

CHAPTER ONE

Alice

OREN FALLS ASLEEP at last on the third bus. He's been fighting it since Newburgh, eyelids heavy as wet laundry, pried up again and again by sheer stubbornness. *Finally*, I think when he nods off. *If I have to answer one more of his questions I might lose it.*

Where are we going? he asked on the first bus.

Someplace safe, I answered.

He stared at me, even in the darkened bus his eyes shining with too much smart for his age, and then looked away as if embarrassed for me. An hour later he'd asked, as if there hadn't been miles of highway in between, *Where's it safe?*

There are places, I'd begun as if telling him a bedtime story, but then I'd had to rack my brain for what came next. All I could picture were candy houses and chicken-legged huts that hid witches. Those weren't the stories he liked best anyway. He preferred the book of myths from the li-

brary (it's still in his pack, racking up fines with every mile) about heroes who wrestle lions and behead snake-haired monsters.

There are places . . . I began again, trying to remember something from the book. *Remember when Orestes flees the Furies and he goes to some temple so the Furies can't hurt him there?*

It was the temple of Apollo at Delphi, Oren said, and it's called a sanctuary.

No one likes a smarty-pants, I countered. Since he found that mythology book he likes to show off how well he's learned all those Greek names. He'd liked Orestes right away because their names were alike. I'd tried to read around the parts that weren't really for kids, but he always knew if I skipped over something and later I saw him reading the story to himself, staring at the picture of the Furies with their snake hair and bat wings.

At the next bus stop he found the flyer for the hotline. It was called Sanctuary, as if Oren's saying the word had made it appear. I gave him a handful of change to buy a candy bar while I made the call. I didn't want him to hear the story I'd have to tell. But even with him across the waiting room, standing at the snacks counter, his shoulders hunched under the weight of his *Star Wars* backpack, he looked like he was listening.

The woman who answered the phone started to ask about my feelings, but I cut to the chase and told her that I'd left my husband and taken my son with me. *He hit me,* I said,

and he told me he'd kill me if I tried to leave. I have no place to go . . .

My voice had stuttered to a choked end. Across the waiting room, Oren had turned to look at me as if he'd heard me. But that was impossible; he was too far away.

The woman's voice on the phone was telling me about a shelter in Kingston. Oren was walking across the waiting room. When he reached me he said, *It can't be a place anyone knows about.*

I rolled my eyes at him. Like I didn't know that. But I repeated his words into the phone anyway, trying to sound firm. The woman on the other end didn't say anything for a moment, and looking into Oren's eyes, I was suddenly more afraid than I'd been since we left.

I understand, the woman said at last, slowly, as if she were speaking to someone who might *not* understand. I recognized the social worker's "explaining" voice and felt a prickle of anger that surprised me. I'd thought that I was past caring what a bunch of morally sanctimonious social workers thought about me. *We can arrange for a safe house, one no one will know about. But you might have to stay tonight in the shelter.*

Oren shook his head as if he could hear what the woman said. Or as if he already knew I'd messed up.

It has to be tonight, I said.

Again the woman paused. In the background a cat meowed and a kettle whistled. I pictured a comfortable warm room—framed pictures on the walls, throw pillows on a

couch, lamplight—and was suddenly swamped by so much anger I grew dizzy. Oren reached out a hand to steady me. The woman said something but I missed it. There was a roaring in my ears.

. . . give me the number there, she was saying. I'll make a call and call you right back.

I read her the number on the pay phone and then hung up. Oren handed me a cup of hot coffee and a doughnut. How had he gotten all that for a handful of change? Does he have money of his own he hasn't told me about? I slumped against the wall to wait, and Oren leaned next to me. *It will be all right, I told him. These places . . . they have a system.*

He nodded, jaw clenched. I touched his cheek and he flinched. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but the only other occupants of the station were a texting college student, the old woman behind the snacks counter, and a drunk passed out on a bench. When the phone rang I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I picked up the phone before it rang again. For a second all I heard was breathing and I had the horrible, crazy thought that it was *him*. But then the woman spoke in a breathless rush, as if she'd run somewhere fast. *Can you get the next bus for Kingston?*

I told you no shel— I began, but the woman cut me off.

At Kingston you'll get a bus to Delphi. Someone will meet you there, someone you can trust. Her name's Mattie—she's in her fifties, has short silvery hair, and she'll probably be wearing

something purple. She'll take you to a safe house, a place no one knows about but us.

I looked down at Oren and he nodded.

Okay, I said. We'll be there on the next bus.

I hung up and knelt down to tell Oren where we were going, but he was already handing something to me: two tickets for the next bus for Kingston and two for Delphi, New York. *Look, he said, the town's got the same name as the place in the book.*

That was two hours and two buses ago. The last bus has taken us through steadily falling snow into mountains that loom on either side of the road. Oren had watched the swirling snow as if it were speaking to him. As if he were the one leading us here.

It's just a coincidence, I tell myself, about the name. Lots of these little upstate towns have names like that: Athens, Utica, Troy. Names that make you think of palm trees and marble, not crappy little crossroads with one 7-Eleven and a tattoo parlor.

I was relieved when Oren fell asleep. Not just because I was tired of his questions, but because I was afraid of what I might ask him—

How did you know where we were going? And how the hell did you get those tickets?

—and what I might do to get the answer out of him.

CHAPTER TWO

Mattie

I WAKE UP to the sound of a train whistle blowing. *Such a lonesome sound*, my mother used to say. I've never thought so. To me it always sounded like the siren call of faraway places. I used to lie in bed imagining where those tracks led. Out of these mountains, along the river, down to the city. Someday I'd answer that call and leave this place.

It takes me a moment to realize that it's my phone ringing that has woken me. And then another few moments to realize that I'm not that girl plotting her escape. I'm a woman on the wrong side of fifty, back where she started, with no way out but one.

The phone's plugged in on my nightstand. One of my young college interns showed me how to set it so only certain people can get through.

But what if someone who needs me has lost their phone and is calling from a phone booth? I asked.

She blinked at me like I was a relic of the last century and asked, *Do they even have those anymore?*

You ought to get out more, Doreen always tells me. Come down to the city with me.

It must be Doreen on the phone. She's the only one on the list of "favorites," aside from Sanctuary's number, that I'd programmed into the phone. When the college girl saw that puny list she hadn't been able to hide the pity in her eyes.

I reach for the phone, past pill bottles, paperbacks, and teacups—all my strategies to coax sleep—and manage to knock it over for my pains. I hear Dulcie stir, the vibration of the impact waking her. "It's okay, girl," I croon even though she can't hear me. "It's just Doreen riled up about something."

I swing my legs around onto the floor, the floorboards cold on my bare feet, and lean down to find the phone. The screen is lit up with Doreen's face (the college intern showed me how to do that too, taking a picture from Doreen's Facebook page of her protesting at the Women's March in January). Her mouth is open, midshout, which is kind of a joke because Doreen almost never shouts. She has the calmest voice of anyone I know. *She could talk anyone down*, the volunteers say. That's why she always takes the hotline for the midnight to six A.M. shift, those hours when the worst things happen. Men stumble home drunk from bars and women lock their guns away. Teenagers overdose and girls find themselves out on the road without a safe ride home—or take the wrong one. Which one of those terrible things has happened to make Doreen call me in the middle of the night?

I draw my finger across the screen to answer. “Hi, Doreen.”

“Oh thank God, Mattie,” she says in a breathless rush as if she’d been running. Doreen always sounds like that. She ran away from her abusive ex seventeen years ago, after he slammed her son’s head up against the dining room wall, and sometimes I think she’s still running. “I thought you’d let your phone die again.”

“No, I just knocked it over. What is it? A bad call?”

Sometimes Doreen will call me because she’s upset by a call. I don’t mind. No one should have to sit alone in the night with the things we have to hear.

“A domestic violence case. Left home,” she says, and my heart sinks. I let out a sigh and feel a pressure against my leg. Dulcie has picked up on my distress and come over to lean against me.

“With a child?” I ask, hoping the answer is no.

“A ten-year-old boy. She was in the Newburgh bus station. I offered the Kingston shelter but she said no. She said it had to be a place no one could find her.”

“Oh,” I say, reaching down to stroke Dulcie’s soft head.

“I checked availability at St. Alban’s and Sister Martine said they could take her,” Doreen says, “but someone needs to pick her up at the bus station and take her there.”

The sisters at St. Alban’s are one of our best links on the domestic violence underground railroad. Their convent is on the river, gated, and guarded by a Mother Superior who would face down a dozen angry husbands come searching for their wayward women. It’s a chilly place to wash up after

you've left your home in the night, though: the nuns in their long black habits, the bare cells, the crucifixes on the walls. I think of that ten-year-old boy, of what he'll feel like in that cold gray place—

"I could call Frank," she says. I hear the hesitation in her voice. Has the woman told her something that makes Doreen think that it might not be a good idea to call our local chief of police—or has she just sensed that there might be some reason to keep the law out of it for now? Or maybe she's just uneasy saying Frank's name to me. Doreen has a theory that Frank Barnes has a crush on me. I've tried to tell her how wrong she is about that, but Doreen doesn't buy it.

"I'll pick them up and take them," I say, already getting up and reaching for the light switch. The weight against my leg slides away as the light floods the room. Doreen is saying something to me, something about the woman that had troubled her or something that the woman had reminded her of, but I don't catch it. I'm staring at the dog bed at the foot of the bed. I'd moved it there a couple of weeks ago because I kept tripping over Dulcie on my way to the bathroom. She's lying there now. Fast asleep.

THERE'S NO TIME to dwell on the phantom pressure on my leg. Diabetic nerve pain? Menopausal hot flash? The early-onset Alzheimer's that felled my mother by my age? More important, the woman and the boy will be arriving at the bus station in an hour. It's only a fifteen-minute drive from the house, but that's assuming the car starts and there's no ice

to scrape off the windows and the roads are plowed. While I'm pulling on leggings and jeans, thermal top and sweater, I go to the window to look out. The view of my backyard is a gray-and-white blur of ominous lumps and dark encroaching forest. I can't tell if the snow in the yard is fresh or if the gray in the air is fog or falling snow. There's no back porch light to catch the falling flakes. *You should fix that*, I hear my mother's voice saying. *You're letting the place go to seed.*

You should mind your own business, I tell her right back. She's been dead for thirty-four years. When will her voice get out of my head?

Dulcie is up and shambling by my side by the time we reach the top of the stairs. One of these days we're going to topple ass-over-teakettle together down the steep slippery wooden steps and one of us will wind up in rehab. I'm not laying any bets on who'll survive the fall.

Downstairs, Dulcie heads straight for the back door to be let out as if it's morning. I don't like letting her out in the dark; the snow is deep out there and there are coyotes in the woods, but I don't have time to walk her, so unless I want to come home to a puddle, I'd better.

"Stay close," I tell her, as if she could still hear me, or would listen if she could. I step out with her and feel the sting of icy rain on my face. *Crap*. That won't make for easy driving.

I turn on the kettle and get out two thermoses from the drying rack. There's nothing but tea in my pantry and that won't do for mother or son. There's a box of donations in the

trunk of my car, though, that I think had some hot chocolate in it. I should get the car started anyway.

I go out the front door and nearly slide right off the porch. I'll have to salt that. Avoiding the broken third step on the way down is tricky (*one of these days that will be the end of you*, I hear my mother helpfully point out) and the ground below is white with newly fallen snow. There's a good six inches on the car, all of it covered with a glaze of ice. The scraper's in the trunk, which is also sealed by ice. I use my fist to break through the ice over the front door and dig through six inches of powder to find another coating of ice over the door handle. As if the weather gods had decided to layer their efforts to thwart me.

It's not always about you, Mattea, says my mother's reproving voice.

I go back inside, grab the kettle, and bring it back out to deice the car. It takes three trips to get the door open and another two for the trunk. When I turn the key in the ignition I hear the exasperated mutter of the fifteen-year-old engine. "I know," I say, looking up at the religious medal hanging from the rearview mirror, "but there's a boy and his mother waiting for us at a bus station."

Whether from divine intervention or because the engine's finally warm enough, the car starts. I turn the rear and front defrosters on high and thank Anita Esteban, the migrant farmworker who gave me the Virgin of Guadalupe medal fourteen years ago. When I told Anita that I didn't believe in God she'd pressed the medal into my hand and told me

that I should just say a prayer to whatever I *did* believe in. So I say my prayers to Anita Esteban, who left her drunk, no-good husband, raised three children on her own, went back to school, and earned a law degree. She's what I believe in.

I get the box of donations out of the trunk and bring it back to the kitchen, where I find enough hot cocoa to make up a thermos. I'll buy coffee at the Stewart's. There are Snickers bars in the box too, which I put in my pack. Of course the sisters will feed them, but their larder tends to the bland and healthy. That boy will need something sweet.

I'm closing up the box when I spot a bag of dog treats. I take out two Milk-Bones and turn toward Dulcie's bed . . . and see the open door. I feel my heart stutter: all this time I spent fussing with the car she's been outside in the cold. I open the screen door to find her standing withers deep in the snow, head down, steam shrouding her old grizzled head.

"Oh, girl!" I cry, grabbing her by the ruff and pulling her inside. "I'm so sorry."

Her hair is matted with ice. I wrap her in an old tattered beach towel, rubbing her dry, kneading balls of ice from her footpads. "Why didn't you bark?" I demand, when what I really mean is *How could I forget you?* I rub her until the ice has melted and she has stopped trembling. Then I use the same towel to wipe my own face.

Disgusting, I hear my mother say.

Yes, I agree, rubbing harder.

Then I look at my watch and see I've got ten minutes to make the fifteen-minute drive to the bus station. *That's what*

comes of flitting about in the middle of the night. My mother is out in full force tonight. Meddling in other people's business. Neglecting your own.

Having almost killed my old dog, I have nothing to say in my own defense. So I grab my pack and go, turning the thermostat up a notch to keep poor Dulcie warm while I'm gone.

IT'S MOSTLY DOWNHILL from my house to town, something I appreciated as a kid when I needed to get away fast and could coast on my Schwinn from my driveway to the Stewart's without turning a pedal. Frank Barnes and I used to race down the hill, daring each other on. When I was seven and he was nine, I took the curve at the bottom too fast and wound up in the Esopus. I still have the piece of flannel Frank tore from his shirt to stanch the blood and the scar on my forehead as a reminder of my folly.

Coasting down the ice-slick road tonight, my wipers barely keeping up with the sleet and icy rain, has me praying to Anita, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Ganesh, and whatever pagan wood spirits haunt the lonely pines that stand guard around the little mountain hamlet of Delphi. I roll the window down and take deep gulps of cold, pine-scented air. The shock of the temperature steadies my hands on the wheel for the last hairpin curve before town and through deserted Main Street, past the boarded-up windows of Moore's Mercantile, where my mother bought me my school clothes every fall, and the Queen Anne Victorian that used to house my father's law offices but is now home to Sanctuary. There's a

light on downstairs. Doreen's probably rearranging the food pantry and donation bins. *Every night like a goddamned house elf*, Muriel, the head of volunteer services, says. I'll check in with her after I drop off the mother and son at St. Alban's. Bring her a bear claw from Stewart's. Give her a chance to talk about the call.

The bus terminal shares a parking lot with Stewart's—the only place in town open. There's no bus there yet. Either it's late or I've missed it. But there's no boy and woman standing outside, waiting for me.

I park the car and turn it off, tempted to leave it running but afraid that someone will steal it. Some of the people who *do* get off the bus aren't the most savory—drug dealers running heroin from the city to the Catskills, gang members from Newburgh and Kingston, parolees from the prison over in Hudson.

You always think the worst of people, Doreen tells me.

It's what I used to say to my mother. *I'll stop when people stop confirming my worst suspicions of them*, she used to answer back.

Atefeh Sherazi is at the counter inside Stewart's. She smiles when she sees me come in. Doreen and I helped find her this job when she came to Sanctuary two years ago. She'd left her husband in New Jersey and taken the bus upstate with her two children. When I asked her if she was afraid her husband would follow her she said it was her brother she was worried about. He had brought her to America from Iran ten years ago by promising her an education and had

instead brokered an arranged marriage. When her husband started hitting her she went to her brother, but he said that it was her fault she wasn't able to please her husband. *He'll kill me if he finds me*, Atefeh told us.

She'd stayed at St. Alban's until her application for Section 8 housing was approved and Roy Carver gave her this job. Now she's taking classes part-time at Ulster Community College, working toward the education she came here for.

"What are you doing out on a night like this, Ms. Lane?" she asks. I've asked her to call me Mattie many times to no avail.

"Picking up someone on the bus from Kingston. Has it come in yet?"

Atefeh shakes her head. "The driver called in half an hour ago to say he'd be late. Black ice on 28. He had to pull over and wait for the sand trucks. Can I get you some coffee while you're waiting? There's a fresh pot."

"I'll get it, Atefeh." I hold up my thermos and nod at the open biology textbook on the counter. "You keep studying."

I walk to the coffee counter at the back of the store and fill the thermos. Then I pour myself a cup, adding sugar and milk, to keep myself awake. I pick up a quart of milk, orange juice, butter, and then eye the pastries on the warming rack. The mother and son will be hungry when they get here.

While I'm deciding between bear claws and cinnamon rolls the bell over the door jangles. I look over to see if the bus has come, but it's only two guys in heavy camo gear getting out of a jacked-up plow truck, fake foam antlers strapped to

the plow and a very real, very dead buck strapped to the roof. Their exhaust steam is billowing around my little Honda. I guess they're not worried about someone taking off with *their* ride. I turn back to my pastry selection and hear one of the hunters ask Atefeh for lottery tickets.

Like that's going to change your luck.

It's not that I have anything against hunters. I know enough families around here who rely on that meat, and the local hunting club always donates a venison roast for Sanctuary's community holiday supper. In fact one of the hunters, the older and heftier one, looks familiar. I think he's come into Sanctuary with donations a couple of times.

I glance back toward the men. The one I don't recognize, the younger, skinnier one, is staring at Atefeh's name tag.

"Atefeh? What kind of name is that?"

"It's Persian, sir. Here are your lottery tickets. Good luck to you and have a good night."

But the hunter isn't done. He turns to his friend. "Hey, Wayne, getta hold of this! Her name is Atefeh. Hey, why aren't you wearing your kebab doohickey?" He pokes his finger at Atefeh's head. I can see her flinch. Her shoulders have risen beneath her striped uniform as if she is bracing for a blow and fighting off the urge to flee at the same time.

Stand by the victim, I hear Doreen say. *Don't confront the attacker*. I move closer to the counter. "Is everything okay, Atefeh?" I ask, keeping my eyes on her.

Her eyes flick toward me and her shoulders lower a fraction. "Did you get everything you need, Ms. Lane?" she asks.

“Yes,” I say, edging past the hunter.

“Hey,” he says, “who said I was done?”

“Will there be anything else, sir?” Atefeh says with unflinching politeness.

“Yeah, I’ll take a . . .” His eyes rove around the counter and then settle with undisguised glee on a baseball cap with an American flag on it. “I’ll take one of those.”

“Of course, sir,” Atefeh says, removing the cap from the stand and ringing it up.

“No, wait . . .” He spins the stand and sticks his finger in at random. “I changed my mind. I’m not sure. Which one do you like?”

Atefeh stares at him wide-eyed. I move as close to her as I can with the counter between us so she knows I’m here for her. *Why aren’t we supposed to confront the attacker?* I’d asked Doreen. *Because it will escalate the conflict and ultimately make things worse for the victim,* she’d replied. Doreen’s always right about this stuff, but I feel like a pathetic wimp as Atefeh holds out a cap with a shaking hand.

“Oh, shoot,” he says, looking straight at Atefeh and not the patriotic slogan on the cap. “I left my reading glasses at home. Could you read it for me?”

I’ve seen men like this before, men who have to make someone else feel small so that they don’t. When he finally chooses one with a MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN slogan on it, and pays in crumpled bills and a handful of linty change, Atefeh puts the cap in a bag.

“Uh-uh,” Camo says, wagging his head with what can only

be described as a shit-eating grin on his face, “I bought it for you!” He looks back to see if his friend, who’s paging through a *Field & Stream* magazine, gets the joke. “It’s a present for Atefeh! Go ahead, put it on!”

Atefeh is looking down at the ugly polyester hat, her cheeks blotched red. I reach across the counter to touch her hand, but before I touch her she raises her eyes and meets the gaze of the hunter.

“Thank you very much for the present, sir, but I am not allowed to wear a hat at work. I will give it to my son, though, who loves American history and plays Little League.”

It’s a perfect response. Atefeh does not need me to fight her battles for her. Doreen was right—

“What’s your son’s name? Jihad?”

Afterward I will tell Doreen that I knew the coffee had cooled enough to make it perfectly safe, but the truth is that when I tip the cup toward Camo’s groin I hope it will scald the grin right off his face and leave him sterile.

“Leave her alone!” I shout, as he howls at the pain. “And get the fuck out of here.”

He glares at me, one fist curled protectively over his groin, and one cocked at his side. I put the pastry bag on the counter, slide my hand into my coat pocket, and curl my hand around my car keys, sliding the keys, teeth out, between my fingers.

I’m about to take my hand out of the pocket when the other hunter grabs his friend by the shoulders. “I think it’s

time we go, Jason. That stag on the roof isn't getting any sweeter while we stand here jawing."

"That bitch threw her coffee at me!" Jason complains, struggling—but not very hard—to get out of his friend's grasp.

"Yeah, well, that's what you get for being an asshole." The other hunter looks at me. There's a hint of a smile—and recognition—in his eyes; I've definitely met him before. "C'mon before the nice ladies call the cops on you."

"Well shit," Jason says, "I was just trying to be nice. Let's get out of here." He shrugs his friend's hands off and makes an exaggerated show of straightening his camo jacket as if it were an expensive suit, then manages to knock over the magazine rack on his way out.

His friend—Wayne—stops to pick up the magazines, but I hiss under my breath, "Just get your friend out of here."

He looks up at me. "He's not my friend; he's my dumbass brother-in-law." Then he looks back at Atefeh. "I apologize for my family, ma'am. Have a good night."

As soon as the door closes I turn back to Atefeh. She's shaking like a leaf. I move around the counter and put my arms around her. *Ask the victim if she's okay*, Doreen told us.

What a stupid question, I'd told her, *as if anyone is okay after being bullied and abused!*

"What an asshole!" I say now. I let loose a blue streak of curses that has Atefeh blushing through her tears. Then I help her clean up the coffee I "spilled."

“I’m so clumsy,” I say, making Atefeh laugh.

By the time Atefeh’s poured me a new cup of coffee the bus is pulling into the parking lot. “I’d better go,” I say. “These two might not want anyone to see them.”

“Let me know if I can help,” Atefeh says, squeezing my hand. “And . . . thank you.”

“Just don’t tell Doreen,” I say, hugging her. “I didn’t exactly follow protocol.”

It’s only when I get out into the parking lot that I start to shake. It’s not throwing the coffee that scares me—although if it had been hot I could have scarred Jason for life. It’s the keys. I’d been ready to punch Jason in the face with a fistful of keys. I would have happily gouged his eyes out.