble talking to him, so even he's quiet. I can see everyone already in class as I pass the doors.

"It's first period right now. Which I hate, so thanks for getting me out of it."

I can't tell if Mick is being friendly or not. I think maybe he is. He looks at the ground a lot, almost like he's following some invisible tracks of his own. I think he's just one of those people who doesn't like looking straight at you. "You'll start at second period." He snatches my schedule from my hand. "Which looks like Geometry for you. Good luck with that shit. Room 108, right over there, after the bell rings."

We walk past a row of small lockers, some of them hanging open. A few have little hearts and hand-drawn signs on them with things like Go 18! Beat Sargaso!

"What's Sargaso?" I ask.

"High school in Santa Fe. We always play them in football the Thursday before the market. It's a big stupid deal. Why do you wear all black?"

He asks this like it's right in line with football and big stupid deals.

"Just like it is all. Doesn't stain."

Mick doesn't laugh. He does nod, though, like it was good advice or something. I think my sense of humor is getting a little dusty. More Navajo, hopefully.

"Here's yours," he says, popping his fist on the farthest locker in the line. "Upperclassmen get all the good ones," he says,

reading my mind. "Your code is in your folder. Put your shit in there, we still got a few minutes to walk."

Mick shows me the cafeteria. "There's where you get the food, there's where you eat it. Can you eat lunch?"

"You mean like do I have lunch?"

"Can you pay for it. You got money?"

"A little," I say. Owen gave me twenty for lunch, even after I told him I wanted to walk solo.

"A'ight, well, if you got money trouble, they help you out. There's programs and stuff." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "But if you do got money, keep that shit to yourself."

We walk again without talking much. Just the sounds of Mick's boots squeaking against the tracked floor. He points out the art-and-music hall, where I see the wooden framing of a booth.

"It's the Crownpoint booth for the market." He sneers. "I gotta help paint it 'cause I got busted skipping first period last week. If you wanna check it out after class, I could use the company."

He vaguely gestures out a big window in the rear toward the sports fields. I see one half of a dusty baseball diamond and take his word on a football field just out of sight. All in all the place is old, pretty small, and well worn. Discolored paths snake along the concrete floor where kids have walked for years. But I don't mind. I'm used to old places. Pap's house was old before he bought it. I'm used to small places too. I live in a car—a big car, but still a car. As for well worn, well, I got no problem with that. The bell I wear around my neck might be the most well-worn thing on this planet.

Mick looks at his watch. A big, plastic, cheap-looking thing. "Shit," he says. "Time's up."

The bell rings. The period switches over, and a couple hundred kids go from in the classrooms to in the halls in a blink. I try to keep my eye out for anything weird, or for anyone eyeing me funny, sensing the bell, but all I see is kids. Tons of them. More than I've seen in my life. And all of them look at me as they pass: I'm the new kid. One of a handful of white kids in the whole place. Of course they're gonna look at me. But still I feel as hot as I've ever felt in my life. And that's before I spot Kai.

She's walking out of a classroom, talking with two other girls at her side, and putting a notebook away into a woven bag at her hip. She's wearing a Lobos Football T-shirt and very short pink shorts. The way the shirt falls, it almost looks like she's not wearing shorts at all. She laughs at something one of her friends says, then she looks up, and then she sees me staring like a cow. I know I should look away, pretend I was just scanning the hall, but I can't. She recognizes me. She looks surprised, but not in a bad way. She opens her mouth a little, then she's surrounded by a group of older guys who come laughing down the hallway, and soon all of them go off in the same direction.

When I turn back to Mick, he's already looking at me with a smirk on his face. His mouth twitches a little, like he wants to say something, but he just shakes his head. The hallway is already clearing out. The passing period is winding down.

"Remember, you're in Room 108. Good luck, lover boy."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

CAROLINE ADAMS

I'm freezing. I mean, I know I get cold. I always have. I'm the type of girl to blow dry my feet for ten minutes after I do my hair, just because I can. In the winter, if it were socially acceptable for me to walk around in one of those huge Carhartt monkey suits the rig workers have, I would do it. I'd sleep in it too. But it's August, in the desert, and I'm way too cold for August in the desert.

The book almost killed me. The thought of how close I came to having my life sucked out of me in the thin place makes me a bit dizzy. So now I'm cold and dizzy. It's been a few days since that night, and I'm still not right. I came close to slipping away forever. Really, really close. I try not to tip Owen and Grant off about just how close, but I think they know. It might have something to do with the fact that I reheat my steaming-hot tea in the microwave every thirty seconds. Or that I'm drinking cup after cup of steaming-hot tea in the first place, in the co-captain's chair, under the blazing windshield.

Anybody else wouldn't have made it back. I don't want to toot my own horn here, but it's the truth. I had to coax my own smoke back to life, which is tough, because I can't exactly see it on myself. All I know is I felt it guttering, like a little spark at the bottom of a pile of straw, only the pile is on the desert plains and a big wind is trying to scatter it far and wide. I had to put my hands around it, breathe on it, whisper to it, just like I did with the agents when they first tumbled out of the break in the river, when they were half dead too.

I focused on thoughts that would warm me. Not things like tropical islands and Carhartt monkey suits, which would warm my body, but things that would warm my soul. Things like remembering Grant when he stood like a little superhero, holding the bell out in front of us to protect us in the Texas desert. Things like Ben. Everything I can remember about Ben, actually. But the problem is, I'm remembering less and less about Ben. I have a bunch of core memories that I go back to all the time. Playing cards with him when he was getting chemo, holding him in the dry grass of his backyard when he got sick, kissing him for the first and last time before he left me. These are all important to me, but I've been bringing them out of their special memory box and shining them up too much, and I think I've forgotten other stuff. I had a lot more Ben material once. I know I did. Every moment I spent with him was special in some way, but all I have now are the superstars, and the more I bring them out, the less shiny and the more bronzed they get. The rest seem to have faded altogether. That, more than anything, reminds me of all the years that have gone by.

The Ben memories helped, but they didn't bring me back. They're more the type of thing I talk to James and Allen about over a cup of French press up at Friday Harbor. They're great "last thoughts," the kind of things you run up the flagpole right as you're checking out, and I thought I was checking out, until a stupid memory popped into my head. It was of Owen, frazzled and red faced and damp about the ironed neck of his button-down, trying to make a twenty-point U-turn in the boat when we were lost on some Navajo road west of Chaco Canyon, and even though I couldn't laugh with my frozen mouth I ended up laughing with my soul. And just like that, the icy-iron grip of the thin place and the creeping insanity of the book were snapped. I'd live. What can I say? I guess I have a soft spot for frazzled men.

Speaking of frazzled, Owen has been in a constant state of mild frazzlement for days now, ever since he slapped that book away and pulled me back. He grasps my fingers like straws whenever he sees me, as if they were thermometers that could

measure my core temperature. He does this without talking sometimes, just reaches over and grasps my fingers, and, yes, they're cold. I tell him that they're always cold, which is true, but I can tell he doesn't buy it. His smoke is so gentle. It's this softly resting blue, like a cloud plunked over a mountain, afraid to leave. Which is why he's really not happy about what we're about to do.

"Are you sure they're all gonna show up? I mean, if it's just you and me, we're really underprepared for this. Criminally underprepared," Owen says. He's pacing the main room of the boat, his head cocked at forty-five degrees so it doesn't bump the ceiling.

"Chaco got word out. Everyone will be there," I say, trying to grab him as he passes, but he's lost in his analytical world again. The one that measures outcomes and risk and determines best practice. The oncologist's world.

"You *just* stopped shivering in your sleep, Caroline."

"We don't have any more time. You've seen this place. It's falling apart. And Grant is in the middle of it. Ben thinks this could be the key to trapping this thing. If there's a chance we can get any more info out of the book, we have to take it." I check the dash clock on the boat. It's almost time.

Owen mutters to himself, still pacing. I hear the words *Grant wouldn't even let me walk him halfway* and *goddamn book*, but I know he's in with me. He's pulling his totem pouch from inside his shirt. He chose to wear it there because his neckties used to cover up the bulge. He doesn't wear ties anymore, but he still keeps it there. He has racks and racks of ties in the closet that he hasn't touched in years, but he still keeps them too.

"Are you ready?" I ask gently.

"No."

"Owen."

"Fine."

I count down from ten. I have the book in one hand, flipped open to the Coyote Way page. At one, I grab my totem. Owen phases right along with me, his hand grasped around my fingers.

The bite is immediate and twice as painful as I've ever felt it, so soon.

"Don't look at it!" Owen screams. He brushes my cheek with the hand that holds his totem and nudges my line of sight toward him. "Not yet!"

We're alone. Each second that ticks by makes us more alone. I think maybe I was wrong and Owen was right. Maybe this was another stupid decision in a long line of stupid decisions with this stupid book. And if you peg this book as stupid, and me as stupid for getting it, then the whole house of my life starts to look like a stupid deck of cards.

I shake my head. That's just the melancholy of this place talking. I can't let it win. But there's no denying that we're here alone and I'm holding on to a mental time bomb with the hand that doesn't hold my totem. I stare into Owen's eyes, as muted and sepia-blown as they are, and he stares into mine, both of us willing each other not even to glance at the book. Another interminable number of seconds ticks by. I want to leave. I want to blink back. I dip my gaze, but Owen squeezes my fingers. I look up at him again.

Then there's a weird sucking sensation, like when you're bobbing in the ocean and caught in the retreat of a wave that pulls your legs out from under you. Another hand falls on my shoulder, bracing me. I turn to find Joey Flatwood watching me with calm eyes, his long black hair spread out behind him like a ribbon, splintering into fragmented strands of gray that blend into the thin place. He says nothing, only clamps his hand onto my shoulder and nods.

I feel another pull, a big one this time. All three of us bob like bottles in the waves as the refrigerator form of Big Hill pops into sight, mid-lumber. He settles next to Owen and clamps one hand on his shoulder. He's washed in gray, a charcoal painting of a man, but I can see one of his constant kerchiefs around his neck. He looks like the world's hugest train robber.

"Hold on now, hear?" he bellows. "They comin'!"

More distortions around us. I feel like my body is floating on the crest of where two seas meet. The first, the thin place, is freezing. The second, the Circle, is warmer, and with each wave that hits me the gripping cold lessens. I close my eyes and let the current take me, confident that Owen's grip, and Joey's, will keep me from floating away. When I open my eyes again I see our chain has become a circle at least twenty strong. Most I recognize from when we fought with them in the desert. I see the old Aborigine and the staid gentleman with his cane. I see the soldier next to the businesswoman. I see the tribeswoman and the monk, and several I've never seen before—a young girl and a man hunched and bent at the back, and three tall women who look like triplets—all of them swathed in gray, smudged and blurred, but standing determined. Outside of Joey Flatwood, I don't know any of their names. I don't even know Big Hill's real name. But I don't have to know who they are to know that we're a sisterhood and a brotherhood. It's like a family reunion. We all have our separate battles, but when the time comes to do our part, we pick up right where we left off, mid-conversation even.

With all of us here, the chain unbroken, the bite of the thin place is bearable, but I know we can't sit on our duffs. The book is already responding, just as I'd hoped it would. My theory is simple. If Owen's totem combined with mine made a few words appear, maybe a whole mess of totems would make a whole mess of words appear. Two totems brought a little stick to the fight. I want to bring a big stick. Looking around me now in the wind-tunnel scream of the thin place, it's pretty clear I brought a big damn stick. I brought a log.

I step into the middle of the Circle members, and their chain wraps around me. They eye the book warily, flinching away from it already. Glancing at it in snatches like you would a solar eclipse. It's time to play cheer captain.

"Bring it in!" I yell. The Circle closes in, totems out. Their collective turquoise burn is blinding. Even if I wanted to look at the book, I couldn't. Instead I close my eyes and feel as each member plunks an edge of their totem onto the page. I feel like those

scientists who watch bomb blasts from behind lead walls with mega goggles over their eyes. Even the backs of my eyes are bright. After the last plunk the book gets noticeably heavier. I can feel the words forming, their ink soaking in, the pages saturating.

Owen squeezes my hand, and if I could see him I know he'd be grimacing. Despite all of our power, the thin place is fighting back. The bite is getting stronger. There's no beating it back for long. But that's fine, because I think we have what we need.

"I think we did it!" I yell. I have this absurd urge to break it up like a cheer captain again. *Circle on three! One, two, three, CIRCLE!* But instead I just drop the book. It blinks out of the thin place and falls to the floor of the boat. The Circle members blink out, each stepping back to where they came from. Joey gives me a thumping pat on the back first and then blinks away himself. Owen and I are the last to go.

This time I don't collapse. Neither does Owen. He looks for my eyes. I nod to reassure him, then both of us stare at the book, open, on the floor. The page still says The Coyote Way, but now there's more. Much more.

CHAPTER 15

GRANT ROMER

Chaco ain't happy with me right now. He's hanging over me all the time, chiming in when I'm trying to talk to people, chirping off opinions here and there about classes and teachers and kids I'm trying to be friends with.

"They needed you there, Grant," he says. He's sitting on top of this huge window well outside of the art department. I hear his voice in my mind. The other ten kids painting the front face of this booth are oblivious to our conversation.

"They're fine," I say, hoping he gets the tone of my thoughts. "They had Joey, they had twenty Circle members. They got what they needed."

Chaco shakes his head. I can tell by his shadow. He nearly blots out all the light coming in from the window. After class that first day, when my head was still sort of spinning, Mick came up to me and reminded me about his work duty on the booth. I told him I wasn't much of a painter, but then he said that Kai was on the market crew too. So here I am.

I'm trying not to get red and blue paint on my black jeans and sort of succeeding. I'm dabbing at a glob that landed on my T-shirt with my thumb, trying to ignore Chaco, when someone says, "You should just take it off." I look up with my thumb still pressed to my gut, and I see Kai.

"Seriously, the way you paint, you oughta just take your shirt off. It's not staying clean."

My mouth suddenly seems too dry to form words, but I do manage to put my thumb down. She smells like paint and sawdust in a way that makes me think strangely of my grandpa, of the way he used to smell coming out of the shop. But his was on top of a glass of whisky, and hers is on top of this flower smell that's either on her skin or in her hair and that I have a crazy urge just to huff. She cocks her head, waiting for me to talk. I work spit into my mouth.

"How do you paint, then?" I ask. I absolutely am not about to take my shirt off. I'm a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, and she'd be blinded by how white I am. She grabs my hand and steps in to direct me, and I have to tell myself to close my mouth.

"You slide, see? Up and down. Slide it. Don't slap it." She slides my hand a few more times, letting the brush flip over itself, up and down the corner post of the booth. I'm stumbling around saying *thank you* when my words die in my mouth. Three older guys have come into the room and are standing a few paces back. They're all Navajo, and they're watching me like I'm taking a leak on their car door. Kai sees my look and seems to know instantly what's up, even without turning around. Her face falls. No more wink. No more hint of a grin. She plucks her hand from mine. Goes over to her side of the booth. Acts like they aren't there. But the whole room is silent. The older guys let her go, but they're still looking at me. I recognize them from the first day. They were the swaggering crew that swallowed Kai up in the hallway.

I almost apologize to them, but at the last second I wonder what Joey would do. He damn sure wouldn't apologize for no reason. So I return their gaze, paintbrush in hand, blue droplets trailing up my sleeve.

The lead kid, the one in front, isn't a big guy. He's my height, maybe ten pounds heavier, but he's cut. He wears a sleeveless T-shirt from some local diner that I don't know, cut open at the sides near to his ribs. He wears b-ball shorts and tan work boots too, just like Mick, but somehow I doubt this kid is following Mick's cue. More like the other way around. The two guys behind him are big, thick boys with creased necks and pudgy foreheads and open

mouths. I notice Mick in the back with the stencils and spray-paint. He meets my eyes for one second then shakes his head and gets back to spraying. I look out the window and see Chaco's shadow standing stock-still.

The front kid says something, and for a second I think maybe I'm messed up in the head because it's coming out in gibberish. My second thought is that I've found our skinwalker. This guy is why the crows are perched two- and three-deep on the roof and cars, this is why the place has all those coyote tracks. This guy. Right here.

Then my head clears, and I recognize that he's speaking Navajo and he ain't even talking to me. He's talking to Kai while he's looking at me. I can't understand a word of it, obviously, but I catch a few other kids grinning, looking away. I know it ain't good. I catch one phrase in English: Indian lover. That one gets Kai's attention too, and she snaps something back at him. I've talked with Owen enough about these things to know that if you call a white man an Indian lover he's at best a tourist and a fanboy. At worst he's a pervert. Someone here to taint the blood.

"Whoa, whoa man," I say, holding up my hands in a way I hope doesn't look too wussy. "I'm just here to paint. No big deal."

"Just here to paint." He has no accent at all. He shakes his head like I can't read the writing on the wall, but forget the writing, I don't even see any wall. "You make sure it stays that way," he says.

Before I can dig myself into anything deeper, he nods at a few of the boys in the back by Mick, and a bunch of them head off into the corner where they speak in low Navajo. They look shady, but they've apparently forgotten all about me, so I'm OK with that. I spend another minute or so halfheartedly trying to paint the cross post before the lead kid calls Kai away from her friends. She chances an unreadable glance my way out of the corner of her eye as she goes over to him. I see Chaco's shadow tip its head; he's trying to listen as hard as I am, but it's no use. They argue a bit, not much on her part, before he leads all of them out.

After another minute the air cools enough that people start to get back to work, and the low hum of conversation returns. I'm not sure what the heck just happened. I feel sweaty and red and like I'm breathing too loudly. Mick scares me half to death when he taps on my back. I didn't hear him take a step my way.

"See what I'm telling you, man?" he says under his breath, dipping a brush into my bucket to paint along with me. "If you're trying to find a place here, I'm just gonna tell you, it's not with them."

"Is that her boyfriend or something?" I try to keep my stroke even, keep it from shaking with the adrenaline I feel coursing through me. I've never run into anything like that before. Heck, before I stepped foot into Crownrock High I hadn't really had more than a passing confrontation with anybody my age, ever. Not since the boys in Midland would chase me on their bikes. And even then it was mostly them hollering at me and me pedaling for my life, hoping they got bored before I got tired.

"Her boyfriend? No. Worse. That's Hosteen Bodrey. Everyone calls him Hos. He's her big brother." Mick scratches at his neck and looks away. "Don't take it personal man, it's called the Native Market, after all."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'm only doing this 'cause I got caught ditching and they made me. It's the Native Market. It's for Native Americans. They don't want us doing it no more than we want to be here doing it. Sorry you had to learn that the hard way."

I'm not so sure. Kai didn't look like she didn't want me here. Looking around the room now I see a lot of eyes watching me with distant expressions, but they're not angry, not mean, just distant. Quiet. Even as they work in their own groups on other parts of the booth, they seem quiet. Mick sees what I see and murmurs while he whaps his paintbrush clean.

"Like I said. Don't take it personal. It makes me want to burn the place down sometimes too. And I've been here for a year now."

He stands up and tosses his brush down. His post looks more cat scratched than painted. "That's good enough. You guys got the rest, right?" he asks the group. "For your big show?" A couple of the nearest kids look up at him and roll their eyes. They aren't unfriendly, though. Mick may be as much of an outsider as me, but he's an accepted outsider. His section leader ticks her head toward the door and tells him to get gone if he wants to leave.

"Adios, then," he says. "C'mon, Grant, I got something I want to show you."

But I'm not feeling like leaving yet. Taking off right now feels a bit too much like running scared, which isn't something Joey or Ben would do. I may be the new white kid, and I may have no family save the two who took me on and one bird, and them more on account of what hangs around my neck than on account of me. But I'm still Pap's grandson. I'm still here walking through more hell than these kids have seen in all their lifetimes, Navajo or not. I don't feel like leaving just yet. I feel like painting my goddamn post, the right way, sliding, not slapping.

"You go on ahead," I say.

Mick cocks his eye at me. He looks around. He holds out his hands and spins a little, shrugging. "Fine by me," he says, his voice quiet and flat. He shakes his head as he leaves.

"That guy is trouble," I mutter to Chaco, dipping my brush again.

"Which one?" Chaco asks. He fluffs and settles in the shadows, and I realize he's been about ready to break through the glass this whole time. "They all seem like trouble. Everything here seems like trouble." I can sense him staring at me through the wall. As if I'm the one to blame.

"So it's my fault I decided to take the front lines of this mess?" I ask, starting to slap and stopping myself. I take a deep breath.

"That's the problem. Do you know what they might do to you if they knew what you have around your neck? What anyone might do to you? What if they smoosh your head into the floor and notice the tracks running up and down the halls here? Ever thought of that?"

"I'm not some stupid kid riding his bike in the dark anymore. I know what I'm about. Did you at least catch anything Hos and his crew said?"

Chaco is silent, and I think I've gone too far. In the quiet seconds, while I'm standing alone doing someone else's work, nobody taking notice, I wonder what it might be like without Chaco. Without Owen or Caroline, without any of them. I was basically alone before them. Pap and I were together, but we were both alone. I hacked it then, and I was just a kid. What could I do now, just me and the bell? But then Chaco chimes into my thoughts.

"After he got done telling her not to touch you, he and his boys said something about the market. Something about being ready for it." Chaco's voice is quiet. I wonder, not for the first time, how much of my thoughts he can read. If he hears more than I let on. But this only pisses me off more.

"Yeah, that's what this stupid booth is for," I say.

"I don't think he was talking about the school art booth, bro," Chaco says, his voice full of snark. "He wanted Kai to come with his crew, to get ready for something. She didn't want to. I think he's got some other plan, but I couldn't make anything else out. Sorry, your highness. Is that enough for you? Can I have my shiny bauble now like a good crow?"

"Shut up, Chaco." That's the first time I've ever said it to him and meant it. And I expect him to snap something back at me, but he doesn't. He shuts up. He hops up and takes flight, and I expect him to leave me. Go somewhere to blow off steam or maybe just check out altogether for a bit like Caroline does with the agents sometimes. But not Chaco. I still feel him near, just higher up, trying to get a better view of what I've thrown myself into.

CHAPTER 16

OWEN BENNET

I'm lying on my back on the floor inside the trailer hitch. It's the only part of the thing I've managed to finish completely, but no need for applause. It's just a ten-by-six-foot slab of carpet. And it's the thin stuff too. The stuff you find on the floor of elevators. You can glue it down without much work. I managed to wire a 240 line, but now I've got nothing to hook to it. The walls are bare, the ceiling is bare. It's dark, but that's because I closed the back. It's also outrageously hot, but I feel like I need the heat. Like it might give me some sort of clarity. The Navajo sweat it out. I figure I ought to give it a try. Of course, I'm drinking a glass of bourbon as well, which isn't part of the Navajo ritual. I'm dribbling it into my mouth a half sip at a time and swirling it around my teeth.

I don't really know what purpose I thought this trailer would serve. When I started it, all I wanted was to be doing *something*. I guess serving as a place to swish bourbon around my teeth in the dark is as good as anything. Sort of like a hick sensory-deprivation chamber. I supply the darkness. The bourbon supplies the weightlessness. It's good bourbon too. Not the plastic bottle trash I used to drink back at my apartment. That, at least, is an improvement in my life. Something to hang your hat on. Not in here, though. There's nothing in here on which to hang a hat.

The good thing about bourbon, one of several, actually, is that it sets aside noise. Chaco rez is buzzing with noise, and it's about ready to break the people here, even if they don't know it yet. It's about ready to break me, and Caroline, and Grant, and even Chaco

too. Grant used to tell me about this place he had in his bedroom back in Midland, between the dresser and his bed, where he would go to shut out the noise. Maybe this is my place like that. Grant doesn't tell me much of anything anymore, but after a few dribbled sips of bourbon, that doesn't sting quite as much.

Caroline is with the agents. She thinks they may be able to make sense of what we found in the book. They won't. I know it. They want nothing to do with the book. Caroline knows this too, which tells me she's more comfortable in upstate Washington with two guys that tried to kill us, however entranced they may have been, than she is with me right now. But after a few more dribbles and a big swish, that shuts up too.

With the noise turned down, the reality of our situation steps up. We've got a killer coyote on the loose, one that can take on the personage of any living person it comes across. It taints the ground it walks on, like lead seeping into the water, until the whole place is putrid and ready to blow. It wants to bring our world crashing down around us, and house odds are that it wants to do all the crashing at the Native Market. So we've got three days.

The Coyote Way might be able to trap it. Ben tells us it's a chantway. One of the spiritual ceremonies of the Navajo where Singers try to get the attention of the Navajo gods to bestow favors. Cure illness. Lend strength. It's the exact type of nonsense I spent a decade as a CHC doc trying to tiptoe around, being politically correct enough to acknowledge that yes, your spiritual beliefs have merit, but no, a heavy sweat will not cure your son or daughter of tuberculosis. Your grandfather will not be cured of his chronic emphysema by inhaling pinon smoke. Your husband's jaundice will not go away if he's chanted over for three days, no matter how expensive the Singer is. You need medicine for these things, or your people will die. I still believe that. Even after all I've seen. There's magic out there, but there's also medicine. And maybe they aren't so different.

And yet here I am. I pat my breast pocket, where the words of the book are transcribed. Each of us has a copy, in case the book

gets fickle again and sucks up all the ink we only recently got it to bleed out. I've already memorized it, and I'll spare you the anticipation: the directions make no sense. The three of us and Chaco brainstormed all night over them without getting far. Maybe if I recite them out loud in the hollow of the trailer, the acoustics will make sense of them. Sort of like singing in the shower. Which is what Caroline does. I used to go over some of my trickier biopsy procedures in the shower. Same difference. Here goes. Number one:

"A birth bag," I say. Not sure what that is. Medically, it could be a lot of things, none of them appealing outside of a hospital setting. Don't blame me, I'm just telling you what the book says.

"A burned stick." Which shouldn't be too hard. In a sane world, you just go out, find a stick, and burn it. There you go. Or how about a match? That's a burned stick. Can it possibly be that easy?

"A broken pot." Same deal. Do I just break a pot? Caroline said that we have a Crock- Pot we sometimes use. She likes to cook enough for several days at a time when she can. It has her most recent concoction in it right now, a peccadillo that didn't go over very well. I can toss it. It'll be a shame to lose the ceramic piece, but if it means saving the world, I can part with it.

"A cane." There are plenty of those around here. We used to give them out for free at the CHC. We took up a donation in Albuquerque for them. Most of them were used walkers, though. Would that work?

"A whisk broom." We use a Hoover to keep the RV clean. Caroline said that's like a modern whisk broom. Maybe we toss the Hoover in?

"A broken stirring stick." We're at a loss here. I'm not quite sure what a stirring stick is. Grant suggested using our soup ladle.

I laugh out loud. If you think we can catch our coyote with a match, a crock pot, a walker, our vacuum, and a soup ladle, all wrapped up in whatever the hell a birth bag is, I've got a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you. Once again that damn book provides us more questions than answers. I dribble more bourbon into my

mouth. Maybe I'll just sit in here until all the chaos blows over. Or until the world blows over into chaos. The latter is looking more likely these days...

A sharp series of knocks makes me literally jump up from my back in complete darkness. I forget where I am. All I know is that I'm sweating profusely. It must be a hundred degrees. I feel out wildly for anything, and my hands slap against the sides of what I slowly come to realize is the trailer. I stumble around in the darkness, slam my head against the back hatch, and knock over my bottle of bourbon. I scramble to pick it up then feel around the trailer handle for the lever that pops it open. The door snaps up into the ceiling in a jarring rattle, and I'm left peering out into the afternoon sun. My shirt is drenched in bourbon and sweat, and my hair sticks straight up like the tuft of some sort of tropical bird. What's left of the booze swirls around the bottle hanging from my left hand. I shade my eyes from the blinding sun. I can't even tell who's standing on the dirt in front of me.

"Can I help you?" I ask, trying to make it sound polite but challenging at the same time. The first thing that comes to mind is that another Itch found us.

"Everything all right, Dr. Bennet? It's three o'clock. We're supposed to be at the CHC in half an hour."

My eyes adjust, and I see the bulky outline of a big Navajo. A few single strands of his long hair hover about over his shoulders in the rising heat. He's dressed in a worn linen button-up and well-washed jeans. He wears creased leather cowboy boots and sports a shiny silver police badge on his hip, offset of a shinier silver belt buckle.

"Oh God. Chief Yokana. I'm sorry. I lost track of time." Truth be told, I lost track of the fact that we were supposed to meet to go to the CHC morgue in the first place. He knows it too. I can tell by the way he looks at me sidelong then peers behind me into the empty trailer where there's a wet outline of my head on the floor. He glances at the bottle of bourbon I have absolutely nowhere to hide. He sees me deflate. There are a million things he could say right now. Any number of accusations.

What he says is: "All right, then. Let's get goin'."

God bless the Navajo.

"Great," I say, a little too eagerly. "Let me just change my shirt."

We drive over in Yokana's SUV, a well-traveled Ford Explorer with NNPD plates but no other markings. It has a dusty clean to it—no trash, not even a stray coffee cup—but everywhere bits of the desert, even down to the cracked-earth smell of the AC. I get the feeling he could have a nicer car. He's the chief of police, after all, but I think he doesn't have one for the same reason he's travelling the rez to try and calm people down, and for the same reason he knocked on my trailer and picked me up today. Because he's more interested in actually doing the job than just looking like he's doing the job.

As we roll down the double-lane road out of Crownrock and onto the Navajo Service Route he just starts to talk. Not a lot, not consistently, but a few words here and there. Observations about what he's seen in the towns and outposts, none of them good. The one thing I can say I definitively learned working with the Navajo over the years is to shut up and listen if they're talking, so that's what I do.

"There's a backwater trading post ten or so miles north of Crownrock. It's where I was before I came to you. A man named Burner Forbath runs it with his wife. Has for decades. It works on the barter system still. If you want to set up a house account, you leave what you got as collateral, take what you need. All sorts of things get left and taken. He's had no trouble. Ever. Until his own son robbed him then ended up dead several miles west near White Rock. No visible cause of death. Nothing but coyote tracks around him. That was two days ago. Yesterday I got another call. I'll tell you about that when we get there. Just know that now we're up to five."

Yokana is quiet then. He shakes his head once then shifts his hardened gaze to the road. He doesn't need to embellish. That is implication enough. A two-fold betrayal: Navajo stealing from Navajo, and son stealing from father.

"Burner's boy was a good kid. I didn't believe him until I saw the boy's body myself, surrounded by the house bank he stole. You'll see for yourself, but our team found no cause of death, no markings. It's like the gods struck him down for what he did."

Sani turns north on 191 toward Chaco City. He seems to be working words around in his mouth, behind his closed lips. I know what he wants to say, that this makes no sense. That Burner's boy was struck mad. That the whole rez has been struck mad. That maybe this goes beyond the police work he's accustomed to, into another realm. If he said that, maybe I could shift this load I've been carrying, tell him he's right. That the bodies I'm about to see all were most likely struck by madness. That we've got a coyote skinwalker in our midst. That Burner Forbath's son didn't betray his own family and clan. The coyote did, using him.

But Sani Yokana didn't get to be where he is by swiping at shadows and ghosts. He charged real people with real crimes and put them behind real bars. Just like I used to practice real medicine on real people with real ailments.

"Maybe he didn't steal the house bank," I say. It's as close as I can come to saying what I feel without chancing Yokana pulling a U-turn and taking me right back to Crownrock with a *good day to you, sir*. He looks over at me.

"Burner has one key to the store safe. He gave it to the boy before he left for business in Crownrock that day. It was him."

"What I mean is, maybe Burner's son was ill. Mentally unwell." I look pointedly out the window at all the crows weaving above me, casting shadows like running clouds on the flats and across the heat-beaten road. Yokana follows my eyes, and together we watch a line of four crows flank the car then cut high and right. One tracks us with eerie calm before all are lost to view.

"If I remember correctly, the crows started to show up last time too," he says. "You know I sometimes wonder if they follow

me? You believe that?" He smiles sadly and shakes his head.

The rest of the drive, Yokana outlines what he knows about the rest of the bodies. One of them is Bilagaana Bill. I already know his story, but I listen to Yokana tell me about him again. The one they found in the Escavada Wash is a woman from a little town called Los Cristos. An older loner, like Bill. It took three days for someone in her family to get to the CHC to identify her. The third they found the same day: a farm hand who worked seasonally in Nageezi for years. The ranch foreman identified him but couldn't say much other than that he always did his work well then left after harvest.

We pull into the CHC parking lot as the sun turns from the light brightness of high noon to the heavy, cutting rays of a New Mexico afternoon. I reflexively straighten the tie I put on when I changed my shirt, the first I've worn in months, and I'm struck by a nearly overwhelming nostalgia. I remember the heady, antiseptic smell of the place with such force that I can nearly taste it in my mouth. The sunlight reflects off the uniform windows of the squat, four-story building like each has a raging bonfire behind it, and most likely, many do. Not physical fires, but mental ones. Most of my time here was spent putting out fires with Caroline and nurses not nearly as good as Caroline.

We walk through the doors, and I see the front-desk receptionist, a Navajo woman named Lelah who was fairly old before I came around a decade ago. She looks up, mid-phone call, and smiles. Then she ends the call and stands up. She laughs when she sees my surprise. For the first five years I knew Lelah, she couldn't walk right. She was on the receiving end of the walker donations we started in Albuquerque. She walks evenly over to me and gives me a big hug and says, "All it took was every day." I don't know what she's talking about at first, until I see that she's holding out a tattered single sheet of paper with a series of physical therapy exercises on it. "Just like you said, Dr. Bennet," she adds as she hands me the sheet. I sense it's important to her that I take it. Like it signals the end of a long struggle.

I return her smile, and I laugh along with her, but inside I find I'm disappointed in myself. I've let her down by not walking in these doors a few times a week over the past five years. I cheated by handing her the instructions and leaving for half a decade and then walking in when her battle is done. I should have been here. I don't deserve her smile, but she pats me on the back and mutters over me in broken English and Navajo anyway until I have to excuse myself to follow Yokana.

He leads me past the elevator bay, where I'd usually wait to ride to the top floor then make my way down methodically from there, getting as far as I could, one patient at a time. Instead we walk to the stairs at the back of the main floor. They lead down to the morgue.

The formaldehyde tang washes over us slowly along with the increasing cold, all of it gradual, until we find ourselves standing under buzzing blue lights between cold lockers and stainless-steel tables. A medical examiner and his assistant work quietly on a naked body on a cold slab in the far back of the room. I recognize Tim Bentley, a mortician who comes up from Gallup twice a week on behalf of IHS. He's a good guy, if a little weird. But what mortician isn't?

Bentley looks up at us as we approach. "Dr. Bennet," he says, "thanks for coming down." I wonder if he knows I've been gone for five years. Bentley never got out much. He ushers the assistant aside and makes way for us to approach the table. "We've been trying to make heads or tails of this one for almost a week now. He was the first. Take a look."

On the table is Bilagaana Bill. He's looked better, but I've definitely seen corpses look worse. I think whatever kept the grubs away is still lingering on him. The chaos. If it's anything like what we felt with the book, I'd want to stay away too. Yokana clears his throat.

"Got a tip from a group of hikers that said they saw something in the middle of the canyon near the west mesa. This is Bidzill Halkini, the one I told you about. Who went by Bill."

I hope it doesn't show that I've seen him before. That we were the ones that found him. That I was the one who called in the tip from a pay phone at the Chaco Canyon Visitor's Center, muffling the receiver a bit with my hand when I spoke.

"What's your cause of death?" I ask Bentley.

"On paper, organ failure. Same as the other four."

"On paper?"

The assistant glances at Bentley. He looks uncomfortable. So does Bentley, in his own way. He takes off his magnifying glasses and picks at some sleep in the corner of his eye. "There's some indication here of a... I'd almost call it a type of encephalopathy, although it doesn't follow modern examples of the disease. The blood flow in the brain was not normal."

"Do you have any postmortem scans?" I ask, slipping on latex gloves. It comes back remarkably easily. Like I've fallen back into the routine of flicking on the coffee pot and stepping outside to get the morning paper. Yokana steps back and rests against the wall, watching.

"Mr. Yokana petitioned for two—one on Halkini, because he came in first, and then on Burner, because he was significantly younger than the first three victims." He moves over to Bill's file and rifles through it until he finds a photo printout of the man's brain. He hands it to me.

"Burner's looks much the same as Halkini's, in terms of blood flow."

As soon as I touch the glossy printout, I'm taken back to that moment in my apartment when Radiology patched through a brain scan of Ben Dejooli, effectively hammering the last nail in his coffin. I remember the way the crows exploded from the big tree outside of my apartment window after I read the scan. I'd been drinking bourbon then too. I half expect more crows now, their claws clacking against the flooring as they come hopping down the stairs. I get no such thing, only the low-grade buzz of fluorescent lights and Tim Bentley looking at me strangely.

Brains are not my specialty, outside of when they're anomalous with cancerous growth. This man's brain is not. I

recognize no outstanding masses of any sort, nothing that would indicate a tumor or clot. But I've seen enough postmortem CT scans of brains to recognize what a normal one looks like.

Bilagaana Bill's scan does not look normal. Some areas of his brain look devoid of blood flow entirely. As if they've been cut off. Others are suffused with blood, bright white on the scan, like they've been overexposed. I bend over him and pull up his right eyelid. The tiny capillaries that web the eye are burst in places. Their red is softened to a muted purple by the milky film of death.

"When was this taken?"

"As soon as we got him in, five days ago."

I take a big breath. "On its face it looks like some sort of massive stroke."

"Except that—"

"Except that there are no clots or blockages of any sort," I say.

Bentley nods. "I thought the error might have been mechanical until I took his front plate off. The tissue samples corroborate."

I stare at the scans for another minute in silence, until Bentley says, "Thoughts, Dr. Bennet?"

"I'm not sure you want to know what I think, Dr. Bentley."

"Try me."

I weigh my thoughts. Test my words in my mind first. "I think his brain looks like it was changing, and his body couldn't take it. Let me guess, no indications of why his major organs gave out?"

Bentley shakes his head.

"He shut down," I say.

"Why?" Bentley's tone is academic. Distant.

"Maybe he didn't want the alternative." By which I mean whatever chaos was poisoning his brain. I wish I could just tell them, without Yokana taking me out in handcuffs.

"He does look like something got at his mouth," I offer, since it's all I can do.

"All of them do," Yokana says. "Paw prints around them too. Probably just a coyote worrying at the mouths. They do that sometimes."

"The rest of the decomposition process is occurring remarkably slowly," Bentley says.

More overhead buzzing. I look at Bentley only to find he's already looking at me. I tuck the scan back in the folder. "Can I see the other bodies?"

Bentley moves down the cold locker, snapping open clasps and sliding out corpses like a tailor pulling an assortment of fabrics. Soon the other four are stretched out before me. I'm looking for anything that might link them, besides the coyote bite. Something that might give me a clue as to the type of person the coyote wants. I feel like more of a cop than a doctor. But then again, maybe that's why Yokana brought me along. Because the best cop he knew for this type of stuff is dead.

After Bilagaana Bill is the woman they found in Escaveda Wash. She's squat, fatter than Bill. There are no marks on her that might indicate how she died, but her face has the same creases from age and sun. The farmer they found near Nageezi looks similarly worn. Deep crow's feet around the eyes. Chapped lips and chapped hands. There's a slight crease around his forehead, and when Yokana sees me looking at it, he chimes in.

"That's from an ancient Stetson he always wore."

"These people are all old," I say.

"That was our first connection too. Until Burner's son came in."

I move down the line to Burner. He's darkened by the sun, but otherwise he looks like a normal young man. He's filled out at the shoulders, but his face still has a hint of that pudgy, teenaged veneer.

"How old was Burner's son?"

"Nineteen," Bentley says.

I walk as calmly as I'm able to the last slab down the line. A thin girl with waist-length black hair lies here. She has muddy feet. She's quite pretty.

"And this girl. How old was she?"

"She's our most recent," Yokana says. "Sixteen. She comes from a family who owns a used-tire shop in a one-horse town off

57 called Animas. One of three daughters and two sons. She set fire to the building before she apparently walked five miles barefoot to the north bank of the Chaco River and laid down to die. No priors, no record of any kind. All anybody the NNPD questioned could say about her was that she was the quiet one of the family."

"Isn't it a bit strange that all of them seem to have been bitten?" I ask carefully, still looking at the girl. She has the gnaw marks on her face too, around the lower lip. Just like the rest of them. I look up at Bentley. "Maybe that ought to be looked into more carefully. There's a chance we need to tell people to look out for coyotes—"

Bentley winks at me.

Half of his mouth turns up into a grin, the other half down into a snarl. It's an awful, two-faced grimace that lasts maybe half of a second. I shake my head, take a deep breath, and when I look up again he's watching me calmly.

"Yes?" he asks.

I turn to Yokana. He seems to have seen nothing.

"Dr. Bentley has told me that they see this quite a bit," Yokana says, flipping through the chart in his hand as he speaks. "The coyotes get at the mouths of exposure victims pretty regularly."

I look at Bentley again. He's grinding his teeth softly.

"It's just what they do," Bentley says, staring at me, unblinking. "It's the softest meat." I take a step back.

"I can't help you," I say quickly. "I'm sorry. I wish I could. Chief Yokana, I need to go. I've forgotten I need to pick Grant up from school."

I've forgotten no such thing. Grant won't let me walk him to school or pick him up. But I have to get out of here. The air is suddenly thick. I'm having trouble getting a breath. I look at the assistant, and he seems strangely doped. Oddly quiet. Has he spoken since I got here?

"Chief," I say. "We need to leave."

Bentley smiles and waves good-bye like a kid at a bus stop. I turn and just start walking up the stairs. It takes every fiber of my

being not to run as fast as I can. I hear Yokana behind me with his slow, deliberate steps. I don't say a word until we're both out and in the baking sun, and only then can I finally breathe. I let the sun wash over me like a shower, craning my neck toward it.

"You OK, Dr. Bennet?" Yokana asks.

I watch the door. Nobody comes after us. Not Bentley, not anybody.

"I am now. Sorry. I haven't been around all that for a while." I wonder what I can possibly say to convince Yokana that every policeman on the rez needs to descend on the CHC morgue right now and shoot Bentley on sight. I almost start to say it, and Yokana is watching me, concerned, but after a few more moments in the Navajo sun I've calmed myself. No, that wouldn't do. The skinwalker will have thought of that, after all. It wanted to show me what it was doing, toy with me, and it said its piece. If I were to go back down those steps right now I'd probably find Tim Bentley dazed and confused, the skinwalker already gone.

"Did you see something down there?" Yokana asks, and not for the first time do I wonder if he knows more than he lets on.

"You brought me to hear what I think. Well, I think these people were attacked by something. Something that broke their minds. They wandered out into the desert because they couldn't take it anymore."

Yokana cocks his head. "What kind of thing would do that?"

A coyote. I almost say it. But it won't come out. I shake my head in frustration. "And they're getting younger. The victims. From Bill on down to the girl."

If this was already obvious to him, Yokana doesn't let on. He only nods, his face falling another centimeter, lower and lower. Grayer and grayer. I wonder how much longer a man like him can stay standing if every day he gets lower and grayer. But I can't dwell on that now. Right now I'm wondering about who will come next. Who comes after the sixteen-year-old? A fifteen-year-old? Fourteen?

All I can think of is Grant.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

THE WALKER

I'm sitting inside my clan hogan watching the daylight fade. The sun seems to be pulled through the smoke hole at the top as if someone is sucking it up with a straw. Gam used to call this type of light *dust light*, the last, sideways beams that catch the dust and the pollen floating in the air. There's no dust at my passing, though. I disturb nothing. I'm the only one here, and I'm not even really here, not like the fire pit is, or the swept earth, or the pollen-dusted beams. I've been the only one here for days. I come back in between calls, hoping to catch whoever keeps this place, but so far I've only seen crows. I think they can see me, or almost see me. They hop in through the eastward-facing door and cock their heads at me before turning around and hopping right out again. Maybe they don't like what they see.

I'm probably looking a little grim. I'm definitely feeling grim. We've got three days until the Native Market, where our coyote may be primed to pop off. The rez is slowly falling apart under the weight of the chaos it brings, and our only weapon against it reads like a shitty garage sale.

Something about all this is going over my head, and I can almost hear the *whoosh*. Something fundamental about the coyote, as a skinwalker. I'm missing something, and it's driving me nuts. If you think about it, this coyote and I have a lot in common. It's a mean bastard, but it has a job too, just like I do. It anchors the chaos side of the river. It absorbs the souls that are drawn there. It may look like the coyote has free reign here—it can change

hosts with a touch, turn them into skinwalkers too, and moves with unnatural speed and strength—but the world it inhabits now still has rules. I take a swipe at the rocks ringing the fire pit, and my hand passes through. That's one rule. I can't interact with this world unless it's to take a soul to the veil. And as far as unnatural speed and strength, well, I bet if you were to ask some of the poor saps I have to chase down and drag to the veil, they'd say much the same about me. But I still have limits, so this thing must too. It's just a matter of finding them.

I wish Gam was here. I wish I could knock on some camper doors and rattle some tents at the Arroyo and figure this out NNPD style like in the old days. I wish I was a better Navajo and knew what a Coyoteway was in the first place. I wish Joey Flatwood had any idea. I wish I was with Caroline right now, playing cards on a TV table in my house while we talked all this over. I'd even be willing to take the chemo again. See what I mean about being a bad Navajo? My people aren't supposed to dwell. We don't look forward much, either. We take what is and work with it. But what *is* sucks, and all I find myself doing these days is looking back. Sorry, Gam, I know you'd be sucking your teeth at me, shaking your head, but can you really blame me? What's *back* is all I have.

I'm roused from my one-person pity party by a shuffling sound coming from outside. I walk out and take a lap around the hogan, tracing the sound back toward the Arroyo until I see two figures crest the rise, taking a well-worn path in my direction. The sunset falls right on them, and I see it's two men. Two old men. They're walking along the path in silence, backs bent with age, their eyes on the ground in front of them. They don't pick up their feet so much as slide them, right foot, left foot, with a sound like the slow sweeping of a broom, one in front, the other behind.

They pass the first three derelict hogans without a glance. As they make their slow way down the path it dawns on me that I know these men. They were at my chant. They're the sand painters. Two brothers, as old as the hills, who used to perform with Gam on the rare occasions she still sang. They're dressed in light jackets despite the summer heat, in that universal way of all

old people, but theirs are over what looks like traditional garb: woven tunics and buckskin breeches worn as thin and white as paper at the knees. They wear beaded moccasins that look patched and patched again. I know they could walk right through me, but I step aside for them anyway. They pause briefly at the open entrance to the hogan, and the first reaches into his tunic. He takes a pinch of pollen in his hands and slaps the mantel. They gently help each other with the slight bending and crouching required to get inside, and once there they silently go about sweeping the place and shoring up the four corners of the framing by dusting pollen in each direction.

One builds a fire in the pit while the other smooths the dirt beside it like he's priming a canvas, and when the hogan is nice and hot, they take off their jackets. Then they take off their tunics. And then they take off their slippers and breeches. They're stripped down to saggy old-man underwear. I'm starting to wonder if maybe I ought to give these fellas their privacy, but that's where they stop. One nods at the other and then creaks his way downward until he's lying flat on the dirt between the fire and the canvas. His brother takes up several handfuls of pinon leaves and stuffs them in a paper grocery bag. I'm thinking maybe he's going to burn the whole thing, but instead he sets it carefully on the floor and kneels on it to save his bony knees from the hard-packed dirt of the floor. Now we've got one lying flat, the other kneeling over him, and the fire crackling and smoking. The kneeling man extends his right hand out over his brother, and he touches his dirt canvas with the knobby pointer finger of his left hand. Then he closes his eyes and begins to sing.

I don't recognize his song, but that's hardly surprising. Gam sang all the time, walking the foothills with me, cooking around the house, when she weaved and when she knitted. She sang Ana and me to sleep when I was younger, and it seemed like no two songs were exactly the same. The sand painter sings over his brother in a softy rhythmic chant that's surprisingly high and on key, considering I bet the guy is well into his eighties. His right

hand still hovers above his brother. He draws in the dirt with his finger.

I peer over his shoulder and watch as he traces symbols. I recognize the hard lines and basic shapes that make up the symbols of power and the outlines of the Holy People, but I get the sense that he's improvising, moving his finger in time with his voice—deeper gouges when his song counts out beats, softer strokes as his words soften and his voice keens. He draws circles one way then traces them back in the opposite direction. I'm so lost in the finger painting that I don't realize he's opened his eyes and is staring now at his right hand. It's a complicated one-man dance that he's doing. Singing, painting, and now moving his right hand slowly, evenly over his brother's body. His eyes never waver, and neither does his right hand. It cuts the air in a slow and steady slice. There aren't even any old-man shakes. That's when I figure out what's going on. This is a hand-trembling ceremony. This man is a hand-trembler, a Navajo medicine-man, although not quite like what Gam was. Tremblers can tell you if you're sick with something, then they send you to people like Gam, Singers who can perform chantways to get your spirit patched up and back in line with the Navajo Way.

After a time, the first brother abruptly stops, evidently satisfied with how still his right hand was the whole time. He gently wipes his tapestry clear, and then the two switch places. Both brothers are Tremblers, then. I can't help but smile. These two and Gam must have made quite the team back in the day. Gam didn't sing nearly as much near the end of her life, but I can only imagine what they must have been like in their prime. Gam was good. One of the best. I bet the brothers are too, if you believe that sort of thing. And if you were here, in the smoke and heat, and you saw the painting, the singing, and now the surgical stillness of the second brother's hand, I don't care how skeptical you are, some part of you might start to wonder.

The brothers now stand facing each other, which is odd. I don't remember this sizing-up as part of any hand-trembling ceremony I ever saw or heard about from Gam. As a matter of fact,

they look like they're checking each other for blemishes, like they're pieces of meat at the butcher. They slowly circle each other. One turns his back on the other, and he scans it from top to bottom, even stretching out the underwear band for a glance down below. They check each other's sparse hair, like they're looking for ticks. They lift up one leg and then the other like old donkeys and check the soles of each other's feet. Last, they check each other's mouths, up and down. Then they both speak the first words I've heard them say all evening. It's in Navajo, but it's clear and I understand it: "No bead, no bone."

They nod to each other. They seem as pleased as they were to find their right hands steady over one another, and it occurs to me that this trembling ceremony wasn't to diagnose an illness of some sort but to pronounce a clean bill of health.

At the sound of the words, memories flood into my head, one after the other. I remember walking with Gam, both Ana and me, taking care to brush our feet over any track we saw, in case it was a snake's, and Gam laughed at us and said we just wiped out a lizard's slow *swish-and-clomp* track, not a snake's. Ana said something like, "Aren't they bad too?" But Gam shook her head. "The Gila gave us the trembling power," she said. "Its scales harden the Navajo warriors. It keeps us safe." And that afternoon, outside the front door, she stopped us and ran her still-nimble fingers through our hair playfully. "See?" she said. "No bead, no bone. The Gila has kept you safe from the witches."

No bead, no bone. The sign of a Navajo witch, of the skinwalker, is supposed to be a bead made from bone, embedded just under the skin. The sand painters wanted to make sure they were clean. They've been coming here time and again, judging from the pollen, to check each other for a bead.

And now other images hit me like bolts out of the blue. The first time I saw the coyote it was gnawing on its own cheek. It tackled the woman in green and lashed out at her mouth, and then she spat at her boyfriend in the red shoes. I remember the blood, the way it hit his mouth too. Then, while I was looking at her, he disappeared. I try to picture what happened next, and I go blank. I

panic and take some deep breaths. The sand painters are packing up, and I watch them go in a daze, the very last of the light showing them the path that they seem to know by heart. Their slow, methodical gait calms me.

I remember now. There was a fight. A fight between Red Shoes and another man over an embrace with the waitress. Perhaps a kiss? Then the skinwalker jumped again, to the waitress, who then ran around the corner, where I lost her.

The coyote, gnawing at its mouth. The woman in green, bitten at the lip. Red Shoes, who took a full gob of blood to the face himself. The waitress he then kissed. A bone bead transferred to each. The hallmark of the skinwalker. Its source of power.

I call for Chaco. I call again and again like an annoying neighbor ringing the doorbell fifteen times. Eventually I hear the pop and feel the pressure drop, and he floats out of the sky like a piece of darker night.

"Walker, you better have a damn good reason to call me like this. Grant is in the trenches at that damn high school, and he's chosen right now to fall into puppy love. We got darkness closing in on all sides, man. I don't have the time to—"

"It's a bead, Chaco. A bead made from bone. That's what we're looking for. Everybody that became a skinwalker had it in their mouths. The five dead people that hit me one after the next, all soulless, they had it in their mouths, but it broke their minds. Maybe they carried it for too long, or maybe they fought against it. Either way they tried to take it away, lay down and die in a place where it might be forgotten, buried by the desert in the Chaco Canyon or Escavada Wash or wherever. But this thing has forged a connection to the coyote, and the coyote found it every time."

Chaco stills and half floats, half flops his way to the ground in front of me. "A bead. Another object of power." He's talking to himself more than to me, but I nod. "Of course," he says. "Your object of power is the bell. You're a Walker, this thing is a Walker. Why wouldn't this thing have one too?"

"The coyote carries it in its mouth. We find the coyote, we rip it out like a bad tooth, we destroy it."

Chaco flutters. "Then it's all over."

[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

CHAPTER 18

CAROLINE ADAMS

Owen is actually making Grant open up his mouth. He's got a penlight and everything, and he's telling him to move his tongue around. I'm torn between laughing and crying. This is what it's come to around here. The boat is getting weird.

"OK, no beads. You're looking good. Now you check me," he says. He holds the penlight out to Grant, but Grant just crosses his arms and shakes his head pityingly.

"You're not a skinwalker, Owen. I don't need to look in your mouth to know that," he says.

Owen shrugs. "Fine. Caroline, you can check me."

"How about we all just stop looking in each other's mouths, OK? None of us is the coyote. I would know," I say.

"Oh yeah, how?"

It's best not to get into how I have a detailed skinwalker checklist for both of them, wherein I would determine that Owen doing this type of fretting is actually *normal* for him. And Grant looking bored out of his mind is *normal* for him too. Instead I say, "I'd see it in your smoke."

"You don't know that. You've never seen it."

"I'd know." Although he's right, I haven't seen it. Still, I think there'd be some indication from the smoke that a body is possessed, being molded, being shifted by this thing into a vessel it can ride until it dies. Owen just got finished telling us his uplifting theory that the coyote needs a kid. A young person, at least. The bodies he saw were trending younger, and Owen thinks it's

because it's harder for the coyote to take control of an old person, with set routines and embedded prejudices and experiences. Young people are malleable. Easier to warp because there's less to change.

"The point is that we all need to see that we're who we say we are, right now, right here, before we go to the Arroyo. It's a baseline panel. Do you know what a baseline panel is, Grant?"

Good old Owen, always finding a teachable moment. He's such a dad, which is remarkable considering Grant doesn't consider himself Owen's son. Predictably, Grant says nothing, just resigns himself to listening as Owen plods on.

"It's an establishment of control levels. For instance, a baseline lipid panel is something I recommend you get at twenty years old to establish cholesterol levels and enzyme activity for that moment in your life. Then we'll know in subsequent panels if there's cause for alarm."

"All right, can we go?" Grant asks. He looks at me with pleading eyes.

"What he's trying to say is that we need to know that at this moment we're bone-bead free," I say, snatching the penlight and doing a cursory check in Owen's mouth, more to get this show on the road than anything. "Because we're going into a dangerous area, and if something does happen and one of us starts acting weird from here out, we'll know at least we were all good here. And it's a good idea."

Owen gives me a proud smile that is surprisingly catching, considering we're on the edge of what you might call the rez war zone. It was my idea. Most of the really insane ones are. Chaco said Ben divined his bead theory from watching these two old hand-tremblers that sandpainted during his chantway years ago. I said it would have been great to ask them about the Coyote Way, seeing as they're old as the hills and might have some idea as to what the six odd ingredients are. If this creature attacks like a skinwalker and has some sort of affinity to the Coyote of Navajo lore, maybe we could use the lore it's wrapped itself in to catch it. I was just spitballing, you know? Just saying the first thing that

came to mind. Like, it would also be great if I had a chai tea latte right now. Except instead of getting a delicious, warm drink the four of us now have to walk into Navajo skid row looking for two old guys.

"You're clear," I say, then I slap the penlight into his hand and pop open my mouth and say *ahhhh*. I hear Chaco squawk on the steps of the RV, where he's waiting. After all these years I can tell when crow squawk sounds impatient.

"Chaco says it's not the coyote we need to worry about here. This crew is old-school. Way too much work to turn into a skinwalker. It's getting our asses kicked that we need to worry about."

"That's lovely. Thank you, Chaco. Quite helpful," Owen says.

Chaco squawks again. Grant translates, his voice droll. "He says if you know anyone else who's willing to translate old geezer Navajo, be his guest."

I do, actually. Joey Flatwood. But he's still not willing to break his banishment. Certainly not to show himself at the Arroyo again. He's stubborn like that. Just like Ben was, and still is. Chaco says Ben is going with us, but we obviously can't expect any help from his corner, not that it's his fault. Chaco says that for the record Ben isn't all that hot on this idea. He suggested we bring Yokana in, but that's easy for him to say. He's not the one that would have to explain the existence of worlds beyond worlds to the Navajo chief of police. And the bottom line is, we have two days before the Native Market. We're running out of time. It's now or never.

We parked the boat in a well-tracked dirt shoulder just before the turnoff to the Arroyo proper. It's still a five-minute walk from here, and we could have gone closer, but the last thing we need to do is show up to this place in our suburban war-vehicle. The boat is nice. Not Liberace-On-Tour nice, but we've got about a hundred grand wrapped up in it (OK, Owen's got about a hundred grand wrapped up in it), and it would look obnoxious rolling up on old tents and tarp-covered lean-tos and cars on blocks. The idea is to look exactly as desperate as we are.

Owen clicks on a flashlight, and we set off in the silence down the rutted road to the Arroyo. The night is black in the rez in general, but it's blacker out on the fringes. Eventually we see lights in the distance, soft glows from inside cars and here and there tents lit up like wish lanterns. The clunky turning sound of a few small generators provides a hum of background noise over which snippets of conversation can be heard, blown our way by the soft night breeze. It's not late yet, just dark, and the Arroyo is still alive. You could even call it sort of pretty. This is the time to see the place if you have to, when the drop-off beyond looks like the velvety black entrance to some sort of mysterious cave and not the pit full of trash and rusted metal that it is. When the camp looks like a half moon of bobbing lanterns, you can almost believe it isn't full of people too poor to own a house or rent an apartment, right next to bootleggers and meth cooks and addicts. The rough parts are muted, covered in a blanket of velvet night and soft moonlight. I might actually like to take it all in, if it weren't for the fact that we were being followed.

I tug on Owen's cuff, and he turns to me.

"We've attracted some attention," I say. I can see the smoke of two or three people in the darkness to our right and left, like faint wisps of ground fog in strange colors. The people themselves blend in seamlessly with the dark horizon.

Owen and Grant slow, and Chaco stills. We wait. But neither the smoke nor the bodies it comes from move toward us, which you'd think would be heartening. Until you realize that all they want us to do is keep walking, farther from the main road. Farther from the boat. I can read it in the way their colors bubble and waft. But they're not roiling, either. They're not angry, or cruel. They're curious, and maybe a little bit opportunistic, but I think that's the game out here at the Arroyo.

"Let's keep walking if we're gonna keep walking," I say. "Act like you know what you're doing, Owen."

And he does. He straightens up and fixes the tuck of his shirt. He clears his throat and nods at the rest of us. I see the people around us pausing, reassessing. Maybe it's Owen, maybe it's the

huge bird that sits on Grant's head. Either way, they follow at a distance, but more join. By the time we reach the inlet at the camp's edge, basically a big, rusted swinging gate bolted into the ground in the middle of nowhere, we've got six different smokes at the fringes that I can see, but so far they all hold back.

At the gate is a young man. He leans heavily against it, and his body makes the slight sways and constant adjustments of the veteran drunks we'd see at ABQ General. He smokes a cigarette that burns a soft red in the dark. He wears a stained Cleveland Indians jersey and sagging gym shorts with sandals covered in duct tape, and he watches us plainly as we approach. I hold Owen and Grant back a few paces from the guy. An element of everyone's smoke here is harsh, rough, but it's more of an undercurrent than what surfaces up top. Up top is still curiosity.

"You're definitely lost," he says. Then he takes a quick drag of his cigarette.

"No, we came here for help," Owen says, and although I can see that he's near to trembling on the inside, his voice is level and calm. Doctoral. I wonder, if I'd had the sight I have now back when I worked on the floor with him, how many times his outside would have belied his inside. When you work an oncology floor, you're almost always terrified. It's all about how you control it. I'm not at all surprised that Owen does it well.

"We're looking for two old men, sand painters. We were told they live here," he says.

The man is quiet, but inside he's surprised. First, three white people show up, then they ask about two old-timers who probably haven't been off the Arroyo in years. I think we've chosen the right approach, but then he shatters my confidence.

"Get the fuck out of here, *bilagaana*," he says. "Before you get hurt."

"We need help," Owen says again.

"Navajo medicine works best on Navajo. Go back to your pretty city."

"It's not for us, it's for the rez," Owen says.

"The *rez*? What do you care about the *rez*?" he asks. The six who lurk in the darkness start to move in as soon as he raises his voice. Owen senses that he's been too familiar. He takes a step back, another smart move. Now the smoker sees Grant fully for the first time, with Chaco on his head, doubling his height.

"What the fuck is that?" he asks, and I see his color rise for a moment.

"It's my bird," Grant says, calm as a lake. Chaco rises to his full height.

The smoker is afraid, but not of Chaco, not exactly. He's afraid because in his past he had a friend who lived by the crow totem, but he died. A Circle member, although the smoker didn't know it. I see the words play over his head and his heart. They read, "Oka Chalk."

"That's a big fucking bird," the smoker says, speaking around his cigarette, taking in a long drag now.

"He's... not your normal type of crow," Grant says.

"Listen," says the smoker. "You take this circus and walk your asses back the way you came. Hear me? This ain't no place for you."

The six others are coming toward us, and now they're not so curious anymore. Now they've got one thing on their mind: getting us out. Maybe taking a bit of a road tax along the way. Chaco sees them too, and he snaps his head to the side, eyeing the closest. He shifts himself to fly. I speak first, loudly.

"Oka Chalk is the reason we're here. He was the start of all this. You remember him?"

Everyone freezes. The smoker comes a few steps closer. I sense Owen tense but keep a hand on him. "What do you know about Oka Chalk?" he asks, peering at me over the cherry of his cigarette, through half-hooded eyes. He smells like bad beer.

"He had a crow too, once. Different from the one there." I nod at Chaco. "But—"

"A bad omen," he finishes. "That stone crow of Chalk's, it was bad luck. He started his own totem pile with it. I bet it told him he was gonna die. Now the fuckin' things are everywhere—the sky,

the roads. They're in the middle of the pit by the hundreds." He gestures vaguely with his cigarette behind him.

I don't know what the man is talking about with totem piles and premonitions of death, but I know I have his attention. The problem is he's just getting more scared now, no more willing to take us beyond the gate. We need to play our cards quickly, or we're going to get the hook. As if Chaco can understand me, he lets out three shrill caws that are immediately echoed from the desert behind us and built upon by the crows in the trash pit. From the sound of the birds, their collective voices slamming against the dirt and the desert like they're all right next to our ears, there are more than a hundred in that pit. It sounds like an army, and it's worse for being nighttime. If you think about it, you never hear crows at night. You never really hear birds of any kind at night. There's a reason. It's not natural. And it's terrifying. Still, I sense a new respect for us in the smoker. If it's born from fear, so be it.

"Do you want us to get rid of the crows?" I ask.

The smoker eyes me. He's sizing us all up in a new light, especially Chaco and Grant.

"You know we can do it," I say. "We know why they're here. But we need to talk to the sand painters first. And we need to do it soon."

The six that surround us are still moving in, inching closer while the smoker thinks. At the last second, just as I see Chaco's beak flashing to strike, the smoker holds up a hand.

"Follow me," he says. "And stay on the path."

We walk single file behind the smoker, and his sandals make loud clicks in the heavy silence that falls after the cacophony of the crows. Two of the six people that surrounded us follow in the rear. The rest fade away again, back to watch the road, I suppose. The first thing we pass is a big-wheeled Jeep. The tires look more expensive than the car, which is missing its back doors, and when the smoker passes the driver's-side door he taps the window three

times. Someone is inside, and they honk three times. The honk is echoed across the camp. A warning that outsiders are coming in. Hide anything you don't want strangers seeing.

I'm not exactly sure what I expected to see at the Arroyo. Albuquerque has a pretty big drug problem and the vagrant problem that goes along with it, so I guess I was expecting something like Commons Park in ABQ, which isn't too far from my old apartment: a bunch of homeless kids mixed in with grizzled drifters, all of them milling around giving each other shady handshakes, rifling through piles of their belongings looking for some odd or end.

The Arroyo isn't like that. I don't know if it's the culture of the place, where they sort of police their own, or if it's the more private nature of the Navajo in general, but I don't see any trouble. I sense trouble behind shuttered camper windows or in zipped tents where lights are snuffed as we pass, but that's where it stays. What I do see is men drinking around a campfire, laughing. Quieting when we pass and watching us carefully, then laughing again (probably at our expense). I smell people cooking meat and beans and grease. I hear kids shouting and running, and I think of Ben and Joey dashing all over this place. Climbing and jumping and racing between campsites.

We round the corner and move from the more ramshackle tenements to places that look almost homey. These are clean and swept. Some campers have welcome mats and potted desert flowers. Most of the cars look functional. The far side is where the reserved spots are. In the lights of the campers, I see people who look older, some very old. The smoker catches me peering, and I look straight ahead, embarrassed.

We walk the entire perimeter, to the opposite side of the entrance from the road, where the semicircle camp butts up against a low rock rise that isn't level enough to set a tent or a camper upon. The smoker stops us ten or so feet back from a pop-up camper that looks as though it popped up decades ago and stayed that way. In the low light that leaks from the windows I see pruned flowers and old-growth brush hemming it in on all sides. It

looks like something that sprouted up from the desert itself, with the same sand coloring and the same stark lines.

"Wait," says the smoker. "Don't wander." He dusts ash off the front of his jersey and hitches up his shorts a little then walks up to the front door of the camper and knocks softly, stepping back to wait. After several minutes, a woman opens the door. She's dressed in a light- blue nightgown covered by a faded pink robe. He speaks with her quietly, but Chaco can hear.

Grant whispers to us the gist of what they're saying: "This is where both of the brothers live. She's related somehow. He's asking if they can talk to us. He's calling us outsiders but says we know the crows."

The woman takes a step down and peers out into the darkness at us. She shakes her head several times then speaks with the smoker. "She says no way. They're getting ready for bed." Grant's voice is low with disappointment. The smoker seems to understand. He's already turning away. The woman takes one last look at us, squinting into the dark. Her body turns to go inside, but her head lingers for another moment, as if she's confused. She stops and turns back fully to face us. Then she takes a step down.

"Doctor?" she says. All of us turn to Owen, who looks as surprised as anyone.

"Yes?" he replies.

"O," she says. "Doctor O."

"That's right. I'm Owen. Owen Bennet. Do I know you?"

The woman ignores his question and bustles down the last step and over to us. She holds out her hands to Owen, and he takes them. She's smiling, and her smile is suddenly warm and reaching. She takes one hand and points at a small scar on her neck, where her thyroid is. Or was. I can see what happened there. Faint purple stretch marks circle the lower edge of her neck, where Owen most likely treated a goiter. It was probably large, but it's all but invisible now, save for the scar and what remains of the stretch marks. Owen laughs once.

"I remember you," he says faintly, his eyes wide. "Right when I first came here, the CHC volunteer crew arranged to pick you up

for treatment near the turnoff. That was well over a decade ago, though. You still remember me?"

She doesn't understand, but she beams at his words anyway. "Maya," she says.

"That's right. You're Maya. My God, you look like a different person."

She smiles until her eyes nearly disappear. Then she looks at me and Grant. She takes Chaco strangely in stride, which I think is a good sign. She takes Owen's hand and brings him forward then motions for all of us. "Come," she says.

Owen follows her up and inside the main room of the camper, which is bisected into two equal sides, with two beds made neatly with similar woven blankets. The kitchen smells vaguely of a rich spice I can't place, but it's orderly as well, all the dishes freshly washed, still dripping on the rack. I'm wondering how the heck she thinks all of us are going to fit in here, especially since the smoker still isn't willing to leave us, for better or worse, but my fears are put to rest when she takes another few steps and exits down and out of the opposite door on the side of the camper facing the Arroyo.

Here there's a small fire in a raised fire pit about the size of a hubcap. Enough light to see close up, but not enough to mute the stars that seem scattered above the desert like an arc of thrown glitter. Two men look up at us, both seated in old loungers, the type you'd find in a frat house common room. They wear light jackets, and their legs are covered with woven throws. They're small men, diminished by age, but they sit still with a solid presence and seem absolutely unsurprised to see us here. Even Chaco. Maybe especially Chaco.

"Chaco remembers these two," Grant says quietly. "From his time before me. When he was a different bird, with Ben's grandmother."

Both men nod at Chaco first, and Chaco nods back. Each of us steps forward and introduces ourselves, and when it's done, all of us wait in silence. The men turn to each other and mutter something I don't think anyone could possibly hear, much less

understand, but afterward the one on the left says, "Tsosi," and the one on the right says, "Tsasa."

That done, Maya starts fussing around looking for four seats in a square patch of land no more than twenty feet wide. I try to tell her not to worry, that we'll stand, but she's not having it. Eventually I end up in a slightly busted lawn chair, Owen and Grant on two glazed stumps of wood. The smoker seems content to stand out by the periphery of the light, toward the stars, where he lights up another cigarette and waits.

Everyone waits. I wait too, until I realize everyone is waiting for me. They want me to say something, to kick all this off, but to be honest with you I never really thought we'd get much past the turnoff. Also, I'm not sure what these people can understand, or what they can tell me, in English. So I'm sort of in a bit of a pickle, here. With no better ideas jumping to mind, I start by taking out the black book. As soon as they see it, the brothers frown, and Tsosi makes a sucking sound with his teeth that reminds me so much of Ben's grandmother that I have to take a breath to steady my head.

"Do you know what this is?" I ask. The brothers still frown. Maya looks back and forth between us and then shrugs, but I think it's because she can't understand what I'm asking. I look at Chaco, who squawks, and for one insane moment I think maybe they can understand bird squawk. I let it hang in the air for a second, but it does us no good. The sand painters don't understand bird—nobody does but Grant and Ben. I take a deep breath and rub at my face. This is going to be harder than I thought. Then the smoker chimes in from the dark. In Navajo. The brothers respond, and he interprets for us.

"They don't. Not exactly. But they don't like it," he says.

I glance at Chaco, who nods. We're all on the straight here.

"Neither do I. Not exactly," I say. "But it's important, because I think it can help us catch the skinwalker."

The word slips out before I can stop it, and it has an immediate effect. The smoke of both men, heavy and still and a rich chestnut in color, freezes. Maya's face is drawn, and the

smoker hisses at us, then spits. "We don't talk witchcraft here. Not with the old generation. And definitely not now." The smoker looks carefully behind him at the trash pit, where the crows sleep again. He shivers, like we just sneezed in the cave of a sleeping bear and everyone's waiting to see if it'll wake up.

"But how will we ask them anything? It's what we came here for," Grant says.

"You talk about the crows. They'll get your meaning."

"But the crows aren't the problem. They're just here because they go where things are out of balance," Owen says, before the smoker cuts him off.

"Listen, *Dr. O*," he says, making it clear he doesn't have quite the shine for Owen's position that Maya does. "You and your friends gotta learn how to talk around what you mean, or you'll never get anywhere with the old-timers. It's not their way to be direct."

Owen sits back a little, and I can tell he's stung. That's something he should have known. Something I should have remembered too. But we've been gone too long. I hold up my hands in apology.

The brothers' smoke stirs again, tentatively.

"There's a list of things in this book that I was hoping you two could explain to us. Tell us what they mean. Tell us what to do."

That came off as desperate, all right. Which was my initial plan. But now that I realize how desperate it sounds I'm wondering if I should rethink my approach. The brothers' smoke is stilling again. Maya looks awkwardly at us from out of the corner of her eye. I can hear the smoker shaking his head, spitting again. I was too direct. That's not the way. But what is the way? I'm starting to panic. I scratch at my neck, and I can feel it puff up with irritation. Suddenly I'm thinking about my puffy scratches and not about the book or what's inside of it, and now my train of thought is totally derailed and I'm thinking again about that stupid chai tea latte, which is *so* irresponsible at a time like this—downright *rude*—but I have nothing else to say. I feel like I'm breathing way too fast.

"Tell us about the Coyote Way," Grant says quietly. The tension snaps. The brothers seem to understand him, or at least those few words. Their smoke stirs then breaks and starts to flow over them again. They start talking to one another, nodding, not speaking to us, but letting us in on the conversation. The smoker interprets.

"The Coyoteway is a Way Chant. A healing ceremony. With a Singer and all that. Tsosi is saying how he went to one as a child, by Shiprock. His dad was the Singer. Tsasa was off chasing some girl, and he missed it. Their dad was pissed. They're laughing about it, because the Coyoteway is a super-long chant. Nine days long, if it's done right. That's a long time to chase after tail."

A healing ceremony doesn't sound like what we need. What we need is a plan to catch a coyote, not heal it. I don't think it can *be* healed. What it is, what it's made of, isn't something that can be cured. But even if a Coyoteway is the key, nine days is way too long. We have two until the market. The way Owen looks at me, I know he's thinking the same thing. If we started right now, we'd still be too late. It's a dead end.

I look at the book, and I'm feeling numb. The brothers' words wash over me, talking about their own stories, talking circles around our problem, and I stop paying attention. I see the strange objects written down in the book, glittering in ink that's impossibly black. I want to spit them all out at the feet of the brothers and see what sticks, but I know that would do us no good and only serve to still their smoke again. What would Ben do? I look desperately at Chaco, who titters at me, low and sad.

"Just talk," Ben would say. I can almost hear him say it too, and I wonder if he's here right now. I bet he is. He wouldn't miss this. I try to feel his presence, walking around us. I reach out desperately in my mind for the rich earthen red of his smoke. I knew it, once. I think of one of the first times I saw it, when I was in his house and he was strapped to the chemo, and I asked him what he wanted to do, to take his mind off the poison that was coursing through him.

"Just talk," he said. When I asked him what he wanted to talk about, he said, "Anything. You first."

We need to take another step back, here. What if we're not talking about a specific chant, but something bigger? Something like the *way* of the coyote?

"Tell us about the coyote," I say, interrupting, then cover my mouth. "Sorry, I uh. Was that too direct?"

The smoker actually smiles. "Sometimes the only way to get these two to shut up is to interrupt them. Otherwise you'll be here 'til you're as old as them."

He poses my question. The brothers take it in stride. Their conversation never misses a beat. In fact, they seem more animated, and Maya is even smiling now. I catch Owen's eye, and he grins at me. Grant seems transfixed by the old men and the loping sound of their voices. The smoker interprets.

"Coyote is a lot of things. A shifter. A trickster. He's good and bad. He can even be a god."

"How do you catch Coyote?" Owen asks. "If he's a trickster and a shifter and a god?"

The smoker speaks and then listens with us, his cigarette forgotten.

"Coyote may be a shifter and a god, but he's also a gambler, and sometimes a fool. He falls for tricks as often as he dishes them out, and he'll put it all on the line to get his prize."

Tsosi points to the sky as he speaks, and all of us follow his voice as it lifts up into the night above us.

"Coyote did that," the smoker says. "The Milky Way. Black God was putting the stars into the sky real careful like, one at a time, in all the right shapes, but Coyote was bored, impatient, so he threw the rest up to make the Milky Way. He's powerful, but reckless. To catch Coyote you just need to take away his warning signs. Without them he will run headlong into your trap."

"Warning signs?" I ask. I feel like we're getting closer, still circling around what we need to know, but the circles are tightening. The wood in the pit collapses to red ash, and Maya puts another log on. A desert wind kicks up, and it scatters tiny

embers into the sky, where they glow for a heartbeat before they snuff out. Tsosi confers with Tsasa then clears his throat and begins to speak, and the smoker follows a few moments later.

"One day Coyote woke up at camp and decided to walk. He set out toward the east but started growling, you know? Like how dogs growl for no reason. So he turned back. Then he started south, but his nose began to twitch, like he smelled something bad, so he turned back again. He's wondering what all this means, right?"

The smoker's cigarette dangles in his mouth as he talks.

"He sets off west this time, but his ears start ringing, so he turns around again. All that's left is north, but as he starts off that way he gets all itchy. His skin twitches, and he can't take it, so he turns around again and goes back to camp."

The smoker pauses and lets the brothers roll on for a bit. Then he starts in, talking low so they'll keep going.

"So Coyote does this four times, right? And the whole time he's freaking out about all these weird feelings he's getting. He's trying to figure it all out when this guy emerges, right from the desert." The smoker cocks his head and listens then reassesses. "Well, not just a guy, but a thing too. Sort of both. And he says, ÷I'm your birth bag, Coyote. I'm what you came from. And I say your home is that way."

Thankfully, it's dark enough and Maya and the smoker are so wrapped up in the story that the fact that the three of us are suddenly sitting like we've got steel rods for spines goes unnoticed. This is what we're looking for. I doubt there are a ton of stories about birth bags and coyotes in Navajo lore, and this night feels like it doesn't have any room for coincidences.

"So Coyote walks the way he was told, until he makes camp again. In the morning he sets out, runs into the same problems. The buzzing, the growling, the itching, the smells. He's stuck, until another thing comes up from the desert. This time it's a burned stick, but *not* a burned stick, you know? Something more, to Coyote. And the burned stick tells him where to go from there."

I imagine even Ben is still, now. If he ever was pacing around the fire, I bet he's not anymore. The smoker seems to struggle with his translation when he gets to the birth bag that isn't quite a birth bag, and the burned stick that isn't quite a burned stick, but I get it. I know all about things that aren't what they seem. All three of us carry objects that are more than they appear.

"Coyote does this four more times. Each morning he wakes up, he's lost again. He can't figure out what to do, where to go, but each morning he gets help from these things. On the third day it's a broken pot. On the fourth day it's a ratty old cane. On the fifth it's a little broom. The sixth day it's a broken stirring stick, like for a cook pot. They tell him where to go, and he eventually finds himself at his home, where he sacrifices again and again and again until he becomes a god himself."

Sacrifices again, and again, and again. I think of Owen telling me about the bodies pulled from the lockers one at a time so he could examine each. Of the way the mortician twitched. Bit at his own tongue. Could that really have been something like the Navajo Coyote, showing himself for a brief time? Gambling by laying out his cards face up on the table, showing us that his hand is almost full? The brothers suddenly laugh to each other, nodding in agreement. It's a warm *kyuk kyuk kyuk* that both men share. I look over at the smoker expectantly.

"They think it's funny that Coyote was warned again and again not to go the wrong way, but he didn't recognize it. Like most men. Without direction, we would be lost. Coyote came to see that the things he was feeling, the itching and the growling and all that, those were his warning signs. The things from the desert showed him that. Without those things, he'd be doomed."

"These things that warn Coyote," Owen begins then stops, obviously choosing his words carefully. I can tell this part frustrates him the most. His entire life, until he met me, he lived in a world where things were exactly what they looked like. Things worked exactly as they were supposed to. Treatments had outcomes. Things were documented, ordered, peer-reviewed. But not

anymore. "Can we find these things here? Now? They seem so simple."

The smoker speaks with the brothers for a moment. They lob these beautiful words back and forth like a slow tennis match, where everyone playing doesn't have to move much because nobody cares too much about winning. Then he turns to us.

"They're simple, but they're not," he says. "They're things that Coyote took and made his own."

Tsasa leans forward and with his bare hands plucks a small strip of half-burned wood from the fire pit in front of us. The brothers watch it for a moment as it fades from angry red to dull then puffs a wisp of smoke into the air, the fire gone out. Tsasa starts speaking again, and the smoker interprets.

"Yesterday this would have been just a burned stick, right? Nothing more, nothing less. Eventually it would turn to ash and be forgotten. It's Coyote's stick just like every stick could be Coyote's."

Tsasa passes it to Maya then indicates for her to give it to us. It goes around the circle until Grant hands it to me.

"But today it's much more. Now it takes on your journey. Your strength in coming here. It has the Arroyo in it. It has all of us, this night, this sky where these stars look just like they do. Now it's much more. Now it's powerful. Now you have taken it back from Coyote."

Maybe it's just the night, or the fire, or the fact that I've got two ancient Navajo guys telling me an ancient story under the stars when half an hour ago I thought I was gonna lose my purse and maybe have my Chuck Taylors tossed over whatever passes for the equivalent of a telephone wire here at the Arroyo, but I feel it. The burned stick is heavier than it has any right to be. Its colors are richer. Its wood-smoke smell is stronger.

"Keep it," the smoker says. "They think you're gonna need it."

Both brothers watch us carefully now, their eyes reflective pools in the firelight. It occurs to me that when we asked how to catch a coyote, they immediately started in on the Navajo figure. They didn't go into, oh, say, how to hunt and kill an actual coyote,

which might be the sane thing to discuss. Tsosi says something quietly, and the smoker speaks.

"If you find the rest of Coyote's warning signs, they invite you to the hogan over the hill. They say it's as good a place as any to set a trap."

The brothers seem half asleep when we say our good-byes, but they pat our hands and nod farewell. Maya clasps Owen's hands once more and says good-bye in a way that sounds more like *good luck*. On the walk back around the crescent, the Arroyo is much quieter, the lanterns fewer and farther between. There are no more laughing men or playing children. I get the sense that things should be different, maybe even had been different as recently as a few months ago, but people are circling the wagons even at the Arroyo. Afraid of what is happening outside.

"You gonna catch a coyote and get rid of my crows?" the smoker asks at the gate.

"We'll do what we can," I say.

He nods. "That one and his friends can stay, though," he says, pointing at Chaco. "I like that one." He takes a drag. "Old-timers talk in circles, but now that they're back there and we're up here, I'll go ahead and say it. Coyote may be a god—sometimes he is, sometimes he ain't. But for my money, he's definitely a witch. And a mean one at that."

Before any of us can answer, the smoker nods again, then he simply turns around and walks away.

CHAPTER 19

GRANT ROMER

I'm walking to school with Mick. For the past couple of days he's been waiting for me at the edge of the Crownrock RV Park in the morning. He doesn't say much, just leans against the rusted park sign with his hands in the baggy pockets of his shorts then walks with me when I come down the path. I'm not sure how I feel about it, since the only reason he's doing it is 'cause I'm white. I mean, he can't know me yet as a person. I've been at Crownrock High for a week. But I suppose it's better than walking alone.

I know my mind should be on broken pots and stirring sticks and birth bags and all that crap, but instead it keeps coming back to the market and the Crownrock booth there that I gotta take apart and reattach after the dumbass morning crew drilled an unpainted crossbeam right through the middle of it on accident. And then there's Kai. And Hosteen, her brother, who now comes to every prep session I'm at and manages to get into an argument every time with Kai over something I still can't quite figure. Chaco thinks I'm nuts. He's flying high above us now, making a point not to talk to me, which is fine by me because I know what he'd say: "You're screwing around in this high-school-drama crap when the devil is at the gates." And I'd say what I've been saying: If Crownrock High is good enough for the coyote to case—and it definitely is, its tracks are everywhere, worse by the day—then it's good enough for me.

Mick isn't happy that I stuck with market prep. He doesn't understand why I'd want to do something for the Navajo, who

never did a damn thing for him or his family and he thinks won't do a damn thing for me. Mick's family works in construction and got some contract on the rez that he says the Navajo are constantly messing with and rewriting and "dragging ass on."

"You sure you don't want to chill with me after school?" he asks. "I got some cool places to show you around here. Some cool shit." Mick hitches up his shorts and walks with a bit of a fake limp.

"Market's in two days, Mick. I wanna finish this thing, then you can show me whatever you want."

"You know Hos is gonna kick your ass if you make a move on Kai. You know that, right? He's been walking around for weeks now just looking for someone's ass to kick."

Of all the people in school, Hosteen is probably the one I should be trying to avoid. I've heard people talking at lunch about how he and his family go way back at the Arroyo and rumors of some bootlegging gambit his family runs. But of all the people in school, he's the one that shows the most signs of being wrapped up in whatever our coyote has planned.

"I dunno, man. I don't think it's me he's pissed at. It's something else. Like you said, he's been thugged up for weeks now. He's got something else in mind."

"I heard he's got something planned for the market, something big," Mick says, and I wait quietly, in case he knows more than he's letting on, but his mouth is shut.

"You got any idea what it might be?" I ask.

"What the fuck do I care what these Injuns do? If you're worried about it, stay away from the market."

We walk the rest of the way in silence, but Mick gives me a fist bump when he turns off at the stairs for his first class on the second floor. Mick is weird like that. He talks like he's pissed off, then he's friendly like nothing happened. I've been trying to get a feel for what the rest of the school thinks of the guy, but all I've found out is that nobody talks about him. Same as me. I sort of came one day, everyone checked me out, then everyone moved on the way they've been moving all year. Everyone except for Kai, that is. Kai looks for me in the halls. I've seen it. She sort of cranes

her neck around to look for me every day when she comes out of first period near my locker. She's the only one outside of Mick who really acknowledges that I exist here, but two is better than none.

The classes are fine. The classes are classes. Pretty easy, actually. I think Owen went a little crazy with his Professor Bennet's Education Emporium routine. From what I gather, I'm at least a grade, maybe two, ahead of the rest of the kids my age. I don't let it show. I try not to let anything about where I come from show. Not any cash, not any smarts, and definitely not the bell. I've got one shot here to make myself what I want to be, which is a kid who maybe could call this place home. Mick would say no chance, but I think Mick is kind of a loser.

The Crownrock booth has been moved outside into the back parking lot and roughly disassembled. It lies in five different pieces that will eventually join together to make a decent-sized, three-walled enclosure with a stage in the middle. The stage is for the dance crew. Crownrock has a dance crew that does your standard popular music routines but also traditional Navajo stuff. Sometimes a mix of the two. The three walls also exhibit student art, which is for sale. The art is OK. A few things are pretty good. But they tell me they sell out every year.

I fall in with the crew holding up the top part of one wall while another two guys take apart the bottom with power drills so we can get to the bare crossbar. A few people nod at me, sort of. At least they shuffle to make room for me. That's a victory, I guess. I find myself looking at people's mouths, trying to see what Ben saw on the street with the coyote and the bead, or what Owen saw with the guy in the morgue. It's tough, though. Everybody in high school chews gum all the time. And as for acting weird, well, hell. Take your pick. There's this guy in my history class who talks to himself all the time. Another kid in English lit blurts out cuss words at strange times, and nobody acts like it's weird at all.

I get pretty into the woodworking part. Pap would be proud. I picked up a good base from him, so I actually know a bit about this stuff. I break open the existing joint without cracking things then pull out the crossbar with the help of two or three other kids. We

set it on a bunch of flat cardboard that we spread out so we don't get paint all over the parking lot, then get to painting. The other kids still don't talk to me, but I get the feeling that they're more comfortable every day talking *around* me. It sounds pathetic, but it's true. I think it helps just being here. I get to dipplin' and slidin'.

I think I lose track of time a bit, because the next thing I know I'm done with the base coat and it's time to put in the designs, which are the type of traditional Navajo connected triangles that you see all over New Mexico, painted in the colors of Crownrock High, which I only just learned are the blue and red I've been getting all over my clothes for a week. Could be worse, I suppose. The Sargaso kids have to deal with adobe pink. That's rough.

I'm about to go search for the right buckets when two of them plunk down right next to me, and then Kai plunks down too. She's wearing paint-streaked jean shorts and an old art smock, which is really just a ratty men's dress shirt about ten sizes too big that she wears backward. She's got flecks of paint in her jet-black hair and a few little drops on her thighs. She sits cross-legged, leans back on her palms, and watches me for a second.

I think I must be staring, because eventually she looks down at her smock and then says, "What? I think it's a pretty good look for me."

"It works."

"What's your deal, Grant?" she asks. She's not smiling at me, not exactly, but her words sound like she's smiling. I think it's something the Navajo can do.

"My deal?"

"You've been here, what, a week? And instead of checking out the football team or the lacrosse club or just bugging out with the other white kids, you've been here every day, painting a market booth for stuff you have nothing to do with."

I shrug. "I dunno. Maybe because I want to have something to do with it. Plus, I'm not really the football or lacrosse type."

She nods. She's chewing gum too. I hope. Yeah, I know. It's just gum.

"Kind of hard to play in black jeans," she says.

"They ain't so black anymore." Two days ago I dumped a blot of white primer on my jeans. It won't scrub out. They're sort of motley now.

"Aren't." I correct myself, awkwardly late.

"Yeah, well then maybe you *ain't* gonna mind getting a little blue and red here and there," she says, and she pops open both cans, stirring each up with one side of the same stick. She hands me a washed brush. "Stick between the lines."

We paint in silence for a while. Or maybe I should say she paints in silence. I test about a million lines of dialogue in my head, and I'm about ready to sweat with how much I'm trying to stay between the lines when she says, "Since you basically painted the whole thing, are you gonna go to market to see it in action?"

To be honest, I'd been so focused on the setup and hopefully seeing Kai, exactly the way that's happening right now, that I haven't given much thought to actually going to the market or not.

"Cause if you were," she says, turning back to the design, "there's this big party some of the alumni kids throw at Marcy Park —"

"Of course he's gonna go," says a voice from behind me. It's deadly even, and I know exactly who it is without looking. My shoulders want to sag, but I don't let them. "That's who the market's for," he says. "*Bilagaana* like him, right? Look at me when I'm talking to you."

I set down my brush carefully on a corner of cardboard and stand up. I turn around, and Hos is about a foot from me, his entourage of ogres with him. He's shorter than me, but not by much, and the way he's looking at me is like I'm about an inch tall anyway. He's wearing another cutoff T-shirt and loose jeans with boots. His shoulders sport a bunch of tattoos that look Navajo that I never noticed before. He's probably no more than two years older than me, but it looks like he and I are on opposite sides of the spectrum of life.

"Right, kid?"

I'm stunned. I think adrenaline has wiped my brain. I have no idea what he's talking about. "What?" I ask.

"The market, fucknuts. That's where your kind peruses our kind. Right? Like a zoo, sort of, except we dance for you and hold out pots and beads for you?"

"I dunno, man," I stammer. "I ain't never been to the market before." The other kids have stopped working, once again, and are gathering around the fringes. Hos is on a roll.

"Let me tell you, then. It basically goes like this." He takes the stick Kai stirred the paint with and wipes it on his hands. "A bunch of Indians from all around the country paint themselves up like this and hope white people notice them and give them money." He slams my chest with his open palm and leaves a blue-and-red palm print. I back up a pace but keep my feet. "And white people like you look for great deals on authentic Indian shit for their condos and then hope that the actual Indians will just go back to wherever they came from once the big show is over."

"Leave him alone, Hosteen," Kai says. She's still sitting down, facing forward, but all that hidden shine that she had is gone once again. "It's not his fault."

Hos looks at her and shakes his head. "I know that, Sister." He crouches down until his face is right behind her head, but she still won't look at him. "It's *our* fault. For not doing something about it. For letting them walk all over us. But all that's about to end. And it's not too late for you to join us. There's still time to make your clan proud."

He stands again and turns to me. He looks at his print on my shirt and smirks. "Looks better than it did before." He moves the paint stick closer to me. "Maybe we oughta mark you up a little more, huh?" His two ogre bodyguards move to the other side of me, and now Kai is looking up at me. She looks scared. And that's the first time in this whole fracas that I start to get scared. Hos takes another step and raises the stick to swipe it across my face, but then I hear a beating of wings. Big wings. It sounds like somebody is shaking out a sheet. And I know what's coming, so I duck. Chaco lets out a single explosive call, and all I see is a shadow with inch-long talons swipe at Hos from behind. I can actually hear one talon strike home on his forearm. It makes a *zip*

sound as it cuts him from his elbow all the way up to his hand, then Chaco is away again.

I stand up and find Hos staring at his bleeding forearm. I can already see that it'll scab but won't scar. Chaco held back, but the paint stick is basically gone. Just a nub of it remains in his hand. Some of the kids start yelling, not sure what they just saw. They're pointing at the roof of the gym, where Chaco perches with the stick in his grasp. Even at this distance he looks big. Kai stands and shields her eyes to get a better view of him, then she starts to laugh. She points at Hos's big buddies. There's a clear line of bird shit running over both of them, shoulders and heads and all. It's as if I dipped my brush in a bucket of the stuff and flung it at 'em in a big arc. All three of them start fuming. They want to be mad at me, but they can't. I didn't do anything.

"Stupid fucking bird," Hos mutters. "Must have thought the stick was food or some shit."

"Maybe," I say.

He looks at me with fire in his eyes. "Maybe? The fuck does that mean, *maybe*?"

I shrug. "It means maybe."

He looks at me sidelong for a cold ten seconds or so then turns to Kai. "Get up. Time to go. This booth is as done as it's gonna get."

I can see that Kai doesn't want to leave, but she gets up anyway and shoulders her bag. She looks at me briefly, and her eyes say *sorry*. She shoulders past Hos and his crew, and they close ranks behind her. I can't see her, but I can hear her walking away.

Hos takes one last look at Chaco, who takes this moment to let out three opportune *caws*. Hos looks to be weighing something carefully in his mind, then he shakes his head.

"See you at the big dance, *bilagaana*. Make sure you're there." Then he winks at me.

He walks off, his bleeding arm seemingly forgotten. The rest of his crew don't even spare me a glance as they follow him. Once they're gone, all of my adrenaline dumps, and I'm instantly exhausted. I feel like I'm gonna fall asleep onto the fresh paint, but

I finish the design. When the crew leader, a big senior gal, says that's a wrap and that we'll reassemble everything in Santa Fe, I clap along with everyone else then grab my backpack and go. Nobody seems to notice except for Chaco. He flies right above me.

"You all right there, boss?" he asks me, the first words he's spoken to me all day.

"Yeah," I say. "Thanks for helping me out back there."

"No prob. You know, I think you're right, man. That one is trouble. He may be wrapped up in all this. Maybe our coyote."

"And all I did was piss him off."

Suddenly I feel like an idiot. Maybe Mick was right when he said I was crazy to help out with the market crew. Nobody seemed to give a damn if I was there or not. Even Kai thought it was weird. What was the point of all that? What was I trying to do? Be an Indian? Did I think some paint and a few nails would turn me Navajo?

"It was all a waste of time, man," I say.

"You never know," Chaco replies. I can hear him coming in low. "Heads up," he says.

He backpedals above me and drops something from his claws. I snatch it out of the air and slow to a stop. It's the paint stick, half red, half blue. I can see little imprints where Kai's fingers smudged the paint. I can't stop staring at it. The paint is so bright it almost sparkles in the sun, and her fingerprints are cleanly pressed, like whorled ice crystals. Even the jagged end where it broke looks beautiful, like the splinters could tell a story. It feels heavy.

"What's that look like to you?" Chaco asks.

"A paint stick." But already I know it's not. It's more.

"See, to me that looks like a certain broken stirring stick we've been on the hunt for."

He's right. The story of my arrival at Crownrock is wrapped up in this stick. It might have been the coyote's once, before I came, but I took it back. Kai helped, and Chaco helped. Even Hos helped in his own way. I grin to think that our coyote himself might have handed me one of his warning signs.

Either way, that's two down, four to go.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20

THE WALKER

It's almost three in the morning, the night before the market, and I'm walking the soft streets of Santa Fe. They literally look soft. They're so old in places that the stones and bricks dip and crest like frozen ripples in a pond. A lot of Navajo kind of roll their eyes at Santa Fe. Part of it is because white people love it so much. Part of it is because for a while in the 1900s it was a place where the Navajo could actually live and work. Now it's a place where rich people eat and shop. I don't know a single Navajo who could afford a place in this city, so I get where they're coming from. But don't blame the city. It's old as hell. Since I died, I've gotten a lot of perspective. Forget what happened in the 1900s, try the 1500s. Or the 900s. People were here then too. You don't have that much history without also getting a little magic. You can feel it here, in the old streets, the old churches, the old hills dotted with old graves. This city is an old rock in the desert. It's been hot and cold and hot again, and it doesn't seem to care what anybody thinks. I like it. So sue me.

Usually Santa Fe is a pretty quiet city too, despite all the tourists, but not tonight. Not even at 3:00 a.m., and it certainly won't be tomorrow. Whatever creeping unease taints the rez has spread here. I know the coyote has been here too. His breath seems to hang dead in the night air. Distrust is everywhere, even between the volunteers and cops that sit at the intersections. These guys should be shootin' the shit, sneaking off to get arepas and maybe even a beer if they aren't in uniform. Every year the

NNPD sends a couple lucky bastards to represent here. I was chosen one year when Chief Yokana felt particularly sorry for me about everything around Ana. It's a cakewalk. A paid vacation. But not today. Today everybody is yelling at everybody. Micromanaging things like cordons and cones that nobody really needs. Waving cars off and getting pissy whenever the booth people ask for something.

I'm trying to mark these things more than just in passing. I'm trying to look for patterns, maybe find a way to track the coyote, to be where he wants to be before he brings down the house, because I think he's gonna bring down the house. We've got a way to catch him now, if we can beat the clock, thanks to the sand painters, and thanks to Caroline, but we've got to act fast.

You should have seen her by the campfire. She was unreal in the night light of the Arroyo. I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. Caroline, right there where Joey and I used to raise hell. Caroline, walking into the very place the NNPD tells even the Navajo to steer clear of if they can help it. I never thought I'd live to see the day an Arroyo campfire would play off the warmth of her eyes. Turns out I didn't live to see it. But what I got was the next best thing. At one point, I swear she looked for me. I was there, listening, next to the smoker (which, at the rate that guy rips cigs, I bet I'll be seeing again pretty soon), but her eyes passed right through me just as sure as my hands pass right through booth after booth after booth under the heavy moonlight.

I feel the telltale pressure drop of a Chaco arrival, like an itch in my ear. There's the pop, and then I feel the wind of his wings and the heavy weight of him as he settles on my shoulders. I relax without knowing I was ever tense. Sometimes when your fingers pass through too many things, it starts to key you up, I guess. The solid weight of Chaco feels good. Like a fat file folder of finished work. Not that I'd ever tell the ungrateful bastard.

"We got two," he says.

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, the stirring stick. It came from the school. It came around because of Grant."

I smile. That kid surprises at every turn. Here I was thinking maybe he'd give up and join a metal band. Instead he insists on enrolling at a Navajo high school and, for better or for worse, seems like he's hacking it. That can't be easy. They picked on me in high school because I was small, but even a small Navajo is still a Navajo. In the circles I ran with in high school the social scene went from the popular-jock-badass Navajo kids at the top to the skinny white boys like Grant at the bottom. What he's doing takes guts.

"I also think maybe he's right about the market," Chaco says. "Something big is gonna happen here, tomorrow night during the dances, most likely. Keep an eye on a kid everybody calls Hos." Chaco settles into the crook of my neck and gets small. He hasn't done that in years.

"That's a lead, Chaco. Why do you sound like you ate some bad Chinese?"

"I didn't believe him. I should have, but I didn't."

"Don't start moping now, right when we gotta get to work." I kind of gloat. I can't help it. Usually it's me whining and crying imaginary tears at one of my pity parties. I never get to sit at the other end of the table. He says nothing, only gets smaller.

"Look, man. The kid is fourteen. I'm sure he wasn't exactly being a good friend to you, either. His brain just got soaked in puberty. He'll even out eventually."

Chaco titters on my shoulder, which is his way of laughing. Then he gets bigger. "You'd think I'd know that after a couple thousand years. But I forget every time. Every Keeper is new for me, and I..."

"You care," I say. "It's a good thing. But if you're right about the dances, then we gotta bust our asses. They start in like twelve hours."

"Can we make a move on this Hosteen kid? If he's really a skinwalker, could the Circle jump him right now and take the bead?"

I shake my head. "The coyote is too tricky for that. If we make a move and it senses us coming, it could jump from Hosteen,

maybe change up its plan totally, and then we've got what cops call an unknown. Unknowns are dangerous. Especially with this thing."

We walk down Canyon Road toward St. Francis Cathedral, which is this big church made out of stone that takes on a copper color at night. The cathedral marks the west boundary of Santa Fe Plaza, which is normally a big open square where people hang out and eat or drink around the obelisk statue at the center. A circle stage has been constructed around the center statue. It's where the dances will be performed. Beyond the viewing area, the entire square is crosshatched with rows of booths like mini city blocks on a grid. The booths spill out into adjacent streets in every direction. I see twenty or thirty people still setting up. The real procrastinators.

Then again, you could say the same about me right now. I should be hunting down artifacts of my own, I should be running around like a chicken with its head cut off, but instead I have this strange calm. Like I used to get in the car with Ninepoint when we'd quickly sketch out our approach to bringing in whomever we were after. I got some ideas that I want to run by Chaco first. I want to sketch out my approach like I used to.

"Man oh man," Chaco says, surveying the scene. "This is gonna be a beehive."

"The booths seem to go on forever this year. There's a great park at the edge of all this mess. You got a second to check it out?"

Chaco nods, and we set out, walking through the honeycombed streets without turning a single head.

The walk from the plaza to Marcy Park is a pleasant one. I take the uphill approach, through the old neighborhoods, every one of them the same type of covenant-controlled adobe and wood pillared construction. You get the sense that you've walked back in time, especially when you come across the houses that were built well before the covenant came around. The original adobe, patched and repatched, and still strong.

"I've been thinking about this bone bead," I say. "I don't think we're gonna be able to beat the coyote unless we destroy it. It moves too fast. It jumps from person to person. It's made of chaos, so there's no way we can reason with it. And if we do manage to trap it, it's gonna be mad as hell."

Chaco cocks his head. "I think you're right. But we gotta tread carefully. No doubt this bone bead is a super powerful object. Think of it as a chaos bell."

"Then you're saying we shouldn't destroy it?"

Chaco does this *tiktik* thing with his throat that I've learned is the same as when humans say, "Well, hold on just a second, now..."

"From what you said you saw in that cavern with the black pearl, I got a hunch that the pearl uses chaos souls to form the bead. The coyote has a place at the center of that pearl, and at the center of the coyote is the bead. So if I'm right, and we can fix all this by destroying the bead, the souls will just go back to making another bead for the coyote, only the coyote will be back where it's supposed to be. No harm, no foul."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Hellfire and brimstone. Take your biggest pile of shit and throw it right at the biggest fan you've got. Then throw in a bunch of crow feathers for giggles."

"I'm serious, bird."

"So am I. But it's no worse than what will happen if the coyote roams free. Either way, the river is out of whack, man. For all I know, beyond the veil is already a huge cluster. This bastard has been on a joyride from hell, not doing his *job* for *five years*."

Chaco hates when people don't do their jobs. That's what happens when you diligently do yours for a couple millennia.

We crest the hill and come up on Marcy Park from on high. It looks like a concert is being set up here. Tents and merchandise booths flank a big stage at the far end of a wide grass field. A handful of technicians are turtling around, checking stage equipment and lighting.

The two of us are quiet for a moment, taking in that strange stillness that can fall over a place in the twilight hours before it gets jammed with people.

"What happens when the bead is destroyed?" I ask quietly. "I mean, I imagine that it's more than just a little crack of breaking bone."

"I'd imagine so, yeah."

"You don't know, do you?"

"I'm in new territory here, brother. Right along with you. I do know that no anchor object like that has ever been broken in living memory."

I suspect Chaco knows more than he's telling me. I can sense it in the way he's looking away from me, focusing on the park below. But that's OK, because I have some thoughts of my own about what happens when one of these things breaks, and I want to keep them to myself for a bit too.

"We're still a ways away from breaking the thing, Walker," Chaco says evenly. "We need to catch it first. We've got two of the coyote's artifacts. We're four short."

"Three," I say.

Chaco looks at me, his bird brow raised.

"We're three short. I think I know where one of them is. The broken pot. But it's not in any place any of the five of us can reach it."

"So what do we do?"

"I got an idea. The four of you keep at it. It's about time I visited my old buddy Joey."

CHAPTER 21

CAROLINE ADAMS

It's just before dawn on Saturday, the kickoff for the market. We've got twelve hours before the dances begin. Usually my 3:00 a.m. insomnia centers on obsessing over what passes for my love life. This time I've been up all night thinking about a whisk broom.

I'm not going to lie to you, I had to look online even to see what a whisk broom is. Turns out it's a little hand-held straw broom. Something old farm women dressed in babushkas would use to dust out their cook fires. I had an absurd urge just to buy one, right then. Enter my credit card information, pay for same-day shipping. Voilà. An individually packaged whisk broom, brought to my door. But I get the feeling that's not what the sand painters meant when they said the object is about the journey. A journey from a warehouse in Albuquerque to an RV park mail room doesn't have an ounce of spiritual weight to it, no matter how expedited.

None of us has slept. There's no time for sleep anymore. Not right now. Grant is already at Crownrock High with the setup crew, packing up for their trip to Santa Fe on a school bus. He was as chipper as he usually is, which is to say not at all, but at least his eyes were open. I have that gritty feeling that I used to get doing night shift at ABQ General. The one where it feels like the sandman comes by to knock you into sweet oblivion, except you have to tell him that no, in fact, you won't be sleeping tonight because you have to do rounds on a thirty-six-bed floor, but the sandman doesn't take that too well—he's the jealous type—so instead of sprinkling his dust on your forehead he chucks the

whole bag right at your face. It fuzzes up your teeth and gets behind your eyes, and I know it won't be going away any time soon, so I put a pot of coffee on our little stove and get down to more thinking.

I'm halfway through my second cup when it occurs to me that Owen and I haven't had sex in a month. Don't ask me why this hits me out of the blue. It certainly has nothing to do with whisk brooms, but just like that I'm very disappointed in myself. I look out of the back window of the boat, where Owen is standing and watching the sunrise. He's been walking back and forth, checking odds and ends on the hitch and around the outside of the RV without actually doing anything. That's how he thinks. I can see it on him: he's completely invested in this, every ounce of his smoke is wrapped up in it, and I can't believe I haven't noticed the change in him before now.

In a way, he looks the same as he always did on the floor. He's driven, totally focused on the problem at hand, and you'd think that would be a good thing, but I also know that when he was that way on the floor—blind to everything else but the patients he was tasked with getting healthy again—it was a willful blindness. He told me so. He told me that work was the only thing that could take his mind off me.

I search the smoke sifting off him in the early-morning light in slow, thick waves, and I can see it. I can see that longing, but it's tamped down. Packed under. He's doing it again. He's swapped one distraction for another. He's doing everything he can not to think about me, about us, about loving me the way that he does, and it's working. But it's also blocking him, plugging up his soul. The colors I see on him now aren't the true colors I know. His blue isn't as blue. Sure, there's a lot of it—he's throwing himself into this search with everything he's got—but it isn't as strong. And it makes me feel like garbage.

I set my coffee down and walk outside. He sees me coming and musters a heartbreaking smile. His hair, normally meticulously combed and evenly parted, is tufted here and there where it looks

like he's been running his hands through it again and again. He's frustrated and stumped.

"I know I'm missing something with that damn broken cane." He lets his hands drop to his sides. "It's right there, on the tip of my brain, but I can't..."

I don't even say anything. I just take one hand and pull him gently toward the boat. He looks confused at first, then I see him understand, and a few things cross his mind. At first he's incredibly hungry for me, in every way. I don't do this type of stuff. I'm not one of those girls that does this, grabs a guy by the hand and whispers something into his ear and takes him away to the bedroom on a whim. I'm a planner. Even when it comes to sex. I think of it in terms of time frames and schedules and recommended amounts. I know it's not romantic in the movie-star sense, but then again, I find weird things romantic. Opposite things. Things like the fact that there's no physical way Ben and I could ever be together, but sometimes I can still feel him reach for me. Things like I'm very probably ruined emotionally by what I've seen and done, but Owen still stays with me, by my side, and he loves me so fiercely he's afraid to let it show because he thinks it'll scare me. And it does. And I sort of like it.

The second thing I see in Owen's mind is hesitation, and he pulls back gently.

"Caroline," he says, "I don't want this. I can't keep doing this."

He's not lying, not exactly, but his mind tells me more of what he's thinking than his brain can right now. He does want this, and he can keep doing this, but it's taken him a long time to get right with living with half of my heart, and when we do things like this and I lose myself and he does too, there are a few seconds of eternity where I'm his completely. It's a beautiful lie that our bodies speak to each other.

And it's a lie we both need right now. I just need to let him know this without hurting more of him than I already do every day.

"I don't know why I can't move on from him, Owen. I'm split in half, and I don't know how to fix it. I wish I could tell you how

awful I feel. I wish you could see it on me like I see it on you. You've been walking around with half of a companion. Half of a friend too. And I have no right to ask you to see it my way, but if you could, just think about what it's like to *be* half there. To live life with part of yourself missing. You help me. You shoulder some of that loss for me. Your heart is so huge, it makes up for what I'm missing. Not all of it, but enough to make it OK for a while. So I know it may not be right, or healthy, or whatever, but I'm just gonna say it: I need this. From you."

It works. I can see it immediately. Owen likes to know he's needed. Just like me. Just like everybody. He lets me take his hand again and follows me inside. We lock the little door and pull down the little blinds and clear off our little bed. We undress, and he hangs his shirt in the closet to keep it off the ground and lays his socks over his shoes, right to right, left to left. He folds his slacks at the crease and lays them over the pull-out dressing table. His little routine always makes me smile. I have one too: shorts folded under shirt, folded under bra, all set on my tiny nightstand, and panties off and in the hamper. No socks or shoes for me. I haven't worn shoes since May. Just flip flops. We do this in comfortable silence, like we have ever since that first time years ago, when it was a hilariously awkward dance around this box of a bedroom—but one that I had planned down to the minute while Grant was off getting groceries. All went according to plan, of course. I think you could actually hear the bubble of sexual tension pop that time. It was long overdue.

Owen gets in bed and makes a place for me under his arm, and I get in bed and fit there, and that's how it starts. We know each other now. I could sketch the dimple in his shoulder from the bullet he took for me, entry and exit. I know it by heart. I've felt it with my hand and with my arm and with my mouth. I also know he can fit the entire back of my head in the long palm of his hand. We know where we fit with each other, and that is exactly what we both need right now, when we don't know where we fit with everything else. We forget all that. All the to-dos, the artifacts, the ticking time bomb at the market, it's all blown from our minds for

about twenty minutes on a scorching summer morning in the Navajo desert.

Afterward, Owen's smoke sifts peacefully down and around him, pooling in that teacup spot at the base of his neck, and it matches the blue of his eyes again. He's staring at the ceiling but seeing through it. It's like he's been abraded of something, scrubbed clean, which is why he says: "It's not the cane."

"What is it, then?"

"It's the exercises. Lenah, the secretary at CHC, she gave me the PT sheet I gave her with the donated walker, years ago. She didn't need the exercises anymore. Her pain was gone."

I sit up on one elbow. Now I'm really confused.

"It's been staring me in the face for days now. That was my journey, right there. That program was the first walk I took with the Navajo, with the CHC. The coyote tried to take it from me. I took it back."

Owen gets up and goes over to his nightstand, opens it up, and starts pulling things out. He shakes his head, moves over to the built-in table, lifts a stack of wiring instructions for the trailer, then lifts my magazines and rifles through all the pages. He shakes his head again. I can see him thinking for a minute before he goes over to his little closet and flips through it to find the slacks he wore that day. He frisks his pockets. Nothing. He turns around with his hands on his naked hips.

"It's in Chief Yokana's car," Owen says heavily. "I left it in his damn car."

He picks up his watch and clicks it over his wrist. He checks the time and frowns. I know what he's thinking. We're in the final hours now. I slide out of bed, walk over to my little pile of clothes, and get dressed. He does the same, careful to put the correct socks on the correct feet. I smile again, even with the seconds on the clock hammering home.

"Let's go find him, then," I say. He looks up at me and nods, and I feel like something that was coming loose between us is tied tightly again. We reach underneath our pillows for our totem pouches, and as soon as I grab mine it's like I'm stunned. It feels

heavier, richer, like it's made of velvet and it's carrying thousands of diamonds instead of an ancient lump of turquoise fashioned into a crow. Owen has already pocketed his and is moving to the door, but he pauses when he sees me.

"Something wrong?"

I open up the pouch and pour it out on the bed, expecting something more than the crow, expecting that stream of diamonds to come pouring out, but it's just my totem, tumbling onto the bed. Solid as ever. I see the irregular notches in its wings, the sharp point of its searching beak. Its head, slightly turned, mid-flight, as always. And I realize it isn't the crow totem that shocked me this time. It's the pouch I'm still holding in my hand.

"What's up?" Owen asks, moving over to me now. He relaxes when he sees my totem, safe and whole.

I hold the pouch out to him. "Take it and tell me I'm not crazy. Touch it."

He takes it, and his eyes widen. He pulls his own pouch out of his pocket and squints at both, weighing them up and down in his hand.

"Is this the same one I gave you?" he asks. "It definitely feels different from mine. It's like it's in high def or something."

"It's the same old pouch."

"But I picked up both of them in that truck stop in Alamosa. They were a pair." He tosses mine back over to me. I catch it, and I'm struck again by how soft and full it feels. Like it's woven silk, when I know it's just old leather. Then I get it. It's not just old leather. It never was. It's more.

"You gave it to me," I say. "It's because you gave it to me. Only I never realized it until now."

"That I gave it to you?"

"No, what it meant. It's about the journey, right? That's what the sand painters said. When we got those crows and you said you wanted to come with me, it was because you wanted me then. Just me. But when you gave me the bag, and you got the same, it was because you wanted to do all of this *with* me. You weren't

just there for me, you were there alongside me. Both of us were born into this new life together."

I see it dawn on him. "The birth bag," he says.

I blow out a breath, and a little bit of the weight that is pressing on me is lifted. "Thank God. I thought that one was gonna be really gross."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22

THE WALKER

Joey lives in an old conversion van just like his grandfather did at the Arroyo. Matter of fact, it's his gramp's van. After Joey drove off the rez that day when the tribal council turned their backs on him, and I did too, he kept going north, almost like he wanted to drive himself off the map altogether. I often picture him as he must have been then. Blinded by sadness and pain but refusing to give up until he made things right for my family. He was on a cannonball run, fleeing some demons, chasing others down. He must have been a hell of a sight.

For some reason he hit the brakes in Montana, just south of the Canadian border. He was running from the agents then, and the cops, so a border run was risky. He needed a place to lay low and figure things out, so he rolled his van into Hamm, a speck of a town fifty miles west of I-25 in the middle of the plains. He pulled up under an abandoned carport that was once attached to a tiny house, but the house collapsed who the hell knows how long ago, certainly well before he and I were racing around the rez together.

He parked the van, and it promptly died. And that's where it still sits to this day, over a decade later. Joey doesn't like to let anyone in the Circle know about it, but that's where he still lives most of the time. He might call it home, if he called any place home. But he doesn't call any place home anymore, and that's the problem.

Hamm, Montana, is one of those little towns you don't even catch a whiff of when you're cruising by. There are small towns—

the kind where you might stop to gas up or grab a coffee to keep you going—and then there are *really* small towns. The kind that have four or five businesses on half a block, and that's Main Street. The kind that have one crossroad and no real trees and every single building is a flat, single-story square. And if you step back a few paces, you can take in the whole of the town in one look, underneath an enormous open sky that seems twice as big for how small everything else is. There are only ever a handful of people there, and they come and go all the time. A guy living out of his van, even a guy who looks a little rough and haunted like Joey, can do whatever the hell he pleases so long as he doesn't bother anybody, and Joey never does, because all Joey does is work on phasing.

Joey was the type of guy who did anything to get out of work back in the day. He and I were always looking for corners to cut, ways to slip away and do our own thing, which usually involved drinking beers or smoking cigarettes or throwing things at other things to see what happened. If you'd told me all those years ago that Joey would devote all of his time to studying and practice, I'd have laughed you out of the rez. It just wasn't him. Then again, he probably thought the same thing when he heard I became a cop. Sometimes shit doesn't go the way you think. People change.

His work with the crow totem damn near killed him. It would have killed him at first, the way he just dived into the thin space and held the phase as long as he could, but he took so many drugs that his body stopped rebelling like it should. He overrode his instincts with chemicals. Soon he was able to spend hours in the thin space, then days. He started meditating in the thin space. I watched him as he sat in one place, cross-legged, crow in hand, until I thought he'd blow away into the cold, sepia dust that the thin place seems made of. But he never blew away.

Joey learned to do what the agents did, which was essentially to live in the thin place. Of course, the agents were driven by our coyote at the time. They had a connection with him through the book that I think was the only reason they were kept alive. Joey had drugs. Still, he was able to inhabit the place for long stretches

of time, test what it had to offer. He came out of his meditations and trances with a connection to the world beyond that I haven't seen in anybody else, except maybe Caroline. That, and a raging pill habit.

I've watched Joey a long time. For a while I thought the pills would get him. That I'd get the tug and show up at his van and find him conked out against the door in a puddle of his own vomit. One time, about two years after I died, I checked in on him and saw him down one pill after another for about three hours, then he snorted one for good measure, and I just lost it. I screamed my lungs out at him. Forget that he and I are on separate planes and that nobody on earth could hear me. I yelled and I yelled at him about everything. Got it all off my chest, saying stuff like how Caroline and Owen needed him, and even pulling out the big trump cards like how Ana would be disappointed in him and how his own grandfather would turn his back on him if he saw him right now. About fifteen minutes into my tirade, he said, "I'm done."

That's when I figured out that he could sense me.

He dumped all his pills, locked himself inside his van with a jug of water and a tin of jerky, and got clean over a hellacious forty-eight hours in which I spent every free second I had next to him. I can't touch him, of course, or hold a conversation with him. Nothing like that. But all the time Joey spent in the thin place changed him just like it changes everybody, and it made him more aware of me. He knew I was with him in the van over those two days. At the end of it he emerged sweaty and stinking into this lucidity that still allowed him to walk the thin place but kept him from killing himself with pills, and he thanked me.

So Joey knows when I'm there. Which is good, because I owe him something, and it's time I gave it to him.

When Gam was murdered, she essentially had three things to her name: her Singer's bag, the bell, and her crow totem, which she kept in a little bone box. The bell was never mine to have, and it found its next owner all on its own. As for the Singer's bag, well, singing was Gam's talent. I never had the will or the brains to get

the chants and the ceremonies right, plus, each Singer's bag is personalized, filled with things that have a powerful connection to the individual Singer. With her gone, it became just a bag of things. Ninepoint stole her crow totem, and then the agents stole it from him, but I got it back and gave it to Caroline at the same time I gave Owen the gambler's totem. That leaves the bone box.

The bone box is a holder of things. Important things. Much like a pot. And it just so happened to break when Ninepoint ransacked it. It has the story of that night wrapped up into it, and that night means so much. I keep thinking about how the coyote was there, at my front door, when I came back. In a way, when I left the rez, the coyote moved in and took that box. I know in my heart that the bone box is our broken pot, and it's time I took it back. The problem is, I can't get to it.

When I walk into the lean-to I see the van door is closed and locked and the windows are rolled up, but it's basically hotboxed: the windows are white with smoke, and there's a big hole cut in the top where Joey rigged up an exit pipe. Good thing there's nobody around here for acres in either direction, because I bet it reeks of pinon smoke, and probably a few other things too, of the more hallucinogenic sort. He's essentially created a makeshift hogan out of his grandpa's old conversion van. The sliding door is even facing east, now that I notice it. I gotta admit, I'm impressed. I walk inside.

Joey's head, which had been resting peacefully on the back of the inside wall, straightens as soon as I take a second step inside the van, which is roomier than you'd think.

"Hi, Joey," I say. "Nice setup you have here."

He doesn't answer, of course. Like I said, our connection isn't like that, but he does look everywhere with his eyes for a bit before taking a deep breath of whatever mixture he's thrown in this little coffee can he has smoldering on a piece of corrugated metal siding in the middle of the floor.

"Walker," he whispers. "*Ya at eeh.*"

I shake my head. "Will you cut it with the Walker crap? I'm Ben. Just Ben."

No answer, of course. Which is going to present a problem, because while I know that the bone box is our broken pot, I also know Joey has to deliver it to Owen and Caroline, which is hard for two reasons. First, the bone box is still at the rez. Second, Joey won't go back to the rez. He's still abiding by his banishment. Part of him still thinks he was thrown from the Navajo Way, even after all that came to light. Even though we know he had nothing to do with Ana's disappearance.

The artifacts are about the journey, and Joey needs to make the journey back to his home. His real home. That's how the bone box becomes the broken pot. But it's not like I can tell him that. He can't hear me. I've tried so many times to get anyone to hear me. It's never gonna happen. There are rules.

Joey looks troubled. His eyeballs dart around under his lids like he's having a bad dream, but I can't shake him out of it. Joey was always sensitive, even before he hazed himself in the thin place, so it would make sense that he's feeling the crush of the coyote here too. If the balance of the river is off, the balance of the living world is off as well. Soon enough, even Hamm, Montana, will feel it.

When Ana was having bad dreams, I'd tell her stories. You can't go to bed again right after a nightmare. You'll fall right back into it if you do, so you have to switch things up. Get a glass of water, go pee, or in the case of Ana and me, tell each other stories. But I can't just tell stories here, can I? Joey can't hear me. Unless, of course, he doesn't need to hear me. Not my words, anyway. He's pretty far under right now. You never know what kinds of things can cross over during a sweat. I have firsthand experience. I saw Ana during one.

So I sit back in the smoke and tell him stories. Just like I used to with Ana. Just like Joey and I used to as well, back around the campfires we'd make in my backyard.

"Remember that one time we made a big fire out back of my place, in the pit there by the rocks, and we tried to jump it? Remember how dumb we were?" I say, and I laugh out loud. That was a huge fire. The neighbors who had the other half of our

duplex were not too happy with us, but then again, they never were.

"And then Ana came out and saw us and said she was gonna jump it too, and she ran for it, but you caught her up just in time and swung her up on your shoulders instead? Remember that?"

I remember. That's a big memory. A special one that I almost don't want to think about too much because I'm afraid I'll change it by how badly I want to be back there again. Like I'll make up things that weren't there because I want more from it. But it's now or never.

"We were all whooping around that fire, you, me, and Ana on your shoulders. Then we convinced Ana to go sneak us some of Dad's beer. Of course she would have done anything for you, bro. So she ran off, but she didn't know what she was doing, remember? She came back with Gam's knitting. How the hell do you get *knitting* out of *beer*? That crazy girl."

She came back so proudly with Gam's knitting that we didn't have the heart to tell her it wasn't remotely what we asked for. We cracked up, and she cracked up along with us, which always used to worry me because she had a weak heart, even then. We all just laughed until we were lying on the grass and the fire was soaring above us.

"So you say, ÷Listen, man. I'm not getting your Gam pissed off at me. She's a big deal. We gotta sneak this shit back.' And you were right, but turns out Gam was watching TV right outside her room, so we try to send in Ana again, but now she's having none of it when we tell her to put it back."

Joey's eyes are still closed, but they aren't flitting as much anymore. And is that a smile on his lips? Maybe a ghost of a smile?

"It was up to us, remember? So we had Ana go in and do a little song and dance in front of Gam to distract her and then you and I snuck into her room. You almost lost it when you saw how Gam was watching Ana, like *what the hell is this child doing now*."

Is that a nod? No, no nod. Just his chin falling gently to rest on his chest. The makeshift sweat brazier he rigged up here is slowly dying out. Which is good. I look out of the foggy window of his

van, and I see that the sun is past high noon already. Montana time is New Mexico time. And we're running out of both.

"We did it, though. We snuck in, on our bellies, thinking we were Hoskininni sneaking around in the valley or some shit like that. Trying to ambush the white man. But you thought her knitting went up on her shelf, remember? Up high. So you put it up there at first, and I kept whispering to you that it's supposed to go in the basket by her bed, but you were up there and you weren't listening because you were staring at that box. Remember that box, Joey?"

Somehow I think that Joey remembers that box. Maybe he's even having some sort of vision of that box. Maybe in his vision it's half box, half pot.

"I didn't know what that was, man. Not then. I forgot about it five minutes later. But I bet you didn't. You always had a head for this type of shit. All of it. The world I live in now. The thing I am. I can't tell you how many times I thought you'd be better at this than I am. I think a lot of people would be better than I am. But at the end of the day, I'm on this side of things, and you're on that side of things, and hell if I know if any of this is even getting through to you. It shouldn't be. Because there are rules, and the rules say it shouldn't be."

I can see the sun moving down the line. I can feel the gathering pressure of the coyote. Suddenly all this seems like grasping at straws. We're chasing after legends when there's a killer at the doorstep. But then Joey laughs. I snap up and watch him carefully. He's laughing and nodding. The way he did when he had Ana on his back and we were dancing.

"I need you to get that box, Joey," I say. He quiets, and his face slackens again. I don't know if he's listening or if his mind is on some other faraway fantasy, but it's getting late.

"It's on the rez, man. The NNPD took it to bag and tag it as evidence in a case they never closed, just shuffled off once I disappeared, and Ninepoint disappeared, and the agents disappeared. It's in the evidence room."

I get up and move over to Joey so I'm right by his ear.

"Joey, you gotta get that box, and you gotta take it to the hogan today. Before five. I know you're afraid of the rez. You don't want to go back there, but you gotta think about Ana. About me. About your home there. What you did for my family... nobody I know is a better Navajo than you. Please, man. Do this for all of us."

He's very still now. I want to say more, want to plead more, maybe scream in his ear just in case louder is better, but I get a tug. The job never waits. I open up the map and step through and do what I need to do, which is escort a very polite Swedish guy through the veil. He puts up no fuss. Doesn't even seem scared. Of the two of us, I bet I'm the one that looks scared. I'm checking the position of the sun, making mental calculations in my head as our time ticks away from us.

When I get back to Joey's van and step inside again, the air is clear, the coffee can is clean, and Joey is gone.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 23

GRANT ROMER

This whole Native Market thing is nuts. I've never seen so many people in one place before. We left for Santa Fe early, took the school bus all the way up with a rickety trailer attached that held the parts of our booth, but when we get here the place is already crowded. People are milling about on the back streets, and all the cafes are jammed. They put us in a section of booths a little ways off the main plaza, where the local schools are all set up, and we get to work.

Chaco hops from terrace to terrace, watching me, watching the crowds. He finally agreed that it's OK that I'm even here. With Owen and Caroline tracking down the rest of the artifacts then heading to the hogan, it makes sense that somebody actually shows up where we all think the coyote is going to do work.

Once the booth is up and ready, I retreat into the crowd. None of the art is mine, of course, and I don't really feel up to explaining the indigenous programs of the high school I've been at for a little over a week to potential donors, so it makes sense, but more than that I sort of get the feeling that people want to see Navajo kids at the Navajo high school booth. The bottom line is this is a fundraiser. They're showing art, yeah, but also trying to drum up money and community buy-in, and I'm not the type of kid that tourists think of when they think of a high school on the rez.

You'd think this might piss me off. It doesn't. I knew what I was getting into when I suggested we head out this way in the first place way back when we got chased out of Pueblo by the guy

with the itch. It's guys like Mick who can't seem to get over it, which is why I let out a bit of a groan when I see him milling through the crowd around ten in the morning, heading toward our booth. He sees me, and his eyes light up. He worms his way to where I stand under the shade of a wooden awning, my back against stucco that's already getting hot. It's a bluebird New Mexico day, and the sun shines so bright already you'd think it was plunked right there on the hills just to the west.

"What's up?" he says, not quite looking at me. He turns his back to the wall too and wipes his hands nervously up and down his shorts.

"I thought you said this place sucks," I say.

He's bobbing his head, watching the crowd intently. "Somethin' to do. You see any weird shit yet?"

"Naw, man. Looks to me like everybody is having a decent time."

That isn't exactly true. I've seen some fights over prices, I've seen a lot of shoving, and I've heard a lot of grumbling, but that's the coyote effect. I can see his greasy steps here already. Mostly walking around the big statue at the center of the plaza, almost like he was doing some sort of pilgrimage or something. There's even some tracks by our booth. But all I've seen so far are the tracks, never the thing making them. This is a prime place to pass that bead around, but I'm not about to get into all this with Mick. The guy gets on my nerves. I don't like how he assumes I'm his friend.

"C'mon, man," Mick says, pushing off the wall. "They're already pre-gaming at the house party off Marcy Park. I got some stuff in my trunk. Come check it out."

I look at my watch. "It's eleven in the morning, man."

"It's the kickoff party. Tradition and all that."

"You go ahead. I gotta make sure they got what they need here until the afternoon crew comes."

Mick shakes his head, jams his hands in his pockets. "Whatever," he says, then he slinks off. He doesn't go far, though. Already a crowd has started to gather around the obelisk statue

where the plaza stage is. I can just see the edge of it from where our booth stands. Kai finishes talking to some old couple who claim to be alumni and comes my way to catch a look. I've been carefully trying to bump into her all morning, but she was always busy, either with her friends or chatting to someone who stopped by the booth. Now she swoops in where Mick left. A pretty damn good trade, I'd say, although she does look uneasy.

"You all right?" I ask. I give her my best Clint Eastwood squint and hope she doesn't see how much the sun is making my forehead sweat. Someone is talking into the microphone. The sound is mashed with the crowd noise, so I can't quite make it out. I hear scattered applause.

"You seen my brother?" she asks.

"To be honest, I've kind of been on the lookout to avoid him. But no."

She swallows hard. "Don't take it personally. It's not you he has a problem with. It's *all* of you." She gestures around me, at the scene just behind me of rows and rows of white people wearing sunhats and running shoes, scurrying toward the stage.

"Should that make me feel better?" I ask.

"I guess not." She's still looking for Hos. She's distracted, biting down gently on the dark pink of her lower lip.

"C'mon," she says. "Let's go check it out. We'll stay back from all the mess of people."

She could have asked if I wanted to go straight into the black pearl of chaos itself just then, and I probably woulda said the same thing: "All right."

She actually takes my hand and weaves her way through the crowd, around the booths. Our grip sweats, but she doesn't let go. I *was* looking for Hos because I think he may have a bead in his mouth, but now I'm looking for him because if he sees his little sister holding my hand, I think he'll kick my ass, coyote or not. We skirt the plaza, moving along the outer square until we reach the big cathedral, and she hops up on a low brick wall. She drops my hand and uses both of hers to shade her eyes. She pans the crowd slowly, breathing fast.

On stage, four Navajo women dressed in long blue gowns and leather moccasins are holding up what look like thatched shields in the shadow of the statue. One drummer at the edge of the stage starts banging out a quick-time rhythm. The women bob on the balls of their feet then start to gently hop forward and back in four distinct lines as the drummer chants in a rolling rhythm.

"It's the Basket Dance," Kai says. She's still nervous about something, but I hear a note of pride in her voice. "That's Navajo. We're kicking off the dance competition."

The women are mesmerizing. They do everything twice. Move up, move back. Circle right, circle left. Lift up the baskets, lower them down. It's like they're writing a poem in dance then erasing it again. They walk off stage just as they came on, but the air around them is somehow cleaner.

Kai feels it too, the brief calm that follows the dance as the Navajo walk off and another tribe sets up in the wings. People are feeling the way this place should be, if it weren't for the trail of the coyote. I look over at Kai and find her smiling at me.

"Looks like Hosteen and his buddies decided not to come," she says. "And right about now the afternoon crew is taking over the booth. How about you and I head over to the Marcy Park party? I bet it's ramping up."

Chaco sits above us on a worn stone eave of the church, his head just visible if you were to look up from the square. He ticks his ears downward, the way other crows might listen for worms in the ground. I know what he's trying to figure out. There's relief in Kai's voice—whatever she thought Hos was going to do, maybe he isn't going to do it after all. Maybe that was his window, when his people were on stage, and he missed it. But Chaco doesn't buy it, and I don't either.

"We ain't out of the woods yet, chief," Chaco says to me. "No matter how pretty Kai smiles."

Already whatever brief calm the Basket Dance settled upon the crowd is unraveling. The coyote still prowls these parts. Waiting. I can feel it.

Kai takes my nod as agreement, so she grabs my hand and hops down from the wall. She looks back at me and smiles. The spark is back, but I feel like the air is heavier than ever. Still, it is one hell of a smile she's got. I can't do anything but let her lead me wherever she wants to go.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 24

OWEN BENNET

We've got an hour until we're supposed to be at the hogan. Grant is in the thick of coyote country in Santa Fe, and Caroline and I are about to break into the NNPD chief of police's car.

The first place we tried was the NNPD main office in Chaco City. We asked for Yokana at the desk and were told he wasn't there. Caroline pressed, in her unique way. Soon enough she had the secretaries up front laughing and chatting away like they were all best friends. We learned Yokana was actually dealing with something at CHC, so off we went. And here we are, staring at his old Ford Explorer, parked in the same spot in the CHC parking lot as it was when we both first visited.

I don't think I need to tell you that I have no experience breaking and entering. It's not really my cup of tea. Once, back when I was a resident working myself blind and prone to all sorts of brain farts, I was trying to warm up my old box of a Subaru for the drive to work in the dead of February, and I locked the keys in the car while it was running. I fiddled around with a clothes hanger for an hour as if I knew what I was doing, praying the neighbors weren't watching, before I gave up and called a locksmith. Still, I know the basic idea, and I did manage to swipe a wire hanger from the coat rack at the CHC without anyone noticing, so here we go.

I take two deep breaths, step out from behind a docked service truck, and walk slowly and evenly to the SUV. Caroline follows behind. She keeps a lookout while I try to worm the hook

end in and through the upper window like a blind man trying to thread a sewing needle. I've got my tongue out and everything, wincing at every scrape, until Caroline says, "It's open."

I slowly pull my hanger out then simply open the passenger-side door. Of course it's open. Why would the chief of police lock his car? What lunatic would try to break in to the chief of police's car?

I pop my head in. I left the tattered paper in the cup holder sometime during the car ride, but it's gone now. The car is as clean as it ever was. Same brushed cloth seats, same mud-mats devoid of mud, same baking smell of trapped desert heat. Nothing else. I pop open the glove compartment. It has the owner's manual, a first aid kit, a wind-up flashlight, and his registration in a plastic sleeve. That's it. I'm thinking that perhaps he threw it in the back, or it was blown back there if he was cruising the service roads with the windows down, but as I'm moving to open the back right door, Caroline whispers again.

"He's coming."

"Really? Shit. How long?"

"Whoops, he sees us."

I turn around in time to find Sani Yokana and another policeman I don't recognize watching us from across the lot. Thank God I closed the passenger door. There's a chance he thinks we're just hanging around his car for some reason I can't imagine, but as he starts walking again I see in his face that chance is pretty slim. He knows what we were doing. It's obvious in the way he takes off his sunglasses. Thankfully, for us, I also see he has bigger problems. Between him and the other officer stands Tim Bentley, the mortician, looking very out of sorts. His hair and clothes are disheveled. He seems to be missing a shoe. His face is scruffy. They're not escorting him, not exactly, but they're very clearly keeping him between them as they approach us.

"Something I can help you with, Dr. Bennet?" Yokana asks, glancing at me then at Caroline. The lines in his face seem a hair more dug out even than when I saw him last. A notepad sags in his breast pocket, his shirt is tucked in, and his jeans are still clean,

but they look two- or three-day clean, not one-day clean. He's wearing his gun this time too. It's hooked to his belt next to the badge and the buckle.

"Dr. Bennet?" Bentley is squinting at me, slack jawed. "When did you get to town?"

Yokana and I exchange a knowing glance. Yokana's face darkens further.

"Can you take me away from here, Owen?" Bentley asks. He scratches violently at the side of his face and then rubs his head like he's clearing it of sand. "I don't feel right, you know?"

"We're gonna get you out of here, Dr. Bentley," the other officer says, gently holding on to his shoulder.

"Where do you want to go, Tim?" I ask.

He shrugs hugely, lets out a big *harrumpf*. He tries to scratch at his face again, but the officer prevents him. He doesn't seem to notice or care.

"Anywhere. I just need to walk. I've got these thoughts. These terrible pictures in my head. They itch. My brain itches."

Caroline steps in. "Does he have anything in his mouth?" she asks point blank.

Yokana shakes his head. "He was causing a scene in the morgue. His assistant said he tried to drink formaldehyde and swallow some tools, saying he had to clean his brain. We checked his mouth to make sure he wasn't hiding anything else."

"I'm gonna sit him in the car, chief," the officer says. "Before he gets really out of hand."

Yokana nods, and the officer leads Bentley away to his squad car two spots down. Bentley drags his feet, and he seems unsteady. He keeps looking at the desert to our right and reaching for it.

"We've seen a lot of cases like this recently," Yokana says, watching him along with us. "People seem disoriented. My first thought was severe dehydration, but the few we've checked out are fine. Physically, at least."

Yokana turns back to us. "He didn't remember our first visit at all."

"I think he had... some type of fever then." I'm trying to think of the best way to phrase this so that I sound like a doctor and not a lunatic. Bentley doesn't have the bead in his mouth any longer, but the hangover seems to linger, and it looks awful.

"The fever broke, but he's going to be very disoriented for a time. Depending on how long he was ill."

"A fever, huh."

"Something like that, yes."

I'm an awful liar, but Yokana doesn't call me on it. Instead he reaches in his pocket and hands me a tattered sheet of white paper. My gift from Lenah. Her journey from hobbled to healthy is wrapped up within it, and my journey is too.

"I was gonna throw this away, but when I grabbed it I sort of just held on to it. Not sure I can say why. Seemed like something I should get back to you. I suspect that's what you were looking for in my car?"

Caroline clears her throat. "Sorry about that. We needed the paper. You're right. It's more important than it looks. Also, is there any chance you might have stumbled across a broom that feels equally important? A little broom?"

"A broom?"

"Yeah, a little broom." She holds her hands out a foot apart. "About yea big?"

"No, can't say I have," he says, his tone uninterpretable. Maybe droll, maybe sarcastic, but definitely honest. His phone rings in his pocket, and he picks it up, looks at it, then shakes his head.

"If you'll both excuse me, I was due in Santa Fe hours ago. We doubled our force there, but my men still feel like things are more unruly than usual. Looks like a lot of people are feeling off today."

We step aside as he gets in his car and starts it up after several rolls of the engine. He slowly shifts into reverse. He's exhausted, but he's got his job to do, and Sani Yokana is the type of guy to work himself into the ground if that's what's required of him. He rolls down his window and plops his elbow out.

"Can I ask what you expected to find in his mouth, Ms. Adams?"

Caroline looks to me. I shrug. *What the hell.* I think Yokana has always been more aware than what he lets on, and what he lets on is that he's aware of quite a lot.

"A bead," Caroline says.

He taps his teeth. I wait for him to press us, but he doesn't. Instead he says, "The funniest thing happened to me earlier today. I was going through some files in the basement back at NNPD, and I swore I saw Joseph Flatwood in the evidence room."

Caroline shuffles her feet. I can't think of anything to say either that won't dig us any deeper than we already are. Thankfully, Yokana doesn't seem to mind.

"I did a bit of a double take. I looked up again, and nobody was there. Walked around the whole evidence room thinking I'd lost my mind. Nobody. Funny thing is, I was happy to see him. And sad when I realized he wasn't there. Maybe I got a touch of that fever myself."

"You don't," I say. "I'd know."

He takes a deep breath. "No, I 'spect not. Not yet, at least. I'll see you folks around."

With that he backs up and makes his way out of the parking lot, the sand and grit crackling beneath his tires. He gives us a slow, single wave then pulls out onto the street.

I take the tattered sheet of paper and tuck it carefully in my bag along with the burned stick and the stirring stick. Caroline has the birth bag, her crow still inside. It sounds like Ben and Joey may have come through with the broken pot. The sun is hitting us sideways now. Our time is almost up.

"We need to get to the hogan," I say.

"We're missing the broom, though."

"We've got no leads on that one, nothing at all. Maybe it isn't ours to get. At the very least, if we're all together, maybe we can come up with something."

Caroline looks unconvinced. I'm right there along with her. But we're out of time. Five is better than none, but five isn't six, and I

get the feeling when it comes to these things, there are no half measures.

"Come on," I say. "If Yokana can keep going, and Joey, and Ben, and Grant over there in the middle of it all, we can too."

Caroline holds out her hand, and I grasp it, then together we grab our crows and snap into the thin place, on our way to a line of hogans in the desert.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 25

GRANT ROMER

Marcy Park is about a fifteen-minute walk from the Plaza, but it feels a world away. By the time we get there the afternoon shadows are long, and the park—which seems lower than the rest of the city, as if it's dug out of the rock—is dark while the hills are still bright. There's a crowd here too, but it's younger, spread out in pockets around a big stage set against the far side. A band is playing country rock. Where Kai and I stand at the lip of the park, we catch snatches of music. The wind has picked up, and it's blowing most of the sound away from us, along with clouds of smoke that puff up from the pockets of people.

As Kai leads me down and through the park, past the crowds and the music into a low-lying neighborhood, Chaco is talking nonstop. His shadow flits across the green, right to left, left to right.

"They're all gathering at the hogan, man. Maybe you oughta think about laying low while they call for the coyote. Nobody knows what's gonna happen."

His voice is louder than usual in my head. I think he knows I'm only half listening. And almost completely helpless, hand in hand with this girl.

"The coyote is here somewhere," I say. "I know it, and you know it. We need to get a bead on it before the dances are over."

"Is that a pun? At a time like this?"

"When the others call it, don't you think it would be good to know exactly what, or who, it is they're calling?" I'm spitballing,

because I know and Chaco knows that there isn't anything on this plane or the next that would keep me from this party with Kai, but I still think it's a valid point. Nobody likes to just open the door to their home without checking through the peephole first.

She takes me through an older, simpler neighborhood than the one immediately surrounding the park. Here the cars are more like the stuff I see in the RV park, and the houses are smaller and closer. Blaring dance music comes from one of them, a long, flat ranch house at the end of the block. I smell a loaded grill and can see its smoke coming up from the backyard. A cul-de-sac circles up to the front, and it's already a parking lot full of cars. Souped-up trucks and beater sedans, mostly. I recognize a lot of them from the Crownrock parking lot. A few kids hang out front sipping from plastic cups and talking loudly. Kai leads me inside, but she drops my hand.

This is my first party. Unless you count my birthday parties, which basically consisted of a bird and two people twenty years older than me sitting around a grocery-store birthday cake on a table bolted to the floor of an RV. We made the best of it, and all of them ended up being more fun than they sound, but still. That's not a party. This is a party.

People are everywhere, almost all of them Navajo, but a few white kids and some Mexicans too. The air smells like BBQ and beer and cigarettes and weed. The music is stupidly loud for five in the afternoon. I lose track of Kai in the crush of people, and suddenly I'm alone. A few kids look my way, but most ignore me, until I'm pulled aside by Mick. He's smiling and weaving, his eyes already glassy. He's grinding his teeth a bit too. Owen sat me down years ago and told me all about the stuff he saw at the CHC, and a lot of the bad cases were people without teeth on account of drugs. Mick's got a sloshing cup of beer in his hand, but I wonder what else he has in his system.

"'Bout time you showed up," he says. My guess is he's spent more time here than he has at the market. He leans toward me and sort of bounces off the bell under my shirt. I have to catch him, but then he seems to come to. He nods. "Sorry, man. I think I got

started a little early. Hey, listen.” He leans in again. “Hos and his crew, they’re here. I wanted to catch you before you did anything stupid like show up with Kai. Whoops.”

I hear sound coming from the back of the house. It sounds more urgent, angrier than the rest of the party noise. I hear Chaco from somewhere outside, his voice faint. “It’s the Hos kid,” he says. “Grant, be carefu—”

And then he’s there in front of me, with his whole crew. And they’re dressed to kill. Literally. They’ve painted their faces like Navajo warriors. Black smeared around the eyes, and red down the face. Some have dots of white peppering the base colors. The loud room tapers to quiet. Kai is pushing back on Hos but getting nowhere. She whispers urgent Navajo at him that he doesn’t seem to hear, pointing down at a lumpy duffel bag, one of several that his crew is carrying.

He’s trying to head out the door. He’s not expecting to see me. This isn’t like one of those moments when the new kid confronts his bully and turns him around or makes him see the light. For that to happen Hos would actually have to care about me, have me on his radar, and he doesn’t. He never has. When he grabs my shirt in a bunch in his fist, he’s looking at me, but he’s not seeing Grant. He’s seeing a white kid at a Navajo party for a Navajo school in a part of the country that was once full of Indians and is now full of white people.

“What are you doing here?” he says simply. I turn to look to Mick for help, but Mick is slinking away again. It’s just me. “Your place is up at the market, walking booth to booth.”

“I ain’t got a place,” I say then wish I could bite back the *ain’t*. But it’s already out there. “I figured maybe this was everyone’s place right now.”

I’m not sure what I think that’s gonna do. Change his mind? He’s painted up for war and smells like whisky, and he’s carrying what I really hope isn’t a duffel bag full of guns. He jerks me right into his face. His eye is twitching, rapid fire.

“Wrong, *bilagaana*. It *ain’t* everybody’s place. It’s *our* place. We’re taking it back.”

He pushes me against the wall and watches me for another span of seconds. I realize that this is my moment. This is when I try to stop him. You think about this stuff sometimes, when you're bored and staring out the window of the boat as the miles roll by. You think about all the crazy shooting and ultra-violence that happens everywhere you go, especially nowadays, when this stuff seems to happen more than usual, and you wonder if, say, you were there that night when some asshole decided to shoot up something or raise some hell somewhere, and he came at you first. Say he's stalking the cubicles or walking the pews or something with destruction in his eyes, and everybody just wants to live, so they shove themselves deeper down into whatever foxhole they've dug, but you've got a chance. You could smash the guy in the face, or better yet call him out before he gets violent. At least ask him to open up the duffel bags and explain himself. Face what he's doing before he gets crazy.

Sitting safe and sound on the boat, watching the miles roll by, you think, "Of course I'd call him out. No brainer." But then it actually happens, and you know what I do?

Nothing. And neither does anybody else.

I watch as he shoulders his duffel and gives one last look my way. I can see he's already forgotten me. His mind is on whatever lies ahead. Then he shuffles off. His crew follows him. There are five of them, all guys painted like him, all grim looking. And then they're gone. Kai yells something in Navajo after him, stopping at the front door. It does no good. Kai watches after them for a second, and the room watches after Kai, and then the music comes back. Maybe it was always playing, but the ringing in my ears that started when Hos grabbed me cancelled it out until I got my brains together again. I can hear Chaco, faint but freaked out.

"You all right, my man? Hos and his gang are moving in the back alleys and neighborhoods toward the plaza. The dances are almost over, but he still has time to pull something."

"It's up to Owen and Caroline to pull him back now." I'm a little numb at how much of a wuss I was. How much of a wuss I am. Mick is looking at me with this gleam in his eye, and it says to

me, "Your only hope for the next four years is to stick with me," and what gets me down most is that he's probably right. He's a bit of a goof and a little weird, but Hos didn't grab him on his way out. Nobody told Mick to get back to shopping the booths where he belongs. It occurs to me that I've given Mick a bum rap. The guy is quiet and down low, but he keeps his head above water. Nobody messes with him, even though nobody really brings him in either, but maybe that's the best I can hope for.

Kai turns around from the doorway with a strange gleam in her eye. I wouldn't call it the Kai shine, not the one I saw in her when she sat next to me and told me to stop slapping and start sliding. This is twice as dangerous, and when she turns it on me, I go twice as numb.

"Well that's that," she says. "He never listened to me anyway. Never once." She forces a smile, and I see that her eyes glisten with damp. She walks past me and grabs my hand again. I was facing the door all ready to go out, all ready to leave with Chaco, maybe call Sani Yokana or one of the officers for help, but then Kai spins me around and I'm back in the party. I'm following her past the living room, into the kitchen, where a bunch of kids are sitting around a table with full cups, and they're spinning a bottle.

"People actually do this?" I ask Kai, and my voice seems distant. "I thought this was just something on TV or whatever."

Kai says nothing, just plops me down in a seat and takes the one next to me. I recognize some of the kids from class. They're all my age, and they're laughing and smiling. I don't think they saw Hos leave. They've been out back drinking the whole time. Mick finds his way to the table soon after and shoulders in as well. He looks pretty far gone now. Chaco is trying to say something to me about getting out of here. He says he has eyes on Hos and his crew, but he'll lose them soon.

"What are we gonna do?" I ask out loud. I mean it for Chaco. And it's not really a question. But Kai answers.

"You spin the bottle. If it lands on a guy, he's gotta drink. If it lands on a girl..." Her smile is dangerous. Her words trail off. "Just a little kiss. You go first."

I spin the empty rum bottle. It has smooth edges and seems to spin forever, around and around and around, until it lands on Mick. I'm sure I look disappointed, because Mick snuffs out a breath and says, "Sorry, friend." But his eyes are narrow and angry. I think he's gonna chug his drink, but all he does is take one dainty sip. Then he says, "My turn," and spins. The bottle turns and turns, and Mick stares at it without blinking until it lands on Kai. He says nothing, but I get the weirdest feeling he was expecting this.

Kai's a good sport. Either that or she wants it over with. Either way she pops up, goes over to him, and leans down for a peck, but he grabs her and kisses her deeply. At first she tries to pull back, but then she leans in to him, almost falling on top of him, until she climbs off and away and stares at him for a second. I think maybe she's gonna slap him. The circle is hooting, and some of the girls are calling Mick an asshole, but Kai doesn't do anything to him. She walks quietly back to my side of the table with this strange grin on her face.

"My turn," she whispers. She's standing behind me, but she reaches over me, pressing her chest to my back, and spins the bottle right in front of me. I look at Mick, and he seems lost. He's staring at his hands, at the table, at the spinning bottle. He looks at the circle of people as if seeing them for the first time. Then he looks at me.

"Grant?" he says, as if surprised to see me sitting across the table from him. "My head..." He sags in his chair and presses his palms to his forehead. His gaze runs a thousand yards.

Chaco slams against the back window. The whole party jumps in fright, and Chaco slams again. The glass splinters, and kids scream and run from the kitchen, everyone but Mick and me and Kai. The bell starts to push at me, to push me away from here, from this place, but it seems to realize things at the same time I do. Which is too late.

The bottle stops dead to rights on me. Kai grabs my head and wrenches it around and pries my mouth open with her tongue. Her lips seal against mine.

Everything hits me. A million flashes of a million jagged edges of a million shattered memories where everything is falling apart. People, things, emotions, all of it splintered and scattered at random. The bell is burning like a white coal pressed to my chest. My heart feels stuck in an endless loop of the terrible space between beats, flopping out of rhythm inside of me like it's lost and will never get right again, and still I'm hammered with these memories that aren't mine, over and over and over and ov—

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 26

CAROLINE ADAMS

The line of hogans is mostly falling apart, and their cracked mud tops go: bleached white, bleached white, bleached white, then black as night. We take a well-worn path that snakes down and around the bumps and rolls of the desert, and as we approach I see that the black we mistook for the roof of the last one is actually about a hundred silent crows. A hundred black beaks pointing, and two hundred black eyes following our movements. When they shuffle a bit to keep us in view, it makes a sound like flipping through a huge phone book. It gives me goose bumps.

"Here for the show, huh?" Owen asks them, stopping before the low entrance. No answer. Just blinking. As creepy as they are, I'm not entirely against them being here. We've been in more than a few scrapes where a curtain of black crows has come in handy. Although if it comes to that, somebody is usually dead or dying, so I hope they stay right where they are in the peanut gallery.

Inside, the sand painters are waiting. They sit together in one corner, shirtless, their scrawny brown chests hairless. They wear leather breeches and sit cross-legged on a bed of pinion leaves. They watch us in silence until we both eventually sit too. We have no Chaco/Grant combo to translate this time, and no smoker to be our voice. I expected the smoker, but when we walked through the Arroyo to get here, it was quiet and closed, like a town battened down for an incoming storm. We didn't see anybody, and nobody approached us.

One of the brothers—I don't know if it's Tsosi or Tsasa now that they're out of their recliners—points at the fire pit in the center, where berries, wood, leaves, and pine needles are clumped in two neat piles, one large and one small. He takes a pack of wooden matches from a pouch at his waist and tosses them to Owen, who bobbles the catch but snatches them up from the ground.

"Me?"

The sand painter nods.

"Small," he says, pointing at the little pile. Owen crawls over on his hands and knees and strikes a few matches until he gets the needles to burn. The rest takes care of itself. The pile is already burning fast and putting out a great deal of smoke. The brothers watch the smoke waft until it envelops all four corners of the hogan, then they close their eyes and breathe deeply. Owen and I do the same and immediately start coughing. The smell isn't bad, necessarily, it's just strong. Like a gin martini. But as the fire fades, the smoke eases. We sit still until the hogan is almost completely clear again. I get the feeling that was a prep round, maybe a burst of purification to ready the place for the big pile.

"Broken pot," says the other brother. Owen and I look at each other. That was Joey's task, and Joey isn't here.

"Looks like we didn't get very far," Owen whispers to me, his face grave.

I rub my smoke-irritated eyes and think about how I'm gonna explain that it looks like we're missing step one in this business, when I hear the telltale *whoosh, pop* of a Circle member arriving. When I blink my eyes I see a shadow outside of the entrance. A leather vest falls to the desert floor outside, followed by a shower of pollen, and then in comes Joey. His eyes are wide as he looks at Owen and me, but it's really the sand painters that he seeks. When he finds them he bows his head, as if awaiting sentencing from them.

The two men watch him coldly for a moment, and in the silence Joey chances a sad little glance at them. When he does, they can't hold their scowls any longer and both burst out

laughing, their smiles genuine. Joey looks up again and after a moment starts to grin. The brothers gesture him over to them, and they scooch apart then slap the space between them with their hands. Joey sidles in between and smiles at us sheepishly, which is something I've never seen him do before. It gives me a quick glance at the type of guy he might have been when he was young and it was just him and Ben here, running around the Arroyo like it was their personal playground.

Joey Flatwood has been welcomed home.

"Broken pot," the sand painter says again, and this time Joey reaches in his own pouch and pulls from it a small box that looks like it's been carved from bone and hardened with glaze. I recognize it immediately from the night I said good-bye to Ben's grandmother. It was on the ground next to her. It's cracked at the back, where its two leather hinges have been snapped, and Joey takes the top entirely off.

The sand painters nod. Crisis one is averted. I think about confessing that we don't have the broom, but it looks like things are on a roll here, and basically I don't want to have to see the looks on everyone's faces when I tell them our recipe is missing something and our cake isn't gonna rise. So I don't. Besides, the guy sitting right next to me once told me to hold on if you can, because you never know what one more second might bring.

"Burned stick," says one brother. Owen reaches in his satchel and pulls out the first artifact we found, given to us, actually, by the sand painters themselves. One brother mimics putting things in the bone box. Joey holds it out to us, and Owen drops the stick in. The burned part juts out over the side.

"Broken stirring stick," says the other brother, struggling with the words. Owen places the second stick in the box, and the brother readjusts it so that they cross each other and stick out evenly.

"Old cane" is next. Owen plucks the tattered page from his bag and looks at it for a moment, smiling. The brothers mime sliding it under the sticks in the box, and he does.

"Birth bag." I pull out my totem pouch and frown. And here I pause. I know it's crazy, but I don't want to part from the old thing. I know it's to save the rez, and maybe the world, but it still sort of sucks. This thing has been under my pillow for years. It's rubbed silky smooth on one side where it sits against my skin when I wear it. I look over at Owen, and I'm surprised to realize that I have tears in my eyes again, and not from the smoke.

Owen gives me a soft smile and leans over to me. "I'll find you a new pouch."

"You too. We do this together. Same pouches."

"Same pouches."

I sniff and nod. Then I open it and let my crow totem tumble to the floor of the hogan. The brothers pass me a strip of cloth, and I wrap my crow then tuck it in my pocket. I place the pouch on top of the sticks in the box.

I know what's coming next.

"Whisk broom."

And here we've hit our wall. I take a deep breath, look the brothers in the eye, and shake my head. They don't frown or *tsk tsk*. They don't do anything, really. Their faces are impassive as they speak to Joey between them. After a minute Joey gets up and lights the big pile, and I think we may have dodged a bullet. Maybe the artifacts were more like guidelines after all.

"Are we good?" I ask. But Joey shakes his head.

"We wait," he says.

"For what?" Owen asks.

"For the whisk broom."

What's that supposed to mean? Wait for the whisk broom? What's it gonna do—come waltzing into the hogan like one of those talking candy bars in the movie theater ads?

"What's the fire for, then?" Owen asks. I can tell he's as disappointed as I am. In the fact that we can't move forward without the broom, but mostly in himself. We've let everybody down.

"That's how much time we have to wait," Joey says. "When the fire dies, the window closes."

Owen looks like he wants to say more, but suddenly he twitches and paws at his own totem pouch. I feel it too, at the same time. The crows are deadly cold. So cold that I can feel it through the cloth wrapping of mine. We pull them out of our pockets at the same time and set them down on the dirt. The cloth around mine is already frosting, despite the heat.

"Something is wrong," Joey says. I look up to find him holding his bead-wrapped crow before he, too, sets it down, working the chill from his fingers. "The bell is calling for help."

The three of us—Joey, Owen, and I—stare mutely at each other until the sand painters break the silence.

"They say I am needed here, and Caroline is needed here," Joey says. He looks at Owen and shrugs. "I don't know why, Owen. But that leaves you to go to the bell."

Owen looks down, nodding to himself. Grant is foremost in his mind. He's more than willing, but his smoke still takes a hit at the fact that he's not "needed." When I touch the small of his back, he perks up a little. Not much, but a little.

"All right," he says. "I'll go."

"The market," Joey says as Owen flutters his fingers over his crow on the dirt floor.

"Be careful," I say.

He turns to me. Kisses me on the forehead. "You too," he says. Then he grabs his totem and pops out of sight.

The sand painters take all this in as evenly as if they were watching the sun setting behind their camper. Joey takes a deep breath of smoke from the new fire, and I watch as it streams out of the top of the hogan. The pile is bigger, but it's burning fast.

We wait.

CHAPTER 27

OWEN BENNET

I step from the tense quiet of the hogan into a madhouse of people at the Santa Fe Plaza. I hold my phase for now, reasoning that it'll be easier to spot the bell in the crush of people if I'm in the thin place. And it truly is a crush. The blurred effect of the thin place seems to double the mayhem. All around me people are shoving and yelling. Walking over each other to get away from the main stage for some reason. There, someone holds the microphone. A young man with a painted face. A security guard appears to be unconscious on the ground next to him, and two others are being held back by a group of other young men painted similarly. So this is Hos. This is our coyote. I'm not sure what he's saying—sounds are muted by the whipping wind of the thin place—but judging by how badly everyone wants to get away from him, I know it's not good.

He lifts up a duffel bag and drops the mic. A sea of panicked people passes right through me, but none of them is Grant. I chance a quick scan of the plaza, looking for the glow of the bell, but I don't see it anywhere. Back on stage, the coyote and his pack are fishing through the duffel and each pulling out what look like duct-taped aerosol cans. They fan out around the stage. Policemen on the perimeter are struggling to get to them, but they look like fish fighting a waterfall. Every step forward is two steps back.

Hos holds up his bomb and screams, "My people are not entertainment!" so loudly that even I can hear it. Then he chucks his bomb at the obelisk statue in the center of the stage. His gang

follows his lead. There's a split second when I see six floating packages sailing toward the center, and I realize we blew it. We missed our chance. We couldn't bait the trap in time. I wonder what fire feels like in the thin place. Will I live through this? Does it matter?

I can't hear the bombs explode, but I can see them. They send out great gouts of color, all of it tinged a glittering black to my eyes. Then I tense for the blast, but it never comes. The crowd has pushed their way through me, and my way is clear now, save a few people injured in the stampede. I blink into reality.

"This symbolizes the blood of our people, shed for the benefit of yours, year after year after year!" yells Hos, just before he's tackled by police along with the rest of his gang. Behind him, the plaza statue is glistening, absolutely soaked in red paint.

Paint? That's it? That's what the coyote had planned? It almost makes me want to laugh. They've got Hos rolled over, they're cuffing him, and all the while he's still screaming about Native American rights. I let out a deep breath. Maybe we misjudged this whole affair after all. Then a piercing scream rings through the crowd. Everyone hears it, even the cops. Even Hos stops his tirade. All of us look west. There, high in the sky, I see Chaco. Immediately I know something isn't right. He's diving down fifty or so feet then pulling up. Diving down again then pulling up. He looks harried, like when a bunch of smaller birds chase away one large bird, but this is worse. Panicked. He calls again, and it sounds like he's in pain.

I look at the square. Hos is back to his tirade. The crowd is calming down at the edges. This isn't the right place. The coyote tricked us.

I position Chaco in my mind, do some quick thin-place calculations, then snatch my totem and blink out.

CHAPTER 28

THE WALKER

I sit at Caroline's side, and both of us watch as the fire burns down. I want to hold her, reassure her that everything will be all right, but the fact is, I don't think it will. The simple cloth that covers her totem is frosted completely over. Soon the fire will be down to embers. But neither of us needs those things to know how south all this has gone. She can feel it as well as I can. Grant is in serious trouble, and now Owen is too.

One brother says, "Sweep," but Caroline shakes her head. "Sweep," he says again, pointing to the little ash pile from the first fire and then to the box. He wants the whisk broom to sweep the ash into the box, but Caroline can't, and she starts to cry.

"We don't have the broom, old man!" I yell, and maybe I see a flicker from Joey's eyes, but otherwise it falls on deaf ears, as always.

"Sweep," the brother says again, gently this time. Caroline reaches for the ash with her hands, but the second brother is up on his knees quickly and stills her arm. He's firm but not unkind. He has sad eyes. His grip tells us that each artifact is integral.

"Please," he says, his voice breaking. "Sweep."

That's when Caroline gets it. But it doesn't lift her spirits any.

She takes the black book from her breast pocket and looks at it. She bends it this way and that, fluttering the pages. They flop heavily. For Caroline the book was always weighty. To her, it represents a link. A chance. A possibility to reach me. Her heart is tangled up with memories of me in the blank pages of that thing.

She holds it by the spine and carefully sweeps the small pile of ashes into the box that Joey still holds. Then Joey caps it. The brothers mime that the book goes on top, to hold the box top in place and press down on the package. And then the whole thing goes into the fire.

Joey holds out the box, but Caroline still holds the book.

"I'm sorry, Ben," she whispers. I know she can't see me, but I also think she knows I'm here. She's really speaking to me.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," I say, even though my words will not reach her.

"I was hoping I might be able to finish our story some day," she says. "All these blank pages. Why couldn't one be for us?"

Tears are rolling down her face now, dripping off her cheeks and onto the book. I reach out to try and wipe them again, but this time I stop myself before I pass through her. If I passed through her right now, it might break me apart.

"You've had half of my heart ever since I first met you," she says. "If we'd had time, I think I'd have given you the whole thing, but we didn't, and over the years what I had left has gone to Owen, piece by piece. Even I didn't realize it until it happened. But it happened, and I can't live like this anymore. Half measures don't work when it comes to hearts."

Her head droops low, she speaks into her lap, but her words are for me.

"Ever since you died, all I've wanted is closure. I didn't even have to have you back, if I could just figure out how to say good-bye to you properly. But I know now, I don't need closure. If it means that I have to forget you, forget who I was when I was with you and forget the person you helped me to become, I don't want it. And that piece of my heart you have, it's always going to have a bit of you in it, but I want to give it to Owen. I need to give it to Owen."

"I know," I say. "I know you do."

I didn't think I had any tears left. I thought they all dried up when I rang the bell. Boy was I wrong.

Caroline takes a shuddering breath. "I can't ask you to give back to me what I gave to you. It's up to me to reach out and take hold of it again myself, so that's what I'm doing."

She gently sets the book on the box and nods to Joey, who moves over to the fire and places the whole package in the searing coals. It's alight in moments. Now both Caroline and I are slumped over ourselves, as if the strings that bonded us, that moved us together and mixed us up and were hopelessly tangled when I died, have finally been cut.

As the coyote's warning signs catch fire, I feel a sea change. The hole at the top of the hogan seems to be pulling more than just smoke up and out. It's subtle but definite: the wind from outside is pulled in, then a bit of desert sand. The hogan darkens as if a stream of the rising night itself is being pulled in from the eastern door.

One of the brothers says, "Now we wait."

I feel like a wrung-out towel, but I know that this is my time to get to work. I'm the one that has to catch this thing in between planes. Keep it from jumping from person to person and away from us again. I don't know how I can do anything but collapse with Caroline's words still bouncing around my head, but I have to do my part too.

I stand, but as I do, I feel the tug. I'm getting a call.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say. "Now? Really?"

It's insistent, much more insistent than it usually is, and it makes my stomach flip. I swirl open the map looking for the fray, for the guttering soul string that calls to me, and I find it almost immediately. It's very close. Someone is dying, and they're dying in Marcy Park.

CHAPTER 29

OWEN BENNET

My half step in the thin place takes me to a park, where I'm thrown into mayhem of a different sort. A band plays on a stand in the distance with a large crowd all pressed together, but the wind makes their music sound whiny and off key. The stage lights are rattling in the gusts, and one falls from the overhead rigging, spinning wildly and throwing a chaotic beam across the darkening green before it shatters behind the band in an electric flare that shorts out all the music. Now all I can hear is the wind and a screaming crow.

Chaco is behind the stage, off to the right, above a bunch of houses. I sprint toward where he dips and hovers, still struggling. The wind seems to be pushing back at me, and the sound is as loud as if I was back in the thin place, but this wind is real. It throws dirt and grass and grit in my eyes and mouth, but I carve through.

I break free of the park and into a small neighborhood, and now I can hear Chaco's wings beating just under the cut of the wind. He's in the sky over a house at the end of the block, but he's moving my way, because Grant is moving my way. I almost collapse with relief.

"Grant! Are you OK? Where's the bell?"

Grant stops dead in his tracks and looks at me. Chaco lets loose another painful cry, twice as loud.

"Grant?"

He runs toward me with this insane smile on his face, but there's nothing happy about it. It's the type of smile I used to see back on my psych rotations in medical school. It's the smile of the mentally broken. The unhinged.

He's in front of me in the blink of an eye, and then he's grabbing my throat with one hand. My air shuts off full stop. His grip feels like a knot in my windpipe.

Chaco dives again and pulls up, and now I see why. This is not Grant. This is the coyote. He's turned Grant into a skinwalker, and Chaco doesn't know whether to attack him or help him. I try to speak but can't. My words feel like they back up from my mouth all the way to my brain. My head is about to burst, but then he drops me.

I suck in a crackling breath on my hands and knees. But the air isn't coming fast enough. My vision dims, tunneling to a pinpoint, but then I feel the soft head of Chaco brushing against my arm. I've never actually touched Chaco before, not in five years, but here he is, standing beside me, and I focus on that touch until my vision clears. When I look up again, I see that the whole party is outside on the front porch watching. But then Grant's insane smile is right in my face again.

"Let him go," I say. It comes out in a growl. The coyote wears Grant's grin, stretches it wider than it should be, and he shakes his head like an ornery child. I push myself standing, and the coyote follows me, inches away. The crowd of kids behind him is half cheering, half terrified, and totally unaware of what is happening. He backs up their way, and I stagger after him. He sticks out his tongue, and I see it. The bone bead. It's the size of a pea. How could such a small thing cause so much destruction?

"Spit it out!" I say. I lurch after him, but he dodges me at the last second, lurching this way and that like we're playing tag. He zips his tongue back in and clamps the bead behind a mad grin that bares his full set of teeth. I lunge for him and grab him by the shoulders.

"Give me my *son* back, you bastard!"

The coyote backhands me across the face so hard that I end up spitting out a molar. Now the crowd silences. One girl starts to scream. I see Kai, the girl Grant is so fond of, sitting down outside on the grass, her head between her knees. She's moaning, "No, no, no, no, get out of my head!"

The coyote pulls me straight again. "Your son is mine," he says. "Until he dies."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say, my words bubbling with blood. "Take me! Take me, but leave him!"

The coyote shakes his head very slowly, his eyes wide. It's hard to imagine that Grant ever had those eyes.

"No," the coyote whispers. "I want the Keeper."

"Then you're gonna have to kill me first."

The coyote looks behind me, and his eyes light up. He takes in a big, overjoyed breath.

"I don't have to kill you," he says, pointing behind me with all five trembling fingers. "Because he will."

I spin around to find a small figure standing alone in the middle of the block. He's talking to himself. Hitting his head, muttering loudly then quietly. It's Grant's friend Mick. And Mick has a gun in his hand.

"I told you," Mick says. "I told you they'd never like you. I told you I told you I told you to come see what I had. To come check it out." He raises his gun. He's pointing it at Grant, but he's aiming through me. With his other hand he's hitting and scratching at his head, just like Tim Bentley was. He's trying to shake free the cobwebs that chaos left there. "Nobody wants to see what I got. Nobody. Well, fine. If you don't want to come see, I'll just *show it to you anyway!*"

Mick shoots three times, and all of the bullets punch into me. The first thing I think is how different it feels from when I was hit in the shoulder years ago, back at the hospital. That time the shot passed clean through. This is so much worse. These hit the meat of me. They scramble all the beautiful things that are packed inside of me, the things I studied all my life to learn. I picture them now. My stomach, miles and miles of delicate instrumentation for converting

food to energy, pulverized to mush. My liver, that miracle machine, which I've mistreated from time to time. I'm sorry you had to go like this, punctured and riddled with filthy lead, your delicate connections to my bloodstream destroyed. My lungs, with their millions of tiny balloons keeping me afloat, popped forever. It hurts terribly. It hurts worse than I'd ever imagined anything could hurt. It hurts for the blink of an eye.

And then I die.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 30

THE WALKER

When I step out of the soul map, I don't understand what I'm seeing.

First, I see Grant. He's standing tall with his arms out like he's taking in the adulation of a crowd, but all I hear is screaming. He's smiling, so at first I think he's happy, that maybe we got the coyote, maybe it's finally all over, but then the true nature of his smile creeps over me. When he turns to look right at me, I know it's true. I'm face to face with the creature of chaos that has fashioned himself after Coyote, and he's taken over Grant.

"Welcome, Walker," he hisses. It's Grant's boyish voice, but it's *off* somehow. Like it's slightly out of tune for a human range. It makes me sick to hear it.

Then I see Owen on the ground, and a lot of blood. I feel like my mind is lagging way behind my eyes, because I can't put together that the holes in Owen's body made all that blood. I feel like I'm looking at a tricky math problem, letters as numbers, numbers as letters, none of it making any sense.

"What did you do?" I ask.

"He killed me," Owen says. Then his soul sits up from his body and looks down around him. "What a waste."

Owen's soul stands and walks over to me. "Hello, Ben. Long time no see."

I back up. "No, no. What the fuck are you doing? Get back in there, Owen."

"I can't."

"Get back in your body. Now."

"Ben," he says, reaching out to me. And he touches me. He touches my shoulder. That can only happen when people die. That's my window to interact. But I never wanted this from Owen. Ever. I throw it off.

"Don't you fucking *touch me*, Owen. You get back in your body *right now!*"

"Ben, it's over."

But I'm not having that. I don't care if the coyote is in Grant's body or not. I'm taking that thing down. Grant's bones can heal. I launch myself at the coyote. But once again, I fly right through. And the coyote laughs like a maniac.

"You'll never cross over, Walker. Ever. But I will. Again and again. Now that I have the bell, this world is mine to remake."

He rips the bell from Grant's neck and holds it high. "Do it, Mick!" he yells.

That's when I see the boy. He's been warped by the coyote, and he has a gun. Owen tries to stand in front of Grant's body again, the poor bastard. As if he had any physical body left to take the bullets. And finally it dawns on me what the coyote wanted all along: the bell, just like everybody else. With the bead and the bell he'd be unstoppable. His chaos would smother the rez and then the world. And we brought it right to him.

Mick raises the gun again, but then my world lurches, just a touch. It feels like an invisible train just blew by, and my clothes and hair are sucked back a bit. The coyote doesn't seem to notice anything.

"Owen, get over here," I whisper.

The coyote closes his eyes, waiting to die. Waiting to ring the bell. Double his power. And Owen still won't move, so I run over and grab him.

"Hold on."

"What?"

I felt a warning sign. And the coyote missed it. The crew at the hogan did their job. When you wear the robes of Coyote, you play by the history of Coyote. I see the veil in the distance. Closing fast.

It's here to take Owen away from me. From Caroline. Forever. But not yet. It's gotta catch us first.

"Just hold on tight."

If what I felt before was a breath of the train's passing, what I feel now is the full damn train. The coyote opens his eyes at the last second, but he still doesn't understand. He's confused. Mick fires his gun, but the coyote is yanked backward by another lurch, this time across both of our worlds. The bullet misses, careening off the pavement. The coyote growls, slaps his hands over his mouth, but he can't keep the bone bead from the pull of the hogan now. It leaps from Grant's mouth, a little white dot, like a floating snowflake, and Grant collapses next to Owen's body. That's all I see before I'm pulled away along with the bead like a fish yanked out of water.

We blow through the soul map, and I see a coyote form itself around the bead, muzzle first. Both of us are dragged by the nape toward the hogan, helpless to fight the pull. The coyote growls, but I grit my teeth in silence, my arms straining, because I'm carrying Owen's soul right along with me.

CHAPTER 31

THE WALKER

All three of us hit the dirt of the hogan with enough force to kill us, if any of us were alive in the first place. We bounce and stagger, and my vision spins. All three of us seem confined here by the ceremony, but the only thing that makes an actual impression on the living world is the bead that the coyote still holds in its mouth. It's real on every plane, just like the bell. It rips into the dirt when the coyote's chin hits, digging a little trench on the ground, but the coyote holds on. The brothers notice it, Joey notices it, and so does Caroline. They watch it with strange calm.

When I find my focus again, one of the sand painters is saying something quickly, and I hear Joey's voice quietly translating.

"Nobody move."

Apparently I'm the last to wake up at the party, because when I sit up I see Owen's soul quietly getting to his feet. The coyote is already prowling the edge of the hogan, testing the walls, bead in mouth, his oil-dipped eyes furious. The fire is still burning bright. The bone box is in the middle of it, glowing red, the warning signs vaporized. The sand painters start singing in tandem, their voices rising and falling easily. I recognize the song too. It has nothing to do with Coyote. It's not even a Chant. It's what Gam sang to Ana and me at night. The song about the coming sunrise.

"You've been duped," Owen says.

The coyote growls.

"You should have stayed on your side of the veil," I say. "And done your job."

Owen moves around behind him, and the coyote lunges at him, but it's just a feint. I take the opposite tack, coming at him from the front. I stop when I'm standing right behind Caroline.

"I told you to spit it out," Owen says. "I told you."

The coyote laughs. It's a grating, high-pitched yipping, and it makes me cringe, then he jumps at Owen. Owen falls back, but the coyote changes direction at the last second, bounces over Owen's head, and heads straight for Caroline.

Time seems to slow without me having a thing to do with it. The coyote leaps, his mouth open, the bead bared, aiming to jam it into Caroline and take her as well, and he looks like he's grinning. He sees his way out. But I know something the coyote doesn't know. I know Caroline. And I know that no matter how crazy this may be, somewhere, somehow, through all those sleepless nights, Caroline thought of this. Thought of how it might come down to this, and how the coyote might come for her, and she's been watching the bead carefully.

At the last second, Caroline shifts her head to the right. The coyote's bead misses her mouth by a centimeter. His spirit body passes right through her, but not through me. I catch him by the neck and hold on for dear life. The coyote bucks and twists in my arms, yipping and growling. Owen jumps on the coyote's hind legs to keep them from raking at me, and together we wrestle him still, but it's a tense, primal type of stillness that won't last if we give it an inch.

"Now you have a choice, Walker," the coyote says. I shove its face against my chest to keep it from talking. I shove it hard, because I know what it's talking about. I think I knew the choice I'd be faced with back when I danced around the subject with Chaco while we walked the streets of Santa Fe.

I can feel the veil coming. I look at Owen and know that he feels it too. The curtain call is here. Throughout everything, agents of chaos, runaway souls, skinwalkers, and coyotes, one thing has always remained constant: the veil comes for everyone eventually.

Even Owen.

A moment of strained silence, then the veil's shadow falls over the hogan.

"It's here," Owen says, looking out of the eastern door, still holding tight to the coyote with me.

You'd think I'd be the one with the stone jaw here. I've seen the veil millions of times. I've had long-winded, one-sided conversations with the damn thing over the years. But suddenly I'm the one blubbing.

"Wait. Owen. We can think of something here." I ease my grip, and the coyote bucks and twists, and I almost lose him. Owen and I slam together to still it. "Just hold on a second, man."

Owen shakes his head. "I've got to go out there, Ben. I've got to meet it like a man."

He looks me in the eye until I nod.

"Together, then. This thing crosses back over too. Carefully."

Owen takes a deep breath, and then he looks at Caroline. She's watching the bead. The only thing she can see, but I sense that she understands. Her face is falling. Her whole being is falling. She's like a sandcastle being slowly picked apart by waves. But it's Owen's look that hits me hardest. He's saying good-bye to her in the only way that he knows how. With his entire heart wrapped up in one last, longing gaze.

We walk out of the hogan together, with the coyote between us, and there's the veil. It's as tall and as still and as red as I've ever seen it. And it's creeping toward Owen.

"Jesus," Owen says numbly. "It's a lot bigger than I thought it would be."

Owen might be intimidated, but I sure as hell ain't.

"Listen, you old rag. I know you don't like me crossing over, but we got something here that shouldn't be here, and you know it. See?"

The coyote bucks again, and we have to wrestle him still. It's like hauling in a hundred-pound catfish. The veil pauses its relentless approach.

"Yeah, you see it. Now, the only way we can get this thing back where it belongs is if Owen and I take it together. So are you

gonna let me cross over or not?"

The veil hesitates. It's always been a stickler for the rules. But it knows better than any of us that since the coyote has been gone, things have gone to seed on the other side. It flutters slightly. That's a yes in my book.

"C'mon, Owen," I say.

"You're coming with me?"

"Let's get a move on. Before Big Red here changes its mind."

So it is that Owen Bennet and I cross over into the land of the dead, wrestling the coyote the whole way, together.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 32

OWEN BENNET

It's not bad, if that's what you're wondering. Death doesn't feel bad. Except for the solid weight of the coyote between Ben and I, like a python trapped in a bag, I don't feel anything, really. I just feel dead. But then I see the river.

The river of souls is beautiful. It reminds me of flying over LA at night, but instead of a million different roads and a million different people going a million different directions, it's one road. Billions of people. Two directions. Left, or right.

"Man oh man, has this place gone to shit," Ben says.

I lose my focus. I feel this crazy pull toward the water. To float to the right. That's all I want to do. I want to do it as badly as I've wanted anything, as badly as I wanted Caroline, even. And I drop the coyote.

Immediately the coyote starts bucking, throwing itself left and right, and Ben can't hang on. He throws him down on the sand and sets up in front of the veil like a goalkeeper. The coyote rights himself and shakes his fur free of sand. He slowly raises his head and snaps his teeth a few times, showing us a few flashes of the bead, then he starts to prowls the perimeter of the veil, looking for a chance to jump back through.

"Owen, a little help," Ben says.

"It's just that this river..."

"I know, man. I know. But not yet. We gotta deal with this thing first."

I shake my head. The pull of the river lessens if I look away, turn back toward the veil, toward whatever was beyond it. I try to focus on Caroline. Not on how she looks but on how she feels. The color of her. It's the color of the skin of a bubble, and I want to be with it again. I finally understand what she sees on people all the time. What she calls "smoke."

I step up next to Ben, both of us eyeing the coyote as it walks back and forth in front of us, its eye on the veil.

"The bead and the bell," Ben says. "That would have been a pretty sweet deal for you. Eh?"

The coyote snuffs and kicks up a divot of sand.

"You'd have the soul map, so you could go anywhere. You'd have your pick of the dead, the ordered and the chaotic both, it wouldn't matter. All of them would have been yours. And you could take any of them at any time." Ben whistles. "That would have been one powerful setup."

The coyote growls. I'm not sure what Ben's going for here, but he taps my leg gently in a way that says *get ready*.

"Turns out you blew it, though. We took your warning signs from you. Took back the world you were trying to steal from us. And then you never saw us coming."

The coyote snaps at us, and I see a flash of white bone in his mouth.

"As a matter of fact, I doubt you can even make a run at the veil anymore. You got nothing left in the tank, old man," Ben says.

The coyote stops prowling. Ben taps on my leg again, down low, by my knee. Then the coyote jumps.

We take him down together. I hit low, Ben hits high. Together we stun him, throw him to the sand, his tongue lolling. I see the bead.

"Grab it!" Ben screams. "Grab the bead!"

I jam my hand in the coyote's mouth. He bites down, but I feel nothing. No pain, no pressure, nothing. That, more than anything, drives home that I'm gone. I've left the living world behind me. But I snag the bone bead.

"You should have spit it out when I told you to," I say, then I rip it from the coyote's mouth. The coyote howls, leaps at me as he sees the bead leave him. Then he starts changing. He goes from coyote to person in a blink. It's Bilagaana Bill, then its Burner's boy, then it's the young girl. All the while it's screaming, its voice changing as its body changes. It flickers faster, through hundreds, then thousands of people. For a split second I see myself there, and Ben, and Caroline. I try to remember that Coyote is a trickster, so this creature of chaos might be showing me things to try and throw off my nerve, but it doesn't help much. Not when you see yourself screaming.

Ben isn't fooled. Ben holds on when I scramble back. Ben picks up this chaotic blur of a thing and wrestles it to the river.

"Time to go home," he says. "Your souls are calling for you."

He tosses the coyote up and kicks it out, like he was busting down a door. The coyote flies out and over the river, and the river reaches for it. The river is overflowing with souls that strain toward it, souls stacked upon souls stacked upon souls, and no matter how much the coyote kicks, there is no escaping them. They grasp and coil and stick to the coyote like tar, then they start to pull it down.

The coyote stops fighting. Its flickering muzzle forms a translucent grin. "Now for your choice, Walker," it says. Then it's swept under the river. I see its form like a shark under water, jetting down the left side of the river, toward its home in the pearl.

That isn't my way. My way is to the right, and as I face my way, the pull of the river is twice as strong. It's like a glass of cold water in the desert. You never realize how much you want water until water is gone from you forever.

I stagger forward, but Ben comes around and presses a gentle hand against my chest. "Owen, we need to talk."

It hurts quite a lot now, turning from the river. It's like fighting sleep after staying awake for days, but I figure after all we've been through, I at least owe Ben a chat. He turns me around so I'm facing the veil again. The pull is less, but not by much.

"You have the bead?" he asks.

The bead. I'd forgotten about the bead. I suppose I do still have it. I hold out my hand and open my palm. "Take it," I say, but Ben recoils. He steps back and then shudders, and in the way that this place strips emotions bare, I realize that he wants to take it more than anything he's ever wanted in his life. It takes every ounce of him to do what he's doing right now, to keep from touching it.

"What?" I ask. "What is it? Take the bead, Ben. We've won."

"It's not worth it," Ben says.

"Of course it is. Just take it."

"No! It's not worth it if we lose you. If they lose you. If *she* loses you."

"What are you talking about?" My head turns toward the river. The pull is insistent now. Ben slaps me in the face, and when I look back at him I see he's trembling with the effort it takes to stay away from the bead.

"We need to break that thing," Ben says.

"So break it." My voice sounds clouded. Dreamy.

"Here's the thing. When we do, a big hole is going to be ripped between worlds. Look at me, Owen. A big one. One that someone could walk through without anything stopping them."

I feel as though I come around again for a minute. "Anyone could walk through?"

"Anyone," Ben says. "No matter what. Free pass. But it's one for one. That's the way things work here. Balance rules."

I get it now. I'm happy for him, really. I thought I'd be angry, but it makes so much sense now.

"You did it, Ben," I say. "This is your chance. Cross over, man. For God's sake, do it. You have no idea how much she loves you."

"Don't say that," Ben says.

Enough of this. I didn't get killed to sit here and bandy the obvious with Ben. I set the bone bead on a rock at the edge of the river and grab a bigger rock. I'll make his choice for him. Before he can say anything I slam one rock into the other, and the veil is blown open with a staggering *crack*, like all the thunder in the world saved up for one massive explosion. It sloshes the river like

a child would a bucket of water and kicks the sand into a dust-devil frenzy until we're thrown to the ground.

When both of us can stand again, and the sand of the riverbank is settled enough to see, we find the veil is parted. Not in the way that it parted to take me across, either. It's as if a hole has been blown completely through it. No rules need apply for this one time, in order to right the balance of years and years of the coyote prowling and taking what wasn't his to take. As if in emphasis, the five souls he stole seem to crawl from the rock where we shattered the bead. Bill, Burner, and all the rest. They pay us no mind but go directly to the river, which is where I should be.

"Go, Ben," I say.

"Don't say that!" Ben screams.

"Then just cross!"

"I can't," Ben says, sobbing. He drops to the sand. "I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I belong here, and you belong there."

"Are you kidding me? *Belong there?* They don't need me. I spent a year of my life wiring a goddamn trailer hitch. I've got a fourteen-year-old boy who doesn't care if I'm alive or dead. And as for Caroline, she's spent five straight years just trying to *talk* to you. She'd *kill* to have just *one moment* of what I'm doing right now. So cross over. Take the bell from Grant. Take the burden from both of them. You could be everything to them, the Walker and a father and a husband."

"That's not how it works. I know that now." Ben's hands are limply brushing the sand, his knees digging divots. "I don't know what else to say except that when you thought you were spinning your wheels, you were winning her heart. Both of them. You were building a family, and you didn't even realize it."

Ben comes to some sort of decision, and he stands up. He looks at me in a way not entirely different from the way he looked before, when he grappled with the coyote.

"What are you doing, Ben? Think for a second."

"Oh, I've thought," he says. "I get a lot of time to think. Sometimes I feel like it's all I ever do. And I've made my decision."

I back up, look toward the river. I can feel its warmth calling to me, but Ben's voice pulls me back.

"I think a lot about my grandmother these days, about the stories she told me." He swings slowly to the right, pacing in the still-fresh tracks of the coyote. I realize he's herding me. "My favorite, always, is about the Slayer Twins. Have you heard of them?"

"Ben, this thing isn't going to stay open forever."

He ignores me. "All the young Navajo kids love the Slayer Twins. Monster Slayer and Born For Water are their names. We used to pretend we were fighting with them, running around with sticks, slapping at yucca and dirt like they were the monsters the twins were sent to fight."

I start to walk toward the river without realizing it. I'm almost at the bank when Ben steps in front of me and shoves me back. He's not gentle either.

"They're the twin sons of Changing Woman. She's the Big Deal for us. Basically the Earth itself. And the twins, they had this huge job to do. They had to rid the earth of monsters like the thing we just dragged to the river. So that people could live their lives."

He's backing me up now, so I just rush at him. He grabs me, and we grapple for a minute while the souls behind us swirl and hop. Ben gets me in a headlock pretty quickly. I never claimed to be a good fighter. I'm facing the river again, and its pull is enough to start me writhing and kicking, but Ben flips me around so that I face the veil again. He presses my face to his chest.

"The Slayer Twins cleared the earth so we people could live there, but I always wondered *what then?* I asked Gam, when I was a kid, what happens if the monsters come back."

Ben's dragging me toward the break in the veil. I hit him in the arm, in the shoulder, in the face. He doesn't flinch.

"You wanna know what she said?"

I spin Ben around again so his back is at the veil. He's right there. He could go through. I get this wild idea to just push with my legs and fling him backward, but as soon as I tense he reads me and flips me facing forward. Facing the veil myself. The scene

just beyond the veil is the hospital for half a heartbeat. The room where Ben died. That's where he would step back to. He'd walk out of ABQ General whole again. But now that I face it fully the scene shifts. Now I see my body lying in the street, and Grant's body stirring slightly next to me, both of us resting in my blood. Ben sees what I see.

"Gam said, well, if monsters come back, then somebody will have to stand up in their own way. Fight them back again. I used to think that was me. The problem is, I can't fight in the land of the living anymore. My time there is over. But you can. You and Grant and Caroline and the rest of the Circle."

"Ben, don't do this," I croak. "She won't be able to take it if I tell her you had a chance to go to her and you didn't take it."

"She's already made her choice. I was there. And she's right."

Ben lowers his head to me, loosens his grip, and presses his forehead to mine.

"It's not your time to die, Owen. Watch your son grow tall and strong. Be there to wipe away her tears. And whatever you do, don't ever let go of her."

Ben tosses me forward just like he tossed the coyote. The veil is all around me, like an ocean of red, and then it's behind me, and all worlds go black.

CHAPTER 33

GRANT ROMER

I come to face down on the hot concrete street, and my cheek is lying in a pool of cooling blood. I have no idea what happened to me, only that it was very, very bad. I do the first thing that I do every morning when I get up. I feel for the bell around my neck. But it's not there.

I sit up, and a string of blood comes up with me, drips down my face. My hands are painted in it, my clothes are saturated. And my head is killing me. It feels foggy and scratched up. I have shadows of strange memories, and I don't think all of them are mine. I feel like I needed to do something terrible, but I forgot what it was.

I see the bell and let out what I feel must be my first breath in hours. It's lying by my shoes, like it was dropped there. The necklace is broken, and both bell and necklace are smeared in blood. Then I see Owen. He's facing away from me, his nice shirt soaked.

"Hey, Owen? Get up, man. Something bad happened here."

Owen doesn't move, but that's OK, because I know he will. He's just pulling it together, like me. I shake him a little bit.

"Get up, Owen. We gotta find the coyote. C'mon."

Owen still isn't moving, and at the very back of my brain I know why, but I'm keeping it there, in the back. I refuse to let it come to the front. I shake my head hard, and it's jarring. The shadows of the terrible thoughts threaten to make noise until I sit very still again.

"Owen?"

The truth of what I see is creeping to the front of my brain an inch at a time. I'm remembering Pap. He was lying on the ground like this, and there wasn't even any of the blood then that there is now. And I know how that ended.

"Owen. Please." I pull him over, and he flops on his back. His front is a mess. His nice shirt. It's a mess. It's way too big of a mess for anything to ever be right in my life ever again. That's when it hits me that all this blood is *his* blood. I don't know whose blood I thought it was before, but it's *his* now.

"No, no, no." I scoop a little bit of it up and hold it in my hand. I don't know what I'm doing with it, so I set it on Owen, like I could maybe put it back in him or something, even though I know that's not how these things work, but this just *can't be*. Owen being dead is also *not how things work*. There is not a scenario in which the world can exist without Owen in it.

I sort of choke then, with the weight of it all. I don't cry, I just start coughing, and I close my eyes because I don't want to see any of this anymore, and I lay my head down on Owen's ruined stomach, and I just want to go to sleep.

With my eyes closed, the sounds of everything wash over me. Kids are screaming. I hear sirens in the distance, and over everything is the roar of the wind. The only completely silent thing is Owen. Then I hear footsteps. I look up and see Mick standing above me. He's looking down at me, and he has a gun hanging limply in his hand, but he looks completely lost. There's a big gust of wind and the light brush of black feathers over my face as Chaco lands between us. He snaps at Mick, but Mick doesn't even seem to notice him.

"My dad is dead," I say. I don't know what else to say. I don't even know who I'm talking to. Chaco lowers his head and folds his wings in and turns around to tuck himself between Owen and me. Mick shakes his head, and I hear a big clunk as he drops the gun before he shuffles over to the curb and collapses there.

I don't know how long Chaco and I lay like this, resting on Owen. Certainly until I fall asleep, because I know I must be

dreaming when I start to hear a small beat in Owen's chest. It's like his heart is telling me a secret, it's so quiet, and then I think it goes away again, and it was nothing after all. But the bell heard the secret too, because it gets a little bit warmer in my hand. I try to listen, and even Chaco presses himself closer. He hears it too.

Another beat. Another whisper. Louder now. I can hear it. And I know what it's saying. It's saying *not yet*.

Not yet. Not yet. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Stronger and stronger and stronger. *Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.*

Chaco rises, then I sit up, and when we look at Owen, we find he's looking back at us. He rolls on his side to grab my hand, and there are three soft *tink, tink, tink* sounds as the bullets that were inside of him fall to the ground.

"Not yet," he says, smiling at me. "Not just yet."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 34

THE WALKER

The Serenity Room at Green Mesa is back to normal. Well, normal for a psychiatric hospital, anyway. I guess I was giving myself too much credit when I said it was me that was spooking all these people. It was the combo of the coyote running loose everywhere and then me walking in on top of that. This time, with the coyote back where he belongs, I only get a few mutters when I pass. That's it.

Mom is in her usual spot, by the big bay window, and she's watching the Jemez Mountains again. Only this time, when I sit down next to her, I see that she's actually seeing them. The sunset is an explosion of soft pink, and the clouds look like strings of cotton candy. She's watching the crows fly under them, away from here. They're scattering again. That, as much as anything, tells me our job is done for now.

"You look good, Mom," I say. She says nothing, but she does smile. I know it has nothing to do with me talking to her. That's the rub with a job like mine. When you do it right, nobody notices you. If things are going the way they should, you're invisible.

"She's moving on," I say. "Caroline is. Which is good, because until she told me, I didn't realize how tightly I was holding on to her. To the past. To my life. I've been dead for six years. You'd think I would have realized it by now. But it took her showing me. It took her letting go to get me to ease my grip too."

Mom reaches back and brushes her fingers through her silky hair, still watching the sky. Her eyes are moving from cloud to

cloud.

"She's good at helping people realize things that are staring them in the face. Like the rez. How it needed help. It still needs help, but at least its problems are normal problems now. They're gonna stick around, all three of them. She told Owen that if he was gonna keep screwing around with that trailer hitch, he ought to at least put it to work. He's turning it into a mobile doc's office. He and Caroline are gonna work the rez."

It makes me absurdly happy to know that they're staying on Chaco rez. That when I need to find them, I won't have to search the map. No more uprooting. Grant's staying at Crownrock High. Even after all that happened. He said he was done running. Caroline is helping with that too. The coyote messed with a lot of people's minds, and she's got a knack for fixing them. Grant's and Kai's. Even Mick's. Although that kid was troubled for a long time, maybe even before the coyote came through. The cops found an arsenal in the back of his car and journals with all sorts of terrible plans. He was ripe for the coyote to begin with. Still, Caroline got permission to visit him at UNM's acute care psych ward, where he's under lock and key. She says she at least wants to undo whatever the coyote did, and I know she can. The rest is up to the docs.

Things at Chaco are settling down again. Life is moving forward.

"I think I was afraid that for me, there was no such thing as forward. All I had was what lay behind me. Like when Ben died and I became the Walker, that was it for Ben. I thought the two were totally separate things. So I held on to Caroline for dear life, thinking that if I let go, not only would I lose her, but I'd lose Ben too, forever. I looked high and low for a way to get back to her, for a chance to be Ben again. But that's the thing. Ben's still here. Ben never left. And the Walker is still here too. It's all one thing. It's all me."

Mom's gaze is broken when another patient sits down in the chair next to her. A woman her age. One that used to sit with her all the time, until Mom started to go downhill.

"Evening, Sitsi," she says. "It's almost dinnertime. Any interest?"

"I think so," Mom says, and hearing her voice brings tears to my eyes. "I think that would be nice."

The two women help each other up, and together they walk right through me, on their way out.

I don't mind. Not anymore. It makes me smile, actually. It makes me feel good. This is my job. This is my journey, and it's moving forward now. Caroline, Owen, Grant, they all walk it with me. We're all still in it together. For now. And even though they can't see me, I know they can feel that I'm there, walking next to them.

It's what I do. I am the Walker, after all.

OceanofPDF.com

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Coyote is one of the most fascinating and contradictory beings in Navajo lore. Karl W. Luckert, a mythology scholar on the subject, calls him, among other things, a "fool-gambler-imitator-trickster-witch-hero-savior-god." *Signs of Warning*, the tale told in Chapter 18 of this novel, was taken from the Curly To Aheedlinii version of *Navajo Coyote Tales*, translated from the original Navajo by Father Berard Haile, OFM (and interpreted by the smoker in the narrative). The six objects that present themselves to Coyote (birth bag, burned stick, broken pot, cane, whisk broom, and broken stirring stick) are all accurate at their origin.

Signs of Warning is but one of many tales about Coyote, and anyone looking to learn more will benefit from both Haile's compilation and Karl W. Luckert's essay on the theoretical and historical framework of Coyote that is presented as the introduction.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. B. Griffith writes thrillers of all types, from psychological to supernatural. He is the author of the [Tournament series](#), the [Vanished series](#), and the [Gordon Pope series](#). He lives in Denver, Colorado, where he can often be seen sitting on the porch or wandering to and from local watering holes with his family.

If you'd like to know when he has another book out, you can join his mailing list here: <http://eepurl.com/SObZj>. It is an entirely spam-free experience.

You can also visit him online via his [facebook page](#), or check out his digital HQ at bbgriffith.com.

Thanks for reading!

OceanofPDF.com