Chapter 4

Apache Women

No one saw the car leave the road. My brother Tyler, who was seventeen, fell asleep at the wheel. It was six in the morning and he'd been driving in silence for most of the night, piloting our station wagon through Arizona, Nevada and Utah. We were in Cornish, a farming town twenty miles south of Buck's Peak, when the station wagon drifted over the center line into the other lane, then left the highway. The car jumped a ditch, smashed through two utility poles of thick cedar, and was finally brought to a stop only when it collided with a row-crop tractor.

—

THE TRIP HAD BEEN Mother's idea.

A few months earlier, when crisp leaves had begun slipping to the ground, signaling the end of summer, Dad had been in high spirits. His feet tapped show tunes at breakfast, and during dinner he often pointed at the mountain, his eyes shining, and described where he would lay the pipes to bring water down to the house. Dad promised that when the first snow fell, he'd build the biggest snowball in the

state of Idaho. What he'd do, he said, was hike to the mountain base and gather a small, insignificant ball of snow, then roll it down the hillside, watching it triple in size each time it raced over a hillock or down a ravine. By the time it reached the house, which was atop the last hill before the valley, it'd be big as Grandpa's barn and people on the highway would stare up at it, amazed. We just needed the right snow. Thick, sticky flakes. After every snowfall, we brought handfuls to him and watched him rub the flakes between his fingers. That snow was too fine. This, too wet. After Christmas, he said. That's when you get the *real* snow.

But after Christmas Dad seemed to deflate, to collapse in on himself. He stopped talking about the snowball, then he stopped talking altogether. A darkness gathered in his eyes until it filled them. He walked with his arms limp, shoulders slumping, as if something had hold of him and was dragging him to the earth.

By January Dad couldn't get out of bed. He lay flat on his back, staring blankly at the stucco ceiling with its intricate pattern of ridges and veins. He didn't blink when I brought his dinner plate each night. I'm not sure he knew I was there.

That's when Mother announced we were going to Arizona. She said Dad was like a sunflower—he'd die in the snow—and that come February he needed to be taken away and planted in the sun. So we piled into the station wagon and drove for twelve hours, winding through canyons and speeding over dark freeways, until we arrived at the mobile home in the parched Arizona desert where my grandparents were waiting out the winter.

We arrived a few hours after sunrise. Dad made it as far as Grandma's porch, where he stayed for the rest of the day, a knitted pillow under his head, a callused hand on his stomach. He kept that posture for two days, eyes open, not saying a word, still as a bush in that dry, windless heat.

On the third day he seemed to come back into himself, to become aware of the goings-on around him, to listen to our mealtime chatter rather than staring, unresponsive, at the carpet. After dinner that night, Grandma played her phone messages, which were mostly

neighbors and friends saying hello. Then a woman's voice came through the speaker to remind Grandma of her doctor's appointment the following day. That message had a dramatic effect on Dad.

At first Dad asked Grandma questions: what was the appointment for, who was it with, why would she see a doctor when Mother could give her tinctures.

Dad had always believed passionately in Mother's herbs, but that night felt different, like something inside him was shifting, a new creed taking hold. Herbalism, he said, was a spiritual doctrine that separated the wheat from the tares, the faithful from the faithless. Then he used a word I'd never heard before: Illuminati. It sounded exotic, powerful, whatever it was. Grandma, he said, was an unknowing agent of the Illuminati.

God couldn't abide faithlessness, Dad said. That's why the most hateful sinners were those who wouldn't make up their minds, who used herbs and medication both, who came to Mother on Wednesday and saw their doctor on Friday—or, as Dad put it, "Who worship at the altar of God one day and offer a sacrifice to Satan the next." These people were like the ancient Israelites because they'd been given a true religion but hankered after false idols.

"Doctors and pills," Dad said, nearly shouting. "That's their god, and they whore after it."

Mother was staring at her food. At the word "whore" she stood, threw Dad an angry look, then walked into her room and slammed the door. Mother didn't always agree with Dad. When Dad wasn't around, I'd heard her say things that he—or at least this new incarnation of him—would have called sacrilege, things like, "Herbs are supplements. For something serious, you should go to a doctor."

Dad took no notice of Mother's empty chair. "Those doctors aren't trying to save you," he told Grandma. "They're trying to *kill* you."

When I think of that dinner, the scene comes back to me clearly. I'm sitting at the table. Dad is talking, his voice urgent. Grandma sits across from me, chewing her asparagus again and again in her crooked jaw, the way a goat might, sipping from her ice water, giving no

indication that she's heard a word Dad has said, except for the occasional vexed glare she throws the clock when it tells her it's still too early for bed. "You're a knowing participant in the plans of Satan," Dad says.

This scene played every day, sometimes several times a day, for the rest of the trip. All followed a similar script. Dad, his fervor kindled, would drone for an hour or more, reciting the same lines over and over, fueled by some internal passion that burned long after the rest of us had been lectured into a cold stupor.

Grandma had a memorable way of laughing at the end of these sermons. It was a sort of sigh, a long, drawn-out leaking of breath, that finished with her eyes rolling upward in a lazy imitation of exasperation, as if she wanted to throw her hands in the air but was too tired to complete the gesture. Then she'd smile—not a soothing smile for someone else but a smile for herself, of baffled amusement, a smile that to me always seemed to say, *Ain't nothin' funnier than real life, I tell you what*.

—

IT WAS A SCORCHING AFTERNOON, so hot you couldn't walk barefoot on the pavement, when Grandma took me and Richard for a drive through the desert, having wrestled us into seatbelts, which we'd never worn before. We drove until the road began to incline, then kept driving as the asphalt turned to dust beneath our tires, and still we kept going, Grandma weaving higher and higher into the bleached hills, coming to a stop only when the dirt road ended and a hiking trail began. Then we walked. Grandma was winded after a few minutes, so she sat on a flat red stone and pointed to a sandstone rock formation in the distance, formed of crumbling spires, each a little ruin, and told us to hike to it. Once there, we were to hunt for nuggets of black rock.

"They're called Apache tears," she said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small black stone, dirty and jagged, covered in veins of gray and white like cracked glass. "And this is how they look after they've been polished a bit." From her other pocket she withdrew a

second stone, which was inky black and so smooth it felt soft.

Richard identified both as obsidian. “These are volcanic rock,” he said in his best encyclopedic voice. “But this isn’t.” He kicked a washed-out stone and waved at the formation. “This is sediment.” Richard had a talent for scientific trivia. Usually I ignored his lecturing but today I was gripped by it, and by this strange, thirsty terrain. We hiked around the formation for an hour, returning to Grandma with our shirtfronts sagging with stones. Grandma was pleased; she could sell them. She put them in the trunk, and as we made our way back to the trailer, she told us the legend of the Apache tears.

According to Grandma, a hundred years ago a tribe of Apaches had fought the U.S. Cavalry on those faded rocks. The tribe was outnumbered: the battle lost, the war over. All that was left to do was wait to die. Soon after the battle began, the warriors became trapped on a ledge. Unwilling to suffer a humiliating defeat, cut down one by one as they tried to break through the cavalry, they mounted their horses and charged off the face of the mountain. When the Apache women found their broken bodies on the rocks below, they cried huge, desperate tears, which turned to stone when they touched the earth.

Grandma never told us what happened to the women. The Apaches were at war but had no warriors, so perhaps she thought the ending too bleak to say aloud. The word “slaughter” came to mind, because slaughter is the word for it, for a battle when one side mounts no defense. It’s the word we used on the farm. We slaughtered chickens, we didn’t fight them. A slaughter was the likely outcome of the warriors’ bravery. They died as heroes, their wives as slaves.

As we drove to the trailer, the sun dipping in the sky, its last rays reaching across the highway, I thought about the Apache women. Like the sandstone altar on which they had died, the shape of their lives had been determined years before—before the horses began their gallop, their sorrel bodies arching for that final collision. Long before the warriors’ leap it was decided how the women would live and how they would die. By the warriors, by the women themselves. Decided. Choices, numberless as grains of sand, had layered and compressed, coalescing into sediment, then into rock, until all was set in stone.

—

I HAD NEVER BEFORE left the mountain and I ached for it, for the sight of the Princess etched in pine across the massif. I found myself glancing at the vacant Arizona sky, hoping to see her black form swelling out of the earth, laying claim to her half of the heavens. But she was not there. More than the sight of her, I missed her caresses—the wind she sent through canyons and ravines to sweep through my hair every morning. In Arizona, there was no wind. There was just one heat-stricken hour after another.

I spent my days wandering from one side of the trailer to the other, then out the back door, across the patio, over to the hammock, then around to the front porch, where I'd step over Dad's semiconscious form and back inside again. It was a great relief when, on the sixth day, Grandpa's four-wheeler broke down and Tyler and Luke took it apart to find the trouble. I sat on a large barrel of blue plastic, watching them, wondering when we could go home. When Dad would stop talking about the Illuminati. When Mother would stop leaving the room whenever Dad entered it.

That night after dinner, Dad said it was time to go. "Get your stuff," he said. "We're hitting the road in a half hour." It was early evening, which Grandma said was a ridiculous time to begin a twelve-hour drive. Mother said we should wait until morning, but Dad wanted to get home so he and the boys could scrap the next morning. "I can't afford to lose any more work days," he said.

Mother's eyes darkened with worry, but she said nothing.

—

I AWOKE WHEN THE CAR HIT the first utility pole. I'd been asleep on the floor under my sister's feet, a blanket over my head. I tried to sit up but the car was shaking, lunging—it felt like it was coming apart—and Audrey fell on top of me. I couldn't see what was happening but I could feel and hear it. Another loud *thud,* a lurch, my mother screaming, "Tyler!" from the front seat, and a final violent jolt before

everything stopped and silence set in.

Several seconds passed in which nothing happened.

Then I heard Audrey's voice. She was calling our names one by one. Then she said, "Everyone's here except Tara!"

I tried to shout but my face was wedged under the seat, my cheek pressed to the floor. I struggled under Audrey's weight as she shouted my name. Finally, I arched my back and pushed her off, then stuck my head out of the blanket and said, "Here."

I looked around. Tyler had twisted his upper body so that he was practically climbing into the backseat, his eyes bulging as he took in every cut, every bruise, every pair of wide eyes. I could see his face but it didn't look like his face. Blood gushed from his mouth and down his shirt. I closed my eyes, trying to forget the twisted angles of his bloodstained teeth. When I opened them again, it was to check everyone else. Richard was holding his head, a hand over each ear like he was trying to block out a noise. Audrey's nose was strangely hooked and blood was streaming from it down her arm. Luke was shaking but I couldn't see any blood. I had a gash on my forearm from where the seat's frame had caught hold of me.

"Everyone all right?" My father's voice. There was a general mumble.

"There are power lines on the car," Dad said. "Nobody gets out till they've shut them off." His door opened, and for a moment I thought he'd been electrocuted, but then I saw he'd pitched himself far enough so that his body had never touched the car and the ground at the same time. I remember peering at him through my shattered window as he circled the car, his red cap pushed back so the brim reached upward, licking the air. He looked strangely boyish.

He circled the car then stopped, crouching low, bringing his head level with the passenger seat. "Are you okay?" he said. Then he said it again. The third time he said it, his voice quivered.

I leaned over the seat to see who he was talking to, and only then realized how serious the accident had been. The front half of the car had been compressed, the engine arched, curving back over itself, like

a fold in solid rock.

There was a glare on the windshield from the morning sun. I saw crisscrossing patterns of fissures and cracks. The sight was familiar. I'd seen hundreds of shattered windshields in the junkyard, each one unique, with its particular spray of gossamer extruding from the point of impact, a chronicle of the collision. The cracks on our windshield told their own story. Their epicenter was a small ring with fissures circling outward. The ring was directly in front of the passenger seat.

"You okay?" Dad pleaded. "Honey, can you hear me?"

Mother was in the passenger seat. Her body faced away from the window. I couldn't see her face, but there was something terrifying in the way she slumped against her seat.

"Can you hear me?" Dad said. He repeated this several times. Eventually, in a movement so small it was almost imperceptible, I saw the tip of Mother's ponytail dip as she nodded.

Dad stood, looking at the active power lines, looking at the earth, looking at Mother. Looking helpless. "Do you think—should I call an ambulance?"

I *think* I heard him say that. And if he did, which surely he must have, Mother must have whispered a reply, or maybe she wasn't able to whisper anything, I don't know. I've always imagined that she asked to be taken home.

I was told later that the farmer whose tractor we'd hit rushed from his house. He'd called the police, which we knew would bring trouble because the car wasn't insured, and none of us had been wearing seatbelts. It took perhaps twenty minutes after the farmer informed Utah Power of the accident for them to switch off the deadly current pulsing through the lines. Then Dad lifted Mother from the station wagon and I saw her face—her eyes, hidden under dark circles the size of plums, and the swelling distorting her soft features, stretching some, compressing others.

I don't know how we got home, or when, but I remember that the mountain face glowed orange in the morning light. Once inside, I watched Tyler spit streams of crimson down the bathroom sink. His

front teeth had smashed into the steering wheel and been displaced, so that they jutted backward toward the roof of his mouth.

Mother was laid on the sofa. She mumbled that the light hurt her eyes. We closed the blinds. She wanted to be in the basement, where there were no windows, so Dad carried her downstairs and I didn't see her for several hours, not until that evening, when I used a dull flashlight to bring her dinner. When I saw her, I didn't know her. Both eyes were a deep purple, so deep they looked black, and so swollen I couldn't tell whether they were open or closed. She called me Audrey, even after I corrected her twice. "Thank you, Audrey, but just dark and quiet, that's fine. Dark. Quiet. Thank you. Come check on me again, Audrey, in a little while."

Mother didn't come out of the basement for a week. Every day the swelling worsened, the black bruises turned blacker. Every night I was sure her face was as marked and deformed as it was possible for a face to be, but every morning it was somehow darker, more tumid. After a week, when the sun went down, we turned off the lights and Mother came upstairs. She looked as if she had two objects strapped to her forehead, large as apples, black as olives.

There was never any more talk of a hospital. The moment for such a decision had passed, and to return to it would be to return to all the fury and fear of the accident itself. Dad said doctors couldn't do anything for her anyhow. She was in God's hands.

In the coming months, Mother called me by many names. When she called me Audrey I didn't worry, but it was troubling when we had conversations in which she referred to me as Luke or Tony, and in the family it has always been agreed, even by Mother herself, that she's never been quite the same since the accident. We kids called her Raccoon Eyes. We thought it was a great joke, once the black rings had been around for a few weeks, long enough for us to get used to them and make them the subject of jokes. We had no idea it was a medical term. Raccoon eyes. A sign of serious brain injury.

Tyler's guilt was all-consuming. He blamed himself for the accident, then kept on blaming himself for every decision that was made thereafter, every repercussion, every reverberation that clanged down

through the years. He laid claim to that moment and all its consequences, as if time itself had commenced the instant our station wagon left the road, and there was no history, no context, no agency of any kind until he began it, at the age of seventeen, by falling asleep at the wheel. Even now, when Mother forgets any detail, however trivial, that look comes into his eyes—the one he had in the moments after the collision, when blood poured from his own mouth as he took in the scene, raking his eyes over what he imagined to be the work of his hands and his hands only.

Me, I never blamed anyone for the accident, least of all Tyler. It was just one of those things. A decade later my understanding would shift, part of my heavy swing into adulthood, and after that the accident would always make me think of the Apache women, and of all the decisions that go into making a life—the choices people make, together and on their own, that combine to produce any single event. Grains of sand, incalculable, pressing into sediment, then rock.