

- *three* -

WHEN WE GOT home, I found Mama passed out on the living room sofa. The lights and the television were on. She got spooked when she was alone. Once upon a time, I'd kept her company when Daddy traveled, but then I got older, and her drinking got worse but still didn't create enough of a buffer between her and her family, so she'd added pills. After that I'd begun accompanying Daddy when he taught his clinics.

Tonight he'd driven down to the barn to do the walk-through. I left my bags in the entrance hall and checked on Mama.

Unconscious, when she couldn't say things that hurt, she was beautiful. She lay on her back, one hand thrown over her head, her long, shiny black hair tumbling around her shoulders.

I touched her shoulder. "We're home."

No response.

"Do you want supper?"

"You back already?" She turned away, snuggling into the cushions.

I turned off the television and most of the lights and took her highball glass and the bottle of Maker's Mark from the coffee table. I left the bottle by Daddy's place in the dining room.

I put the casserole Gertrude had left us in the oven and took my bags up to my room. Mama wouldn't be at the table, so I didn't bother to change clothes, but I washed my hands and face before I went back downstairs.

The warming casserole smelled rich with Cajun spices and andouille sausage. At least once a month Gertrude prepared a dish from her native New Orleans. Daddy disliked heat, so she went lightly on the cayenne, but the andouille would have a bite.

He came in from the back porch. "Where's your mother?"

"Living room."

After he passed through the dining room, I went to the kitchen door and cracked it open to listen: labored sigh, receding footsteps.

I was tossing the salad when I heard him again.

"Kit, you need to eat something."

Food was one of many battlegrounds they fought on. Mama was thin, like a coat hanger, and determined to stay that way. She watched what I ate, too, to Daddy's annoyance. And mine. In eventing, strength was more important than thinness.

Mama's speech slurred.

"Fine," Daddy said.

I checked the casserole. I was ravenous, but Gertrude didn't believe in microwaves. She said they robbed food of nutrients and changed its texture.

Daddy pushed open the kitchen door. "Supper ready yet?"

"It would be if we had a microwave."

He smiled briefly.

"I'll serve the salad," I said.

Polite conversation was encouraged at meals, so as he made his drink, I said, "Midterms are this week. My lit exam is tomorrow."

A groan came from the living room. I was disturbing Mama's coma.

Daddy didn't even blink. "You study this weekend?"

"Some. I need to review everything."

When we finished the salad, I took away the plates and salad forks. In the oven, the casserole bubbled at the edges, but the middle was cool. Good enough. I scooped Daddy's portion from around the outside and mine from the middle.

"What other tests do you have?" he asked as we ate.

“Biology, French, and history.”

“But you’ll be done on Wednesday. And you’re feeling better.”

“Sir?”

“Your bladder infection.”

From the living room, Mama snored lightly.

I planned to finish the antibiotics, but the pain and burning had disappeared. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s good.”

I finished eating before he did, my mind compartmentalizing with shocking facility. I didn’t have to think about Wednesday night yet. Time to be a student.

“May I be excused?”

“Sure. Leave the dishes for Gertrude. I’ll clear up after myself.”

I took the back stairs up to the second floor. They were original to the house’s 1690 construction, and more than three centuries later the stone steps, grooved with use, canted to one side, but they came out right by my room.

Moonlight shone through my window, bathing the room in light and shadow. I closed my door and wished I could lock it, but since Daddy didn’t take my grades lightly, I was safe tonight.

THE NEXT MORNING I was at the barn by five to muck stalls. The grooms were already at work. Daddy was supervising the feeding.

“Good morning. Ready for your test?”

“Yes, sir.” I yawned, covering my mouth with my hand. “Sorry. I didn’t go to bed until after midnight. Morning.”

He didn’t offer me the option of returning to the house for another hour or two of sleep. I hadn’t expected him to. I liked barn chores and enjoyed a semiformal camaraderie with the grooms. They liked that Daddy required me to understand stable management from the ground up, and they especially liked that if I completed my own work with time to spare, I helped them with theirs.

I rolled open the door of Jasper's stall and went inside.

"How are you, beauty?" I laid my cheek against his neck and inhaled. Horses always smelled good, but they had an extra tang in the fall. It smelled like childhood, countless early mornings, long days, and late nights at home and at shows—grooming, mucking, riding, and loving every minute.

Jasper, none the worse for the weekend, shambled along beside me as I led him to his paddock. It wasn't good for the horses to inhale the dust stirred up by cleaning.

I went back for Vigo, who stalked down the aisle as if he were king of the barn. Beneath his haughty demeanor, he was a teddy bear. I liked riding him.

Psycho Pony, not so much. Her real name was Diva. The nickname was a joke I had with Jamie. She glared and turned her hindquarters toward me when I opened her stall door.

"You'd better not kick me, you cow." I swung her halter toward her flank. She shifted her rump away from me and allowed me to put her halter on. The halter was okay. The lead rope was suspicious but acceptable so long as I kept it short. A longe line or hose was cause for an epic freak-out.

Diva and I made a good story on paper. She had been sired by Lord Byron, Daddy's favorite horse. The media never tired of pointing out that both Diva and I were descended from Olympic gold medalists, though Diva was second generation and I was fourth. But both of us were roans, which led to the endlessly fascinating fact that I'd been named after a horse. Luckily, I didn't bear Byron's actual name. Daddy had named me after his color. He was a blue roan, his sleek black coat shot through with white.

Diva had inherited Byron's coloring, talent, and temperament—beautiful, brilliant, and a total head case. Every show we took her to made special provisions for her. She had private warm-up times so no one else would be in the arena. Stalls on either side of her remained empty. She bit, she kicked, she pulled faces at people and other horses. She was a

nightmare except when she was under saddle, when she was a dream. Even so, I disliked her. I didn't mind a challenge, but Diva was dangerous.

I finished mucking, fluffed the fresh straw bedding, and returned the horses to their stalls. Jasper and Vigo put their muzzles in their buckets and began eating their grain. Diva once again spun her big butt toward me. She would literally rather kick me than eat.

The sun was up and the morning had warmed by the time I returned to the house. I peeked in the living room. Mama was no longer sprawled on the sofa, so I assumed she'd gotten to bed somehow.

I showered, dressed for school, and met Daddy in the dining room shortly before seven. He was reading the newspaper, which excused me from making conversation. Mama didn't eat breakfast. That usually made it the best meal of the day.

Daddy and I didn't talk much on the way to school. I opened my lit book and gazed down at it, occasionally turning pages, so he wouldn't bother me.

He let me out in front of the building. "Do a good job on your test. See you at one."

The first bell rang as I walked up the steps to the portico. Inside, the hall was crowded, which was odd. Sheridan Academy prided itself on a combination of rigorous academics and strict discipline. We had to be in our seats ready to work before the second bell.

Harold Moon, a thin, serious senior whose locker was next to mine, gave me a sickly "Hello" when I greeted him. Then he mumbled something about his physics exam and headed down the hall.

That explained why people were still milling around. Test days started with a confusing change in schedule. There was no homeroom.

"Hey, Roan, you ready for the test?"

I closed my locker. Chelsea Yost was in homeroom and American lit with me.

"I think so. What about you?"

"I studied all weekend, but if I don't pull an A, I won't have the GPA to stay in Accelerated Studies next semester."

I hoped that wasn't true. I liked Chelsea. We'd been best friends in elementary school, complete with playdates at my house and sleepovers at her house, but she was afraid of horses and I'd never cared for Barbies, and we'd grown apart. We were still friendly, though, and until our schedules had diverged this year, we'd sat together at lunch.

We walked down the hall together.

"Did you win this weekend?" Chelsea was asking out of politeness, not because she was really interested. She thought the modeling stuff was cool, but when I went into too much detail about something that had happened at a show, her entire face glazed like a doughnut.

"I did," I said.

She smiled, happy for me but probably happier about the short answer. "That's great!" At least she sounded sincere.

Mrs. Kenyon wasn't in the classroom yet. I took my seat at the back of the room.

A muffled sputter made me look up. A pack of senior girls had crowded into the doorway, Sass and Annabelle in the middle. Sass cut her eyes at the chalkboard that stretched across the front of the room.

A crude cartoon covered half of it, a man with an evangelical pompadour and a woman with long hair and long legs that were in the air. He loomed over her, aiming an enormous, weirdly shaped penis at her.

*Dickwood you're hung like a horse* was printed in the speech bubble coming from her mouth.

Sass had captured Mr. Dashwood's toupee, and to dispel any doubt the woman was Mama, the man was saying, *Pussy-Kit I love you*.

"Oh, my God," Chelsea said from the next row over.

I was cold to the point of being frozen except for my face, which burned hot.

*Do something. Say something.*

I stood up. My legs felt disconnected from the rest of me, but I started up the aisle, my eyes fixed on the cartoon. Nerves almost made me laugh. That penis looked like a baseball bat. Sass had dated

that big dumb baseball player from Sheridan High. What was his name? . . . Lee Herman.

With short, fast strokes of the eraser, I eradicated first Mama and then the speech bubbles. With a stick of chalk, I transformed Mr. Dashwood's toupee into a baseball cap.

I gestured toward the penis. "Hey, Sass, is this what you remember from sucking Lee Herman's dick?"

Chelsea hooted and then clapped her hands over her mouth. A couple of people applauded.

Sass's face turned pink. "I'd never do that!"

"No shit" came from the back of the room.

The voice belonged to Will Howard. He'd never acknowledged my existence, but I knew him. He and two of his buddies had been kicked off the track team earlier this fall when they'd tested positive for drugs. The school had tried to keep it quiet, but through the same rumor mill that was grinding out the news about Mama and Mr. Dashwood, word had gotten out.

Laughter broke across the room. Sass had dated Will when I was a freshman. He'd know what she would or wouldn't do.

"You prick." Sass pushed herself away from the door, back into the hall.

Annabelle and the rest of the minions broke away. I turned back to the board and had just finished erasing the cartoon when the second bell rang and Mrs. Kenyon came in.

She didn't even glance my way. "Roan, sit down. People, we have ninety minutes for this test, and y'all are going to need every one of them."

I returned to my seat, flushed as much with victory as embarrassment—until I saw Mrs. Kenyon standing motionless with her back to the class.

A ghostly impression of the drawing remained.

She'd been in the classroom too long to be shocked. She went to the board and covered up the ghost of the cartoon in her neat schoolteacher script: *Up to 5 extra points for an essay comparing and contrasting the concepts of transcendentalism and anti-transcendentalism.*

Her face was severe when she turned around and began to distribute the exam, a packet of legal-length pages.

She did a half-halt by my desk. "You will see me after class."

She thought I'd drawn that. The instinct to protest was so strong that I opened my mouth, but she put the exam facedown on my desk and continued down the row.

I closed my mouth.

Will Howard, looking at me from his seat across the aisle, shrugged slightly. Getting into trouble hadn't fazed him. The school hadn't even suspended him. His family was Howard Construction. I was protected by the same privilege. I was a Montgomery. I wouldn't get suspended even if I had drawn the cartoon, but I needed to head off Mrs. Kenyon before she called Daddy.

"Turn over your papers and begin," she said.

Feeling sick, I turned my paper over. Two questions per page allowed ample room to write mini-essays in reply, but the words blurred. I couldn't make them out.

I glanced around to see if anyone else was having this problem. Everyone was scribbling away—except Will. He winked at me.

I looked down at my paper and forced myself to focus on the letters until they sharpened into words and then sentences, and I began to write the answers.

MRS. KENYON SAT on top of the desk in front of me, her feet in the seat. "What's going on?"

"I didn't draw that."

"Who did?"

I'd have ratted on Sass in a heartbeat if it hadn't meant explaining the drawing.

"It was already on the board when I got to class."

Mrs. Kenyon regarded me with her usual expression, something like that of a bulldog, but even now not an unfriendly bulldog.

I started to pick at the desktop, but anxious behavior was a giveaway. I stopped.

“Those senior girls give you a hard time, don’t they, Sass and Annabelle?”

I cracked a hard smile. “I give it back to them.”

“Did they have anything to do with this?”

“You’d have to ask them.”

She seemed to weigh her next question. “Are things all right at home?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I took a rule from Daddy’s playbook: The best defense was a good offense. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason. But if something were wrong, you could tell me.”

What went on in my family was private.

Well, some of it. Mama’s relationship with Mr. Dashwood was rapidly becoming public.

“I’m going to be late for French.”

She didn’t seem satisfied, but she said, “You can go.”

During my French review, Sass was called to the office over the PA. I couldn’t gloat because I expected to hear myself summoned, too, but the remainder of the class was uneventful.

At lunchtime, I spent a few minutes fiddling with pencils and notebooks in my locker, waiting for the hall to empty so I could slip into the cafeteria unnoticed, but I wasn’t up to the stares and whispers.

I didn’t have many alternatives for a hideout. Students weren’t allowed to roam the halls unsupervised, even a student with as many privileges as I had. In the end, I went to the biology lab, took my seat, and planned my escape. When the review was over, I’d collect my books from my locker, avoid eye contact, and go outside and wait for Daddy.

That was almost what happened—only when I pushed open the heavy glass door to the portico, Mama’s forest green Jaguar waited at the base of the steps.