



## PROLOGUE

**R**ACHAEL HEMINGWAY WATCHED THE CLOUDS GATHER overhead as she raced along the gravel path leading her away from her house. It was quiet, too quiet; not even the birds were chattering in the trees above her. If she hadn't known better, she would have guessed it was winter instead of a mild spring day.

She knew what was coming.

Her eldest daughter, Hadley, was safe at her boyfriend's house; at least, that's what Rachael hoped. She hadn't spoken to her since their argument earlier that afternoon. Moments ago, she sent her two younger daughters, Pfeiffer and Martha, to the cellar with the old transistor radio, forbidding them to leave. It was Mary, Rachael's youngest, she'd set off to find.

When Mary first turned up missing, Rachael hadn't thought much of it. Mary often disappeared into the woods beyond their farm. Their land bordered part of the Missouri National Forest, and Mary, quiet, dark, and thoughtful, loved the solitude of the thickest parts. At twelve years old, Rachael's youngest daughter was so unlike her sisters. She was a force in her own quiet way, it was true, not unlike the storm that was surely coming to these

Ozarks Hills, and that was what Rachael loved about her most. She was so like her father, Matthew Hemingway. He'd been different, too, not from here, probably that was what attracted Rachael to him in the first place.

It wasn't until Mary hadn't come home, not even for dinner, that Rachael began to worry. It wasn't until she was frying chicken in her mother's cast-iron skillet that she realized Mary must've overheard the argument between herself and Hadley. She'd likely been listening through the vent in her room, as it carried the sounds and smells of the kitchen right up to the second floor. Rachael couldn't be sure exactly what Mary heard, but she knew now that it was probably enough. By the time she pulled on her boots and tied back her hair, the clouds were rolling in, thick and heavy, bringing with them the emotions she'd been carrying around with her all day long, and she knew it was a bad sign.

The wind picked up, and Rachael wished she'd brought along a jacket. She was sure Mary had neglected to bring one with her when she left the house that afternoon. Mary never thought of things like that—necessities such as coats or mittens or even shoes, for that matter.

When the rain started, Rachael picked up her pace, running through the forest, calling out for her daughter. Her voice was lost in the wind, and the branches scratched at her bare legs as she ran, but she didn't let up, not even for an instant. If she could get to the white oak tree at the center, the oldest and tallest of all the trees in the forest, she knew she would find Mary.

Mary asked her once how old she thought the tree might be, if she had to guess. Rachael had stared up at it, as it was well over one hundred feet tall, and not known the answer.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But it's very old."

"Ten years?" Mary asked. She was scarcely six at the time, and she must've thought ten years old sounded quite grown up.

"Much older than that," Rachael replied, trying not to laugh. It hurt the little girl's feelings when her mother laughed at her questions.

"Fifty years?"

"Older."

"A hundred years?" Mary asked, her eyes wide. "Mama, do you think this tree could be a hundred years old?"

Rachael nodded. "I think this tree may be a hundred years old or more," she said. "It's been here a very long time."

"Isn't there a way to tell how old the tree is?" Mary asked.

"Not without cutting it down," Rachael said. "The only way to tell how old a tree really is, is to cut it down and count the rings inside."

"Rings?"

"Around the bark." Rachael made a circling motion with her hand.

"But that will kill the tree," Mary stated.

"It would," Rachael agreed.

"Maybe I could just ask the tree," Mary said, tilting her head to one side the way she often did when she was thinking hard about something.

"You could try."

Mary let go of her mother's hand and stepped closer to the tree. She touched her fingertips to the jagged bark and closed her eyes, whispering something that Rachael couldn't quite hear. After a few moments, she fell back into place next to her mother.

“She says she’s awfully old,” Mary said. Her dark eyes were two shadows. They could see, Rachael knew, what others could not. “She’s so old that we wouldn’t believe her even if she told us.”

Rachael laughed at that. She couldn’t help it. She had to laugh to keep from being unnerved. Mary might’ve been a child, but Rachael never had any doubt that the tree was speaking to her that day, a spring day in March much like this one, when she’d been just six years old.

Now all Rachael could think about was getting to that tree. “Mary!” she shouted, the rain pelting against her face. “Mary!”

That was when Rachael saw her, right where she knew she’d be, her skinny arms wrapped around the tree, hanging on for dear life. Her hair was clinging to her face, and her jeans were ripped and bloodied at the knee.

“Mama!” Mary called when she saw her, not daring to let go. “Mama, I’m here!”

“Mary,” Rachael gasped, grabbing on to her. “Mary, we have to go. Now!”

“No!” Mary tightened her grip. “No, I won’t leave her.”

“The tree will be fine. Its roots are deep,” Rachael said. “It’s been through storms worse than this.”

“You’re a liar!” Mary screamed.

“I’m not lying,” Rachael replied, her voice hoarse from screaming through the wind and the rain and the forest. “The tree will survive.”

“You lied about everything,” Mary said. “I’m not going.”

Rachael closed her eyes to steady herself. There wasn’t time for this argument. Not now. “We have to go,” she said again.

“No!”

“Please!” Rachael grabbed at her daughter’s arms, tearing them away from the tree. “We won’t make it back if we don’t hurry.”

Mary dug her fingernails farther into the bark, but it was no use. Her mother tore her away and dragged her from the tree while she shrieked, “Please don’t make me leave! Please!”

Rachael half dragged, half carried her daughter through the thicket, the storm upon them now, unrelenting. They were too far out into the country for the sirens, but Rachael knew they must be sounding in town, and she said a silent prayer that her other three daughters were safe.

When they got to the gravel road just beyond the house, they continued to run, Mary no longer having to be dragged, too terrified of the storm to protest. The rain came down in slanted sheets, and the sky was lit up with shades of green. Rachael saw the neighbor’s old rusted cattle gate, sliding along the road beside them as if it were floating down a river of dust. She knew the twister was behind them, moving far faster than they could ever run, and she knew there wasn’t time to make it to the cellar before it was upon them.

“Mama!” Mary stopped dead in her tracks and turned around to face what was coming. “Mama, it’s here!”

Rachael was in awe. In her fifty years on this earth, she’d never seen anything quite like it. The sheer magnitude of the storm overwhelmed her, and she was stuck in place for an entire lifetime before she felt Mary pulling on the sleeve of her rain-soaked T-shirt.

“Come on,” Rachael said, hurrying Mary down into the ditch. “Get down.”

“Mama.”

Rachael got down on top of her, covering as much of her

daughter's fragile body as she could, wrapping her arms around her. "I love you," she managed to say before the wind knocked the breath out of her and the noise of the moment was there, on top of them, all the while, the great white oak tree, by now the very oldest in the entire forest, could do nothing but stay rooted into the ground as the rest of the world was carried off without it.



## CHAPTER I

# *Pfeiffer*

**P**FEIFFER HEMINGWAY IGNORED THE DOORBELL. INSTEAD, she rolled over on the couch to face the back cushions. No good could come of answering the doorbell. Not now. There had been a time, in the not-so-distant past, when the sound of the doorbell meant delight. When there was someone standing outside her expansive Chelsea apartment, it meant there had been a package delivered or it was Benny with the takeaway pad thai or her friends were there to pick her up for a night out.

Now when the doorbell rang, it just meant there was someone standing there waiting to take something away from her. This time, she assumed that there were people here for her couch. After all, it was the only piece of furniture left. The only thing she owned that had not been repossessed in recent months. The last time the furniture men had tried to take it, she'd sat there in her nightgown with a can of Mace, bits of pad thai stuck to the corners of her mouth as she ordered them to *try it*.

Still, the doorbell persisted.

“Go away,” she muttered, pulling the blanket up over her head.

“Pfeiffer Francine Hemingway, you open this door right now!”

Pfeiffer sat up. She knew that voice. “Seth?”

“Open the door, Pi.”

Pfeiffer flung off the blanket and stalked to the door. “What do you want, Seth?”

“To make sure the smell emanating from your apartment isn’t your decomposing body,” he replied. “Let me in.”

“Fine,” Pfeiffer said, unlocking the dead bolt and pulling open the door. “Come in.”

“Jesus Christ,” Seth whispered when he stepped inside. “What in the hell happened in here?”

“Unemployment.”

“Pi, that was nine months ago.”

“Two hundred and seventy-two days ago,” Pfeiffer replied. “Apparently, that’s how long it takes to drain a savings account.”

“Have you even applied for another job?” Seth asked, leading her over to the couch and sitting her down. “Surely you’ve got a lead or two.”

“If I had any leads, don’t you think I’d be out pursuing them instead of hiding in a ratty nightgown on my couch?” Pfeiffer asked. “Nobody will have me. No one.”

Seth sighed, pushing his glasses farther up his nose. “Well, you can hardly blame them.”

In fact, Pfeiffer did blame *them*. She did blame Henry Brothers Publishers for firing her after almost a decade as an editor, after almost a decade of finding bestsellers for them, and after a decade of making them money. Sure, she’d made a mistake. In



fact, she'd made the worst mistake an editor could make: she'd passed on a future bestseller.

She had been, of course, the one to send the agent of the aforementioned author an email, tartly telling her that her client ought not to quit her day job. That had been just a few weeks before editors at five other houses got ahold of the book and began a frenzied bidding war, causing the author's name and title of the book, *Aurora's Artifacts*, to be the most sought-after prospect since the Harry Potter series—not the first Harry Potter book. No, not that one. An editor had once told J. K. Rowling not to quit her day job, too.

It didn't take long for the Henry Brothers to figure out Pfeiffer's grievous error, and matters only got worse after that damned email made its way around the publishing world. In less than twenty-four hours, she'd become a pariah. No one, not even her oldest friends—save Seth—would return a text message. The next day, Pfeiffer Hemingway, senior editor, had been told not to let the door hit her where the good lord split her, and just like that—she was out of a job. Nobody, not even the lowest of the lowest publishing houses, would touch her.

"You're taking a risk being here," Pfeiffer said, eyeing the empty room wildly. "Did anybody see you?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "It's not like there's a hit out on you," he said.

"Might as well be," she grumbled. "Nobody will hire me."

"Give it time."

Pfeiffer opened her arms wide. "Does it look like I have any more time? The only reason I still have this couch is because I look half-rabid, and the men from the furniture store were afraid to get too close for fear I'd bite."

"I have it on good authority that you *do*," Seth replied with a wink.

"Shut up," Pfeiffer replied miserably, a smile creeping onto her lips despite herself. "I'm serious. What am I going to do? I'm out of money. Out of friends. Out of a job. I'm screwed, Seth, and you know it."

"Maybe it's time to consider another line of work," Seth said in earnest.

Pfeiffer sighed, pushing her wild, strawberry curls out of her face. "I don't know how to do anything else," she said.

"When you first showed up here in the city, you said you wanted to be a writer," Seth replied.

"But I ended up editing other writers instead," Pfeiffer replied. "I'm better at that. At least I used to be."

Seth patted her knee. "Wow, that's hairy," he muttered to himself before saying, "What about going home?"

"Home?" Pfeiffer blinked up at him. "Home? I *am* home. Well, at least this is home until the end of the month."

"You know what I mean, Pi."

Pfeiffer sat back, exposing both of her hairy knees. If this had been nine months ago, she would rather have died than let Seth or anyone else know she even *had* hair on her knees, let alone any other part of her body. But today was today and not nine months ago, and indeed, she did know what Seth meant. He meant that maybe she should go back to her childhood home.

To Missouri.

To the Missouri Ozarks.

To Cold River.

Pfeiffer winced at the thought. "I haven't been home in almost two decades," she said at last. "I can't go home."

Seth looked at her, very serious for what seemed like a long time. “Pi, honey, how long have you had your cell turned off?”

Pfeiffer shrugged. “A couple of weeks, probably.”

“Well, you got a call at the office today—several calls, in fact—from your sister Hadley. I finally had to promise that I’d deliver a message to you personally.”

Pfeiffer sat up a little straighter. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t really know how to tell you this,” Seth said, scratching at his perfectly coiffed head. “But your aunt Beatrice is dead.”

“What?”

“Dead,” Seth repeated. “Your sister said it happened yesterday.”

Pfeiffer sighed. Hadley. She always knew everything first. *Maybe*, Pfeiffer thought, not for the first time, *it’s because she was born first*. It had long been a suspicion of Pfeiffer, the second sister, that the oldest sister knew everything first, and it was her responsibility as the oldest sister to hold that information over her younger sisters for all eternity. It had been nearly a year since she’d talked to Hadley, and nearly five years since she’d seen her, despite the fact that Hadley lived in Washington, D.C., which really wasn’t that far away from New York. Pfeiffer didn’t like Hadley’s husband, and she didn’t like the person Hadley became around her husband, and so instead of wasting her time arguing about it, she found it best to keep her mouth closed and stay in New York. Their relationship was tenuous on a good day, and today was not a good day.

“She said she would be on the first flight home tomorrow morning,” Seth said. “Red-eye from D.C.”

“Did you tell her I don’t work at Henry Brothers anymore?” Pfeiffer asked. She couldn’t stand the thought of Hadley or Martha learning that she’d been fired.

"Of course not," he said. "You know I wouldn't do that to you."

Pfeiffer eyed her friend and former colleague. He looked uncomfortable, like he would do anything to get out of her barren apartment and away from her shabby-without-the-chic appearance. She bit at the corner of her lip and then said, "Seth, do you still have that old car? The one you drove here from Nebraska?"

Seth's eyes darted around the room, as if he thought at any moment spies from Henry Brothers might pop up out of nowhere. "You promised never to speak of . . . Nebraska."

"Oh, come on," Pfeiffer said, standing up to stretch. "Everybody knows you weren't *born* inside the Kate Spade on Fifth."

"Well, they at least have the decency not to *say that*," Seth said with a sniff. "What do you want with my car?"

"I need to borrow it," Pfeiffer replied. "I can't afford a plane ticket, and I can't let Hadley pay for a plane ticket, because then she'll know I lost my job."

"And you think showing up in a 1994 LeBaron won't out you?"

"I'll figure something out between here and Cold River," Pfeiffer said.

"I know," Seth replied, reaching out to touch her leg again and then thinking better of it. "You always do."

"Can I borrow your phone?" Pfeiffer asked. "I should probably call Hadley."

Seth stood up and worked his hand down into the pocket of his jeans. "Here."

Pfeiffer eyed her friend. "Could your jeans be any tighter?"

"If I keep eating the scones at work, the answer is yes," Seth replied.

Pfeiffer rolled her eyes and shuffled back into her empty bedroom to call her sister. She pressed the numbers into the phone and waited. Hadley answered on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Hadley?” Pfeiffer asked, even though she knew who it was. “It’s Pfeiffer.”

“I’ve been trying to get ahold of you,” Hadley said. “What is going on? You aren’t at work. Your phone is out of service.”

“My phone isn’t out of service.”

“That’s the message I get when I call.”

Pfeiffer sighed. “I’m having some trouble with it,” she said. “I’ll have it fixed soon.”

“And why haven’t you been at work?” Hadley continued. “I’ve never known you to take more than half a day off in all the years you’ve been at Henry Brothers.”

“I had some time coming,” Pfeiffer said simply. “I took it.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I didn’t call you so we could play twenty questions,” Pfeiffer replied.

“That sounds more like you,” Hadley replied. “I guess you got the message about Aunt Beatrice?”

“Just now.”

“We need to go home.”

“Why?” Pfeiffer wanted to know.

“Because that’s what you do when someone dies,” Hadley replied. “You go home and go to the funeral. I mean, really, Pfeiffer. I thought you of all people would want to go to the funeral. She loved you best, after all.”

And there it was. What Pfeiffer had been waiting for. “She didn’t love me best,” she said. “I just understood her.”

“I didn’t?”

“Look, Hadley,” Pfeiffer said. “Can we just not fight about this?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “So are you coming or not?”

“Yes,” Pfeiffer replied. “I’ll be there.”

“Good,” Hadley said. “Oh . . . and Pi?”

“What?”

“I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I’m going to find out.”



## CHAPTER 2

# *Martha*

**M**ARTHA COULD SMELL THE COW SHIT EVEN BEFORE SHE crossed over the Ozark County line. She hated cows. They were big, dumb animals with mournful eyes and jittery dispositions. She'd been kicked by one once, in June, just after her eighth birthday, and broken her arm. Her mother said she'd been lucky it was her arm and not her head, but her sister Pfeiffer had muttered that Martha's head was the hardest part of her body, anyway, so why not?

Martha gripped the steering wheel as her Tesla Model S careened around the curves of the Missouri foothills. She'd written her first songs about this place. She'd closed her eyes and imagined it here a million times after she first moved to Nashville, longing to sit down on the front porch of her mother's house in Cold River and listen to the crickets and mosquitoes join in with the hum of her guitar.

But that had been nearly sixteen years ago, before she'd become

a runaway, before the cockroach-infested apartment in an ugly part of Nashville, before she'd gotten her first record deal, and certainly before she'd met, married, and been divorced by Travis Tucker. And, of course, before she'd spent the last six months in rehab.

Martha always thought her return home would be triumphant. She thought she'd arrive on a giant tour bus with Travis in tow, and she'd step out, glamorous and beautiful. She'd flip her golden hair over one shoulder, carrying her golden albums, and be presented with a key to the city.

Instead, she was driving back from Nashville by herself. Still glamorous and golden, yes, but the shine slightly dulled with age and cigarette smoke. She hadn't had a number one album in nearly three years, and it appeared she never would now that her husband and record label had dumped her all within the last year. Yep, the Nashville press had really had a field day with all of that. Her agent, the only person she'd told the doctors at the facility she would talk to, told her all about it. Later that month, she was served with the divorce papers and then a certified letter from her label. It's a good thing, she thought, that she was already in rehab, because all of that bad news certainly would have driven her to commit herself.

Martha rounded the corner just on the edge of town and rolled up her window so that nobody would be able to see her through the tint. The house where she'd grown up was on the other side of Cold River—a hundred and forty acres and a farmhouse plopped down somewhere in the middle. She wondered idly if her sisters, Hadley and Pfeiffer, were already there. She'd spoken to Hadley on the phone briefly, but the only words that stuck were "Aunt Bea" and "dead." She'd been half-asleep when



her sister called, and now she reached back into the far recesses of her brain to recall their conversation.

It was no use. Martha's memory was rotten. It had not been a kick from a cow but a fall from an apple tree that had seen to that. The whiskey in the years following didn't help matters much. Her last fight with Travis, the one just before he'd walked out, had been about whiskey. Well, it was more about her *drinking* the whiskey than anything else, but hell, what else was she supposed to do on a tour bus *alone*? Travis sure hadn't been spending any time with her.

Martha saw a man on a horse trotting along on the side of the road, a typical sight in Cold River. No, this was certainly *not* the first place she thought she'd visit after rehab. She'd been envisioning a beach with white sand, her white bikini, and . . . well, something nonalcoholic that tasted fruity. Instead, she slowed down to move around the ambling horse and then sped up once again as the man atop the horse tipped his hat to her in her rearview mirror.



## CHAPTER 3

# *Martha*

TEN MINUTES LATER AND MARTHA WAS OUTSIDE OF COLD River, eyes squinted to find the county road where she turned to get to the farm. It'd been so long, she could scarcely remember if it was on the right or left side of the road. The number, however, she remembered—County Road 1957. It was the year her mother had been born, and she and her sisters always joked that it meant her mother was as old as the dirt on the road they traveled.

As she made the turn, on the right, as fate would have it, she noticed a car sitting in the middle of the road, seemingly abandoned. The car was placed so that Martha couldn't get around it from either side without driving into the ditch.

Annoyed, she threw the Tesla into park behind the car and got out. Upon closer inspection, she realized that there was smoke coming from the hood. Farther down the road, she saw the outline of a person moving away from where she stood and toward the farm.

“Hey!” she shouted, running after them. “Hey! Your damn car is in the middle of the road!”

The person didn’t stop, didn’t turn around.

“Hey!” Martha continued her stride, feeling the rocks beneath her flip-flops digging into the soles of her feet. “Stop!”

Finally, the person in front of her halted and turned on her heel to face Martha. The person, a woman, had her hands on her hips; one long, lean leg jutted out in front of her, as if she were ready for a confrontation.

Martha blinked and then blinked again. The person standing half a football field away from her was one of her sisters. She ventured closer. “Pfeiffer?”

“Martha?”

Martha trotted up to her sister, arms flung out to embrace her before she remembered a millisecond too late that her sister didn’t, under any circumstances, hug. Her fingertips brushed at the sleeves of Pfeiffer’s red cardigan instead. “Is that *your* POS broke down in the middle of the road?”

Pfeiffer straightened herself and brushed a speck of red clay mud off her pencil skirt. “No,” she replied, her tone haughty. “It’s my assistant’s. You know I don’t have a car.”

“Or a valid license,” Martha muttered.

Pfeiffer shot her sister a look. “I *borrowed* it.”

Martha craned her neck around to look back at the car. It wasn’t Pfeiffer’s style at all and had clearly seen better days. “Why didn’t you just fly in?” she asked. “You could have rented a car at the airport.”

Pfeiffer shrugged, rolling her eyes at the same time, an indication that she was bored with the conversation. “I thought it might be fun to drive, you know, clear my head.”

“You?” Martha asked. “Have fun?”

“Anyway, I don’t have cell service out here,” Pfeiffer replied, ignoring her sister. “I thought maybe the house might still have a landline, and I could call to have that monstrosity towed.”

Martha followed along after her. “Do you have a key?”

“I figured I could just use the one underneath the mat.”

“Pfeiffer,” Martha said, catching up to her, “what makes you think that mat will even still be there?”

“It’ll be there.”

Martha wasn’t so sure, but she wasn’t about to argue. Of the three sisters, Pfeiffer was most often right, and she liked to remind Martha and Hadley of this on a regular basis. As the younger sister, Martha didn’t mind it so much. That was just what older siblings did, she assumed. But she did wonder sometimes if Hadley minded, since she was the oldest. Hadley was mild-mannered, for sure, but something about Pfeiffer always brought out the worst in her.

“Do you think the old place will look the same as always?” Martha asked.

Pfeiffer stopped in her tracks and stared over at Martha. “*You* certainly don’t look the same.”

It wasn’t a compliment, Martha could tell. It was, however, true. “I look better,” she said indignantly. She hadn’t seen her sister in five years, not since the last time she’d flown to D.C. to see Hadley. The two of them practically had to force Pfeiffer to visit, playing on her duty to them as a sister. But she and Pfeiffer still talked on the phone every few months, and although their conversations were superficial, at least it was a conversation. Martha was used to being the go-between when it came to her sisters, but she wished more than anything that she didn’t

have to be. She always thought that when they grew up, they'd be best friends. But when Hadley married Mark, all of that changed. Mark's job as a congressman kept Hadley busy all the time, and Pfeiffer's dislike for him kept her from Hadley.

Pfeiffer, unaware that Martha was deep in thought, pointed down at her sister's feet. "Couldn't you afford a better pair of footwear than flip-flops?"

Now it was Martha's turn to roll her eyes. It was true, she was still wearing flip-flops, but they were more expensive flip-flops than the dollar-store ones she'd worn as a child. They *were* Marc Jacobs, after all. Her hair was blond now, and it suited her. Her blue eyes were blue, thanks to the help of colored contacts, and her V-neck tank top accentuated her cleavage, the very first thing she'd bought and paid for when her debut album went gold. "I doubt anybody would recognize me now," she said. "Flip-flops or not."

"Everybody will notice you," Pfeiffer retorted. "You're famous, remember?"

"I am," Martha said, remembering herself.

"How was rehab?"

"Sober." Martha sighed.

"That's a good thing, right?"

"I don't know." Martha gave her sister a sly smile. "Do *you* like to be sober?"

Ahead of them, the James farm loomed. The house, the second to be built by the James family after the first one burned in 1900, was a turn-of-the-century farmhouse. It was nothing special as far as houses go, as the ancestral Jameses had been Quakers and not much interested in making a statement of wealth or frivolity. It was a standard two stories, and with the exception

of the time the sisters' mother got the notion to paint it a pale pink like the houses she'd seen on the beaches of Florida, it was nearly always painted white. But it had a sprawling and inviting front porch, which had always been Martha's favorite part of the house.

Now, as they neared the property, Martha saw that the front porch appeared to be sagging, just like the rest of the place. It was as if someone had gone and sucked all of the air, all of the life, out of it.

"I can't believe Aunt Bea let it go like this," Pfeiffer said. She put one foot atop the crumbling, concrete steps. "She was so particular."

"I know," Martha muttered.

Their aunt, unlike their mother, hadn't liked a messy home. She started cleaning when the sun came up, and she didn't stop until the sun went down. She even set out a list of chores every morning with each of the sisters' names on it. They couldn't leave the house or do anything else until the chores were done. Martha hadn't minded so much, enjoying a clean house, and neither had Hadley. But Pfeiffer hated it. She'd sit up in her room for hours and hours, refusing to do anything their aunt wanted them to do. It was a battle of wills every day, and Pfeiffer never won. Still, Pfeiffer and their aunt shared a special bond that the other sisters didn't. It was an understanding, Martha guessed, because they were just so much alike.

"Found the key," Pfeiffer huffed, straightening herself up from bending down to search under the mat. "Same mat and everything."

Martha looked down at the faded mat lying at the foot of the door. Once upon a time it had read "Welcome" in big, bold

letters. Now the lettering was gone, and what was left was a lumpy, beige mass surrounded by a thick layer of dirt. “Great,” she replied halfheartedly.

Pfeiffer wiped the key off on her skirt and stuck the key in the lock. “Hey,” she said. “It’s open.”

“What?” Martha stepped closer to her sister. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s unlocked, dummy,” Pfeiffer said, impatient. “You think Hadley is already here?”

“I didn’t see another car,” Martha replied.

“Me either.”

“Only one way to find out,” Martha said, stepping past her sister and pushing the front door open.

“What if there’s somebody in there?” Pfeiffer asked, hanging back.

“We’re not in New York City,” Martha replied. “The worst that could happen is that a couple of raccoons got inside and are going through the trash cans.”

“I have no interest in being attacked by a raccoon,” Pfeiffer said, her slender hands, their mother’s hands, on her hips.

“Remember Renaldo?” Martha asked, stepping through the threshold and into the house. “How he used to wait outside by the door in the morning for Mom to feed him?”

Renaldo had been the family’s pet raccoon. He’d been injured as a baby, run over on the highway and left for dead. The girls’ mother stopped when she saw a flash of movement as she drove by, and rescued him from his fate. They’d nursed him back to health, and when he got old enough, their mother released him into the forest, and their youngest sister, Mary, had cried all night. The next morning, however, Renaldo was back, clearly

not happy about having been turned out. From then on, they took turns feeding him in the morning. After their mother died, the girls never saw him again.

“I wonder what happened to poor, old Renaldo,” Pfeiffer mused. “I still think about him sometimes, you know.”

Martha was touched by this display of humanity from her sister. It didn’t often make an appearance. They’d lost their father, mother, and sister, all before they’d become adults. Pfeiffer’s way of dealing with it was to close herself off from everyone, even more than she already had. It was a wonder she hadn’t stopped speaking completely like their aunt.

“I’m sure he ran off with the woman of his dreams,” Martha replied. “I bet they had lots of tiny raccoon babies.”

“Kits,” Pfeiffer reminded her.

“Yes,” Martha said. “Kits.”

The two women took in their surroundings. The house, if one could still call it that, was a shambles. Everything, including the peeling wallpaper, was covered in what looked like an impenetrable layer of dust. There were sheets covering all of the furniture in the living room, but even they were dirty and moth-eaten. The floors, original hardwood and once their aunt Bea’s pride and joy, looked as if they might splinter with every step.

“Oh my God,” Pfeiffer whispered. “What *happened* here?”

“Hadley did say that Aunt Bea was pretty bad there at the end,” Martha replied. “Of course, I doubt she would let anyone know it. We sure didn’t know it.”

“I didn’t even know she was sick until I got the call that she’d died,” Pfeiffer said, walking around the living room, her face scrunched up as if she were about to cry. “Did you?”



Martha shook her head. “No.”

Above them, there was a creak in the floorboards that made both of them jump. Pfeiffer put her finger to her lips and pointed toward the stairs. “Do you think someone is up there?” she whispered.

“Who?” Martha mouthed.

Pfeiffer shrugged and motioned for her sister to follow her.

The noises coming from the upstairs sounded like furniture or something equally heavy was being dragged across the floor—obviously a feat too large for a group of raccoons, even rabid ones. *A gaze*, Martha reminded herself as she crept up the stairs. *A group of raccoons is called a gaze*. She wasn’t sure why she was thinking about that right then, but she knew that if she and her sister survived the next few minutes, and she happened to use the wrong term in the future, Pfeiffer would be more than happy to correct her.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t see that Pfeiffer had stopped in front of her, and Martha charged right smack into her, causing her sister to fly forward, face first into the closed door of their childhood bedroom.

“Ow!” Pfeiffer exclaimed. “Ow, shit!”

There was blood on Pfeiffer’s hands when she finally pulled them away from her face, just in time for the door to swing open and for a face to be staring back at them, the lines in his face cavernous, his eyes filled with equal parts worry and confusion. “Pfeiffer? Martha?” the man asked, cocking his head to one side. Then, noticing the blood pouring out of Pfeiffer’s nose, he said, “Lord have mercy, child! What have you done?”

“We thought you were a robber,” Pfeiffer said through gritted teeth.

“Or a raccoon,” Martha replied, shrugging when her sister shot her a look.

“We best get you downstairs,” the man said, taking Pfeiffer by the arm and leading her down the steps. “There are some clean washrags in the kitchen.”

Rufus Crowley was the caretaker at the James farm. He’d been there ever since forever, and there weren’t many memories on the farm that didn’t involve him. He’d been old back then, and Pfeiffer and Martha used to take bets on how old he was and in what year he would die, much to the vexation of their eldest sister, Hadley.

“You shouldn’t talk like that,” Hadley would say. “Old Crow hears everything, you know. You wouldn’t want for him to put a curse on you.”

The rumor around Cold River was that Rufus Crowley’s mother had been a witch, just as her mother before her, and her mother before her. The Crowleys lived on the farthest outskirts of town, past even the clannish and unpredictable Cranwell family, in a clapboard shack at the river’s edge. Townsfolk often went to Mother Crowley for advice and healing medicine, and for advice on any troubles they were too embarrassed to discuss in the company of each other. Of course, these were just stories now, as she’d passed on years and years before any of the girls were born, leaving her only son, a man everyone called “Old Crow,” even when he’d been a young man.

Martha, however, suspected that Old Crow had never, ever been young. Their mother hadn’t liked that nickname, and made them call him “Mr. Crowley” in her presence, although they’d all called him “Old Crow” behind her back. Good-natured and kind, Old Crow never seemed to mind.

“Let me have a look at it,” Crowley said, easing Pfeiffer down into one of the cracking kitchen chairs.

“Is her nose broken?” Martha asked.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Pfeiffer asked, a single trail of blood sliding down from her nose and into her mouth so that her teeth showed the faintest hint of red when she spoke.

“I would not,” Martha protested, although she was trying desperately to hide a smile. She didn’t relish that her sister was hurt, not at all, but she had to admit that seeing Pfeiffer even the slightest bit undone did give her more pleasure than it should have.

“Oh, it’s not as bad as all that,” Crowley replied, dabbing at Pfeiffer’s nose with a wet rag. “It ain’t broken. Just a bit busted.”

“What’s the difference?” Pfeiffer asked, her eyes closed in an attempt to ward off the throbbing she was beginning to feel now that the shock was wearing off.

“Won’t be needin’ no doctor,” Crowley replied. “Though you may have a couple of shiners in the mornin’ below them eyes.”

“Great.”

“I really am sorry,” Martha offered, reaching out to touch her sister on the arm, but she jerked away from her grasp. “I didn’t mean to. I swear.”

“Of course ya didn’t,” Crowley agreed. “What are you two doing here, anyway? Nobody told me you was comin’.”

“Alice Beacon called Hadley,” Martha replied. “She said the family night was tonight, and I guess the funeral is tomorrow morning.”

Crowley nodded, handing over the cloth to Pfeiffer. “Mrs. Beacon and the ladies of the auxiliary planned the whole thing,” he said. “I reckon your aunt saw fit to leave it to them in the end.”

For a moment, Martha saw a flicker of hurt cross through

Crowley's eyes. He and Aunt Bea had been friends since they were children. "Were you around?" she asked. "To help her?"

Again, Crowley nodded. "I were," he said. "She had trouble getting around the last few years."

"She never told us," Pfeiffer replied.

"She wouldn't have wanted to bother ya none," Crow said. "You know how she was."

Both Pfeiffer and Martha knew how their aunt was. Technically, Aunt Bea was their great-aunt, the younger sister of their grandfather. They hadn't known her as children. Their mother told them that she'd run away from home at seventeen and never come back. She told them something traumatizing must've happened to her, because she stopped speaking, to anyone, after she left. In fact, according to their mother, their aunt never spoke to another living soul again. The sisters never believed her, but when she arrived on their doorstep the day after their mother and sister were killed in the storm, they found out she'd been right. Bea never said a word to them, but she was always able to make her point clear. The social worker referred to it as "selective mutism," as she'd been able to speak at one point in her life and for some reason made the choice to be silent. They were told that it was severe anxiety that kept their aunt from talking, but Martha always thought it might be something else. Despite this, she was their only surviving family, and without her, she and Pfeiffer would have been sent to foster care. Martha was grateful to her for keeping the sisters together.

Martha blinked, pushing away these thoughts, and looked to Pfeiffer for what to say. She wished Hadley were there. She always knew what to say in situations such as these. She would

have found a kind word to say about their dead aunt, instead of standing there awkwardly like the two of them were doing, staring at Crowley and the lines on his face.

"I'm sorry the place looks as shabby as it does," Crowley continued when both women remained silent. "Your aunt wouldn't let me do much, save for a bit of work here and there."

"She always cared so much about keeping the place looking nice," Pfeiffer replied, still holding the cloth to her nose.

"It was hard on her without any of you youngin's here to help her," Crowley said. "She had rheumatoid arthritis, and it hurt her to walk."

"She could have told us," Martha replied.

"No, she couldn't," Crowley said.

"You know what I mean," Martha replied. "She could have written us a letter or something. We would have come home if she needed help."

"Would ya?"

Martha and Pfeiffer shared a look. It wasn't like they would have refused. They'd loved their aunt. She'd come and cared for them at a time in their lives when they were utterly alone. But their years of being scared little girls were over the second they left Cold River. Besides, their aunt's letters put off any offers to visit. In them, she often wrote that she wanted the girls to live their lives away from the farm, away from Cold River. She wouldn't visit them, and they didn't visit her. That was the way things were, and Martha never thought to question it. She knew what Crowley meant, however. Neither of them—neither she nor her sister—had any desire to come back to Cold River. It was where they were from, but it hadn't been home in a long time.

“Is anybody up here?” came a new voice from the other end of the hallway.

All three of them turned to stare at the woman before them, silhouetted in the doorframe, slim and perfect. She looked as if she’d materialized out of the beams of light coming in through the dust-covered windows rather than like a road-wearer traveler. Her clothes were not rumpled like Martha’s. Her hair was not undone and frizzy like Pfeiffer’s.

“Hadley!” Martha exclaimed. “When did you get here?”

“Just now,” Hadley replied. “What happened?”

Pfeiffer removed the cloth from her nose and stood up. “Martha happened,” she said.

Martha wasn’t sure if she should reach out and hug her oldest sister. Instead, she got caught halfway between a hug and handshake and stood there awkwardly for a few seconds before pulling her hand back down to her side and averting her gaze.

Hadley shot a quizzical look at her youngest sister but said nothing. Instead, she turned her attention to Crowley. “I’m glad to know you’ve been here taking care of the place,” she said. “The last time I got a letter from Aunt Bea, she said you were absolutely invaluable to her.”

Crowley stood up a little straighter. “I did what I could, Miss Hadley.”

“She did lead me to believe things were in better shape than they are,” Hadley admitted. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Well,” Crowley said, backing away from the three women slowly as if he were a lone, fat chicken and the sisters were cats licking their lips and ready to pounce. “I’d better go and get meself cleaned up before the family night tonight.”

“At Macri’s?” Hadley asked. “Six o’clock, right?”

“The only funeral home in town,” Crowley replied, giving her a rare smile. “I reckon I’ll be seeing y’all there.”

It wasn’t a question, more of a command, and Old Crow took his leave, bounding down the stairs, muttering to himself the litanies of a man who was happy to have made his escape.