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# **Hinterland**

A THESIS

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# Hinterland

A THESIS  
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*Hinterland*, a young adult novel set in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, aims at an audience of fifteen years old and older. Identity and responsibility emerge as the two most important themes of this *bildungsroman*, as sixteen-year-old narrator Leigha Christianson struggles to define both. After the father abandons the family, Leigha, her mother Rae, and four-year-old sister Brittany subsist on odd jobs tyrannical Grandma Kyle doles out to them. Rae's drinking and erratic and irresponsible behavior push the family to crisis.

One day an endangered grey wolf wanders into the clearing behind Leigha's house. Grandma Kyle needlessly shoots the animal, injuring it though it poses no immediate threat. Leigha subsequently kills the wolf to end its misery. Afraid of the consequences of killing an endangered creature, she enlists the help of Samuel Opichka, the neighbor boy her age to hide the wolf's body and the gun that killed it.

Complicating Leigha's reliance on Samuel, is Grandma Kyle's hatred of the Opichka family. She has always wanted to buy out the Opichka half of the clearing the two families share. Because the Opichkas are Arapahoe Indian, Leigha believes her grandmother's racism is behind her hatred. Despite the rift between their two families, Leigha and Samuel become closer as the office of Wildlife, Fish and Game investigates the disappearance of Colorado's first grey

wolf. Leigha turns to Samuel and his family as her mother deteriorates, unable to care for her or Brittany. When the body of the wolf is found on Grandma Kyle's property the tension in Leigha's family finally snaps. Enraged to see Leigha with Samuel, Grandma Kyle hits her while Rae stands passively by and watches. Leigha retreats to the Opichka house where the secret between the two families is revealed: Grandma Kyle's marriage to Samuel's uncle – Samuel and Leigha are cousins. Kyle also helped to build the Opichka house which was originally intended for her and Hector Opichka to live in. Leigha makes peace with the Opichkas.

Rae returns from Grandma Kyle's house distraught that Kyle wants her to work full time on the new land. She goes out drinking with a friend, returns home upset and commits suicide. The novel flashes forward several months; Leigha works with a more subdued Grandma Kyle. Brittany stays at the Opichka home, and Leigha retains good relations with them. Despite the beginnings of romantic feelings between them, Samuel and Leigha agree to be friends.

Models for the writing of this book are the novels *Montana 1948*, by Larry Watson, which also deals with power struggle within a family, and *Jacob Have I Loved*, by Katherine Paterson, a book centering on a young woman of the same age as Leigha, who also attempts to forge an identity apart from that her family has given her.

# Hinterland

## One

At dawn, when all the night sounds of the forest should have slowly slid towards silence, I heard something knock against the compost bins, jiggle the sagging end of the clothesline chain, crunch in the old frozen piles of snow back behind our house. Then the step of a heavy hunting shoe and the moan-like growl of an animal managed to find its way through my worried dreaming and I knew I was awake and the noise was real. Some kind of animal had come into the clearing. I listened and I dismissed the various creatures that might come up to the house: it was too heavy for a raccoon, or possum, too clumsy for mountain lion or bobcat, but awfully quiet -- if it was a black bear...

The low blast of a shot gun made me sit up in bed. One of the Opichka boys from next door had done it. I knew right away because they were our only neighbors. Whichever one of the boys it was, he was still in the clearing behind our two houses.

Back then, I shared my bedroom with my little sister but the shot hadn't woken her up. She was still a kid and she slept hard the way I had until high school. It was near morning but her snores were still even and deep. Nothing was going to wake my mom. Her room was only across the hall but last night she'd gone to bed drunk.

Our house was made cheap: aluminum siding and single pane glass. It was supposed to be a hunter's cabin -- a place for someone from the city to stay for a week or two in the mountains. But it was our home all year round. I could easily hear whoever was out there crunching over the frozen brittle ground.

The Opichkas' home was nicer, made more deliberately than ours of wood and river-rock. Thick aspen forest surrounded the land that we shared, and in back of the aspen was the roomier mountain pinewoods. Mountain lion, possum, raccoon, and black bear all came prowling round plenty.

I got out of bed, careful not to make a noise, and came down the narrow stairway, past my mother's dark room.

I was barefoot and I was freezing because I only wore cotton underwear and a t-shirt. My toes stuck to the grime coated on the kitchen linoleum as I made my way to the back sliding-glass door.

It would be light soon, the sky was already more gray than black, and I could barely make out the figure of one of the Opichkas. He held a long barreled shotgun loose by his side. I squinted to get a glimpse of what he was looking at. I knew it was an animal, probably a big animal. The Opichka boy moved to the side and I could see it was a wolf with a mane of long silver hair.

The wolf roamed in short circles and sniffed at the ground the way a dog would. Its coat reminded me of Mrs. Opichka's old German shepherd, the way he was nearly invisible when the sky was clouded and gray like this.

But the wolf was different too: long legged, long bodied, really not like a dog at all in the way he moved. The wolf's steps were more careful, muscles more visible beneath his coat, head held lower to the ground than a dog's. I'd heard they might come down this far, from Wyoming and into Colorado.

Outside was cold, my breathing fogged the air in front of me. The hard packed snow burned the soles of my feet. The wolf shook its wide face at me as I came out. I held still and we locked eyes for a moment before I remembered that you should never do that with a wild dog and I quickly looked down.

All the Opichka boys were big, wore padded denim work coats and faded caps with the bills pulled low. But I knew that this was Samuel Opichka by his long flat braid and the nervous way he leaned more on the balls of his feet than his heels. When he raised his gun, he held it like you might hold a baby. He was careful.

"Leigha?" My little sister was at the doorway behind me. She rubbed her eyes and danced her feet on the cold floor. She was only four years old so she shouted when she talked. If she was up then it wouldn't be long before my mother would be too.

I motioned for her to be quiet and I pointed up the stairs. "Mom will hear." This would be bad. Since my father had left, my mother didn't sleep very much. Not for days at a time. Then she got so sick and weak she couldn't get up for several days. My little sister nodded and put a finger to her lips.

Our house and the Opichka house were the only two in the clearing and the only two for miles around. But that was still too many because the Opichkas wouldn't sell us their half. And my family wanted to buy it.

“Run get my jeans,” I told my sister. But I still came on out farther into the back clearing. Dressed or not, I wasn't going to let Samuel Opichka shoot dead a wolf on our half of the property like he was on his own.

The wolf was a big female—all alone. That was unusual for one to leave the pack and go out on her own. I didn't see a collar but it could have been under her fur. Wolves had been extinct in North America until 1995 when they were reintroduced to Montana and Wyoming. Back then different organizations tracked the progress of the wolf packs, some jubilant at the possibility the wolves would regain their rightful and ancient place in the Rockies while others, mostly ranchers, wanted the wolves to prove themselves to be guilty of all the trouble that led to their disappearance.

I came up behind Samuel certain he knew I was there, even though he didn't turn around.

The wolf pawed the ground and panted and I watched, squinting. She jerked her head, snapped it back as if she was held on a chain. Something dripped from her jaw, from the dark nostrils, from the slanted eyes. She was sick.

I crossed my arms in front of me, cleared my throat. “You call anyone?” I said. Samuel Opichka patted at the air behind him with one of his flat brown palms, motioning for me to stay back. But I didn't move. This was *my* half of the clearing. I thought I ought to tell him to get back on his side. I could have if I'd wanted to.

Samuel had just turned sixteen that spring, same as me. He'd had a big family birthday party with cake and family. I wasn't like that, my family wasn't. My grandmother always gave me money. Of all the Opichka boys, I had never really taken much notice of Samuel. We weren't friends, considering he'd dropped out of school, considering the problem that his family wouldn't sell his half of the clearing to mine and, especially, considering that he was an Indian and I was white.

He glanced back at me. His face was round and flat and his eyes were black and almond shaped. He didn't seem to notice that I was near naked in front of him. "Looks like it's a gray wolf." he said to me. "I seen them before."

"Here?" Because I didn't think I knew to tell one wolf from another. Fish and Game had gotten out some pamphlets giving advice if any of the released wolves made it down as far as Colorado. But it was supposed to be just in case. There was no gray wolf expected around where I lived. Samuel made a noise that I took by its tone as no. Samuel's breath came in white smoke and my own too.

"We should call the wildlife office," I offered.

Samuel grunted, "They won't send nobody out till Monday, I bet." He moved the shotgun to one hand, barrel to the ground and palm holding the butt like a walking stick. "That wolf is sick."

My little sister came outside dragging my jeans and a pair of my boots. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of the wolf and she scampered back inside. My sister must have used both hands to slam the sliding glass closed. The noise rattled the wolf, made her twitch and roll her eyes side to side.

I pulled the jeans on, Samuel kept glancing back at me over his shoulder, but like he didn't care much what I was doing.

"Well, what do we do then?" I asked him, wobbling, trying to stuff my feet in the boots. My toes were nearly numb with cold. Still were, once I finally got them in the boots.

"Think she'll make it that long, Leigha?" Samuel said. I couldn't remember him saying my name before. "That wolf be dead by Monday."

The wolf started towards where we stood and stopped. Then she started towards the aspen forest opposite our voices and stopped again. Her breath wheezed with its own tendrils of the white smoke.

"But it's a gray wolf and we've got to call the Wildlife Office," I said. "They'll be tracking it, tracking the pack at least. They probably missed this one already," I said. Like me, Samuel had been taught to kill a wild animal that was sick or wounded. But a wolf was special back then – protected. I didn't think we were allowed to kill it.

"I guess no matter what we do, Wildlife Office got to be called. Someone might have seen it near here. Just doing what's right gets us in trouble," he said. Samuel rubbed a fat finger against his lips like he was considering our options.

It didn't seem to me we had any. "That *is* what we do, Samuel. We call Wildlife Office, that's *all* we do."

The wolf shook and panted and her saliva curved in a long shivering strand from her jaw to dangle in a murky bead just above the ground. She sat back on her haunches and watched us like any dog might have. In a twitch, she bared her teeth for a second. Then the twitch was gone.

Behind us came the heavy pulse of a truck engine climbing our drive. Samuel and I both looked behind us towards the gap between our two houses, a rectangular slip where the drive we shared was visible. The gleaming maroon truck belonging to my grandmother stopped on the drive some sixty feet behind us. Samuel and I turned back to the wolf.

This was bad, my grandmother coming. Inside the house my mom would be trying to clean herself up to be right and ready for whatever Grandma Kyle had in mind for the day. My grandmother was our only source of income with my father gone; my mom, my sister, and I all worked at prepping the latest cabin, house, or chunk of land that she had bought or sold. It was a tenuous kind of income that meant Grandma Kyle could come over and make demands whenever she liked.

From behind the glass door I could hear the high-pitched sound of my sister's voice shrieking about the wolf.

The wolf turned to the aspen woods again.

“There, she’s going back,” whispered Samuel. And it seemed he might be right. The wolf started towards the forest as if the sickness was shaken off. Behind us the sliding glass door opened with force, its rubber track squeaked.

I swung around to see Grandma Kyle striding towards us with her black air rifle in her hands, a grimace on her face.

She turned the grimace at Samuel and, though I knew she considered it a polite enough greeting, it looked a lot like when the wolf twitched and bared her teeth.

Grandma Kyle didn’t spend long on Samuel, “Leigha, you got an animal come onto

your property?" she asked me. The words *your property* emphasized with another look to Samuel.

It was really my grandmother who wanted to buy the Opichka's half of the clearing. When my mother was still a girl she'd bought land higher up the mountain ridge. Back then the Opichkas had wanted to buy our half of the clearing. Grandma Kyle had become enraged at their gall in attempting to take her half of the land, even though she had tried the same thing. Her reaction was something my mother didn't understand but carried inside of her as a frightful memory.

Grandma Kyle was determined never to sell our half. When my parents married she gave them the house and the deed to her side of the clearing but with the demand that they never sell to the Opichkas and the frightful memory inside my mother held her to that demand. My grandmother's possessive quarrel over the narrow swatch of cleared land became ours – a duty in our loyalty to our family.

"We'll clear out those damn Indians, and we'll build you a real house," she'd say. But they never would sell and neither would she.

Grandma Kyle thrust the cool metal and wood butt of the gun in my hands. "Better to shoot it now. It'll just be back if you don't," she said.

"There's nothing here it would be back for, Grandma Kyle." My breath was puffing again, making the white smoke. In front of my grandmother's cool eyes it embarrassed me. "And she's sick," I told her.

Grandma Kyle bristled because I was contradicting her in front of Samuel. I scowled a little because I was sorry I'd done it.

Samuel had his eyes on the rifle, “You can’t shoot a wolf Ms. Christianson,” he said.

“You go back on over to your own side,” she told him. She nodded over to the other side of the barbecue pit, the unofficial divide of our two sides.

Samuel kept his shotgun at his side and walked back towards his own house.

When he'd gone inside, Grandma Kyle came behind me, faced the aspen woods, some 20 yards ahead. She reached over my shoulder and yanked the rifle up so my eye lined with the scope. I could see her, the wolf, through a small break in the trees. I could see her heavy gray and white mane, her wide face, her pale eyes.

I took the gun from my face. If we called the wildlife office they would capture and cure the wolf. “I think we should try and help her,” I said.

“Help her?” Grandma Kyle’s straight gray eyebrows went up. She shook her head and looked disgusted, “You’re not a baby anymore, Leigha,” she said. “Don’t act like one.” Her thick arms crossed over her weathered suede coat. Her eyes were the same gray as my own and I knew their moods as though I felt them myself.

My mother’s eyes were black and sleepy, shaped like Samuel’s eyes, but my grandmother wouldn’t have liked me to say that. I didn’t have any grandfather, none I’d heard of and especially no Indian grandfather. I brought the gun scope back to my face.

I found the wolf through the scope again, but I didn't want to shoot her. I let her move out of my aim down through the trees.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Leigha, go back inside,” my grandmother reached over my shoulder again and yanked the rifle away.

“I can do it,” I told her. Because it wasn’t that I couldn’t; I *could* have.

“Go on. You heard me.” She didn’t turn around and leveled the scope to her own right eye.

She was a strong woman, shoulders nearly as wide as Samuel’s. Her face was lined and tanned from living in the mountains, so close to the sun, so cold, so dry. People always said I favored her in my appearance so I expect to look just like her one day. I left her to go back inside but I couldn't resist pausing at the sliding door and calling back, “Fish and Game are going to come looking for it, Grandma Kyle.” Just like her, I wanted the last word.

My mother was awake and dressed, standing in the kitchen with a beer in one hand and her hairbrush in the other. “I’m going over to town with Kyle,” she told me. She was looking out the back at Grandma Kyle, “You'll need to stay home with Bethany.” I just shrugged. She was only forty that spring but I could see the lines in her face were more present, not just when she smiled or frowned, and they were deeper too.

From outside came a low blast and the sliding glass shook under my mother’s palm. I whirled around, stood on the edge of our back porch but there was nothing to see except for Grandma Kyle striding towards us with her rifle, butt end in her armpit, other arm swinging loose.

“Did you shoot it?” My voice came out higher than I would have liked. My grandmother just ignored me.

“You look like hell, Rae,” she told my mother. My mother had set the beer on the counter far against the kitchen wall and my grandmother didn’t even see it. My mother ripped the brush through her long black hair, throwing sparks of static. I thought

she smelled like hell as well, like sweat and day old beer and smoke but Grandma Kyle didn't seem to notice that either.

I glanced out to the back and it all seemed peaceful, normal, but I wondered at my grandmother's rifle shot. The veil of aspen trees was silent.

## **Two**

I was sixteen that spring and at that time I believed all my mother's problems began about a year earlier – when my dad left us. Really those problems began long before my father gave up in the tug of war over my mother. He'd never stood a chance against my grandmother. And I guess my mother hadn't either.

A few days before the wolf came, my mother and grandmother came to pick me up after school in Grandma's big truck. Grandma Kyle didn't ask about the wolf. We were going up to my grandmother's place to watch a tree come down. It was a big pine that sat in the middle of my grandmother's front yard.

“Where's Bethany?” I asked.

“Stop worrying about her,” my mother snapped.

“I was just asking.”

My mother sighed like she was tired of being nagged. “Ellie’s got her at her house. Okay?” Ellie was one of my mother’s drinking buddies. She lived with a crazy survivalist old man who was her boyfriend. Their house was dirty and piled with all kinds of old appliances and clothes and furniture that other people got rid of. Ellie had watched me when I was Bethany’s age. It was a pretty fun place for a kid as long as you didn’t get hungry or have to spend the night.

“I don’t like you hanging around Ellie,” Grandma Kyle said to my mother. My grandmother did that – she forgot that Bethany and I were the kids and that Mom was all grown-up. Other times it was like she wholly forgot that Rae was her daughter, that I was her granddaughter. We were actually the only real friends my grandmother had and she shifted us into whatever role suited her. Even though I was just a teenager I could see that something was wrong in my grandmother doing this to us. There was a basic unfairness to it. Grandma Kyle was able to have us as her friends, her equal, but whenever we treated her the same way she could pull back into her role above us. Because of this constant shifting in my grandmother’s attitude, I was always at least a little uneasy around her and my mother together.

When Grandma Kyle drove, I always sat in the back. I wasn’t cramped, though; Grandma Kyle’s truck had a roomy extended cab with leather seats. It was much nicer than any other truck on the mountain. My grandmother was rich. She liked to buy things that let people know it.

Far down Grandma Kyle’s long drive I could just make out an orange truck with a huge oil-blackened wench. A thick rope was tied in loops around the trunk of the tree. When we got closer I could see the huge mess of dead pine needles that carpeted the

area. Two men were working the rope tighter on the thick tree trunk and the pine needles coated and fell from the bills of their caps the way snow would have. They both wore flannel jackets and dirtied jeans. After my grandmother stopped the truck we stood on the periphery of the front yard in a straight horizontal line, my grandmother, my mom and me. The three of us surveyed the work the men had done with satisfaction, as if it were our own. Grandma Kyle had wanted her daughter and her daughter's daughter to be as strong, as good as any man. It was why she'd named my mother and insisted she name me with a man's name. In a rare moment of defiance my mother has changed "Leigh" to "Leigha" -- something Grandma Kyle was still too sore to joke about.

I'd always imagined that my grandmother had named herself because I couldn't picture anyone putting a label on her. But maybe she told me that about herself.

It was always bright in the Rockies, sunshine every day, like an island only clean and cold, the icy smell of the air, the prickly beauty of blooming mountain flower. We were three generations – generations of Christianson women my grandmother would say. Bethany and I were Sloan, my father's name, not really Christianson at all and, technically I guess, so was my mom. But Sloan just never seemed to stick to us, not in town, not in school. It seemed like everyone I knew also knew my grandmother and she never acknowledged any name but her own.

The tree coming down was an old pine. It had a trunk as thick as four big phone poles. If it hadn't, I know my grandmother would have brought it down herself. The men had already taken down all the lower branches with chainsaws. Around the trunk lay gray dead limbs and some that were still wet in their core, their severed sinew

pulled from the trunk like tendons. Near the where the men worked, the heavy sweet scent of the wet wood clung to the air. Pinecones split and disintegrated under their steel-toed boots.

One man got behind the wheel of the orange truck. Door still hanging open, he drove it out in a right angle from the house and from the tree until the rope pulled tight. “Better move back, Ms. Christianson,” the second man told her over his shoulder. He walked towards the iron winch on the back of the truck. It was metal, painted bright orange and smeared with black grease. “We’re going to take her down now.”

A big woman, loud, broad shouldered, Kyle Christianson, my grandmother, seemed larger than life to me. Her body was a solid as a man’s, muscled thick arms and legs. Her skin was ruddy and tan, freckled from the sun. She didn’t wear makeup and you didn’t dare wear it in front of her. I wanted to be like her. I already looked like her. I was tall for my age and strong.

“I’ll be glad to have that tree gone,” said Grandma Kyle.

The winch groaned. It pulled tight the ropes. Stinking oil exhaust gathered like a mist over the wet smell of earth and pine. The double loops of rope pulled taut. Grandma Kyle shuffled nearer to my mother. The truck’s tires inched forward and she put her hand on Mother’s arm, pulled her back an inch, as if she might run suddenly in the way of the tree and the men, as if she was still a small child.

“Here it goes,” she whispered.

The peak of the tree made a quick jerking motion, but, still, the trunk stood solid. The truck wheels moved forward into the spring damp ground and crosswise to where the ropes were forcing the tree.

“Now that Paul is gone, you’ll need a gun there, at your place. Take one of mine from the cabinet before you leave.” Grandma Kyle said. Her eyes moved to where the black smoke gathered around the winch and the ropes.

“No, Mom, I don’t want your gun.”

Grandma Kyle shook her head, “You better take one.”

“But I’ve got Paul’s shotgun.”

“It’s old, maybe doesn’t even shoot. And it’s his. You need your own, Rae, you aren’t a child anymore.”

“I’ll get my own, then. Don’t worry, Mom.”

“You have to keep it, Rae, I’ve decided. I’ve got plans for us, Rae, things I’ve been dreaming about for years now but always Paul was in the way. Now you’re rid of him I can let you in on them.”

I watched my mother’s face – waiting for her to speak, to react. My dad leaving us still burned in my throat and behind my eyes. My grandmother’s words galled me. How dare she? But my mother did nothing, said nothing. *Chickenshit*, I thought at mother. I hated the way my grandmother talked about my father and the way she demanded her way with my mother but the way my mother just took it from her was worse. I hated the way my grandmother could act sometimes but would rather have been exactly like her than even the tiniest bit like my mother.

“What plans?” my mom asked her.

“Plans for making money – owning land. I’ve got a bid in on something right now,” she said winking back to suddenly include me. “You’ll see.” I thought I knew what this was about and so did Mom. My grandmother continually played with the idea

that she had to buy a big section of land that she could turn into a kind of hunting and fishing resort. It was a good idea but it had been nothing but a good idea for a long time. She would probably take my mother out in a few days to look at a swatch of land that would be too small or too far or too unworked. Big news with my grandmother was nearly always this same business.

In front of us the tree shuddered and creaked low and the noise hollowed out the space between where we stood, deep in the wooded yard, and where the tree stood, still towering, but shifting – unnatural—broken looking, towards the left.

“Just do what I tell you Rae. This could be our chance. For once, don’t make a mess out of everything. Okay, Rae?”

“Okay, Mom.”

Down the clearing, the tree groaned again and lurched to the right several yards, tendons of wood snapped under the ropes. The tree’s branches shivered and flailed. Up and down, the thick trunk shuddered as the last strips of live wood gave way.

With a whoosh of air the tree fell to the ground, dirt, leaves, needles, sticks and spiraled shards of bark made a cloud of earth against the black grease smoke. The sound was as loud and as jarring as thunder.

Grandma Kyle slapped Mother’s back. She smiled, teeth showing. She looked pleased with her daughter, pleased with the tree lying dead on the ground. She slapped my mother’s back again and started forward to where the tree lay. The ropes had let loose from the wheel and the truck shut off its fumes. They were lost in the sweep of the breeze. Already the men were crossing their bodies with the padded straps of their chainsaws and crowding on the fallen trunk. It lay on its side, branches poked at twisted

broken angles, some crushed beneath it. My grandmother strode past them into the house and my mom lit a cigarette, watched in silence as the men sawed at the tree.

“Let’s go, Rae. Leigha.” Grandma Kyle emerged from the house with a .38 tucked into the waist of her denims. She went towards her polished truck and we got in after her. Inside the cab my mother worried the skin of one knuckle against her lips. From the back, I watched one of the men slice a limb cleanly from the tree trunk. The limb fell and the man walked on to the next one.

Grandma Kyle started her truck. She was staring at something on the floor of my mother’s side.

“What is it?” I asked her.

She ignored me, and snapped her fingers in front of my mother’s face. “It’s your boots, Rae.”

My mother opened her mouth to speak, but my grandmother cut her off, “Oh, never-mind,” Grandma Kyle dropped her voice low, “I should have had you drive your own truck up here.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to come see the tree.”

“Well, I didn’t know that you would be messing up my truck.” Grandma Kyle reached above her head for the button to open the iron gates to her winding drive before remembering that they already stood apart. “Now that you’re working for me you need to act like an adult, Rae, have a little responsibility.” My grandmother sounded disgusted. “Just try not to screw this up for me,” she said.

### **Three**

Grandma Kyle left her rifle on the kitchen counter and took my mother to do whatever it was they had to do, probably nothing. The mysterious find my grandmother had made for her resort would be examined and discarded. It was my grandmother's favorite hobby to look at property that she might want to buy and also the places she owned that she wanted to sell. She liked to calculate all the money she could make. This resort dealing had turned her hobby into an obsession.

All day, I watched the clearing line before the aspens but I didn't see or hear anything of the gray wolf. I knew my grandmother hadn't dropped her – I'd looked carefully through the scope after she left. I also knew – although I don't know how I knew – that she would be back – that I wasn't done with her and she wasn't done with me.

When the sky turned dark I tucked my sister into her bed.

“Where is the wolf, now?” Bethany asked me.

“She ran into the woods,” I told her and I pulled the blanket so that it covered her.

When we heard a wolf’s long, vibrating call, we both jumped to listen at the back window, but it was just the Opichka’s old dog wanting to be let in. There was a soft creak next door as someone opened a door for him. When Bethany finally shut her eyes, I went down the stairs, alone again, to wait for my mother. She’d been with my grandmother all day and now into the night and I figured they’d been drinking. I took my homework out of my backpack and sat at the kitchen counter. I liked doing homework – maybe because no one ever made me do it. I had to work for my grandmother and I had to take care of my sister – these things were expected but neither my mother nor my grandmother acted like anything that happened at school mattered. It only mattered to me. I stared at the math tables and biology facts on the pages in front of me and willed them to distract me from the cries of the darkening forest. But I couldn’t take my eyes from the back clearing. Outside, light still came from behind the trees and the ground was covered in a blue glow that would soon turn to black. I stared into the darkening yard and waited.

Finally, I could see it. Something moved. It was what I had known all along, the wolf was still there. She came from the spindly white barks of the aspen forest into the open space of the clearing. She crossed one long front leg and paw over the other, made a jagged trail forward from the forest towards the house. The wide set blue eyes were more round looking, inflamed. They rolled to the whites inside their sockets, nearly

glowing in the darkening back clearing. I opened the sliding glass and came to stand on the edge of the porch. Something had changed.

The wolf's right hind flank was bloodied and swollen. Her torn leg dragged behind her on one step, then, with the next step, she tried to right it beneath her. The exposed muscles twitched. Threads pulled to bend the leg in a jerking tentative step that never reached the ground. Then the leg dropped again, useless, dead, dragging.

Behind me was the gun, my grandmother's rifle on the kitchen counter where she had left it. I thought I could shoot in the air, the way Samuel had done with his shotgun, and then the wolf might run back into the forest.

The thick coat of the animal was twitching and hopping as if some other creature was alive underneath the fur – something that had found a way between the bone and muscle and the heavy fur and hide. If only I could will the wolf away.

I went back for the gun and then stood holding Grandma Kyle's black rifle in the falling light. I had it pointed into the air. I knew how it felt to shoot a rifle – though I had never shot this particular rifle because it belonged to my grandmother. I squeezed the trigger hard with both my index and middle fingers and the gun popped back into my shoulder. And the blast was a snap of pain on my eardrums and a ringing – the sound traveling behind me.

But the wolf only jumped a little. She sat back on her one good leg while the other poked out from her side the way a turkey or chicken leg might when the skin is cut and the joint is pulled lose and just the meat still clings. The wolf let her head roll from side to side and tried to whine or make some kind of sound but each time the noise ended inside her body.

I held the gun, still pressed against my shoulder – now aimed at the injured wolf. I would never have lowered the rifle and waited to see if the wolf would run. Not with the chance that she could charge me. I knew something about wild animals. I had tracked mountain lions in the snow. I had hunted pheasant and deer.

I raised the barrel of the gun and shot again into the air this time just a little higher than the wolf's head. But the wolf just watched me, waited.

“It’s against the law,” I said aloud and I was right. “I can’t kill you,” I told the wolf in the voice I used to shoo raccoons and possum.

The long front legs lowered the body gently to the ground and she lay down. There was still some control there. The wolf was wild so she wouldn’t look to me for comfort the way that a dog might, but she watched me.

I let the gun hang down at my side. This was not how I had been trained. I heard my grandmother’s voice say those words in my mind the way she had said so many times, “Buck-up, Leigha, do what I taught you.” She would have said then if she stood with me now. “This is not how I trained you.”

I raised the rifle and looked down the barrel in one motion, fluid, Colorado girl, mountain girl who had cleaned deer and shot pheasant and tracked mountain lion. I pulled the trigger and the blast flashed at my eardrums like the other two shots. This time I didn’t shoot into the air. This time I held the gun the way it was meant to be held – held to kill.

## **Four**

Before my dad left we had food in the kitchen – stacks of canned things: soup, green beans, and chili. There were sacks of potatoes and loaves of bread that I made sure to eat before they went bad. There were blocks of cheese that I might have to carve away mold from or boxes of cereal that went stale because my dad only shopped once a month and you had to make it last and eat it in a way that didn't let too much of it go bad at the end of that month. Neither he nor my mother had ever kept house the way I knew it was kept by other people's parents but there was an understanding that my dad was capable of keeping our home from the falling apart confusion on which it always bordered. My father watched Bethany in the day and kept her from getting lost in the woods or hurting herself – again it was the minimum that was needed but I could go to school and occasionally see a friend without worrying that my baby sister was left unattended – that I would have food – that the house wouldn't burn to the ground while

I was gone. It had been enough to let me turn my attention towards a life apart from the constant anxiety I lived with after my father left.

Now the most important part of every day for me was making sure that Bethany would be taken care of. If my mother wasn't home or wouldn't wake up in the morning I took her to my mom's best friend Ellie's house early enough that I could get the Blazer back in front of the house and still get on the bus. Things didn't always work out, though. Sometimes I was late getting back or Ellie wouldn't take Bethany. If my mom seemed okay in the morning, then I left my sister behind and crossed my fingers that my mother wouldn't forget about her. I always left my sister a snack and instructions not to leave the house, not to touch things she shouldn't or slide down the stairs. I tried to think of everything that I knew she would try without me there.

Bethany wore my clothes and I wore my mom's clothes – I didn't get things for my birthday or Christmas like other girls did. My grandmother bought me boots and jackets – clothes she would wear, sometimes exact copies of her own. My parents gave me sketch books or crystals – these were the things that they bought themselves. I was a teenager but I had never worn makeup or had my hair styled.

I watched the girls on television or traveled into Denver with my parents a few times and saw teenage girls there that looked like fancy dolls – the kind Bethany stared at for hours in catalogues. She cut the pictures out and made them dance and talk until the paper was too thin and worn to make out anymore. The doll-girls seemed the same way to me – thin and flat and not burdened with all the business of living that filled me out.

When I went to school no one bothered me or teased me or gave me any trouble. There were doll-girls at school but there were plenty like me too. I guess I just felt a little cut off from the other kids living lives I assumed made room for the choice between becoming a doll-girl or not. I imagined everyone else with the kind of mother and father I saw on television or read about in books – parents that took care of the kids – that were capable and caring.

After school and weekends were usually taken up with projects Grandma Kyle had us doing – clearing brush or mending a fence. She loved to do physical jobs outdoors and after the lackadaisical week with my parents I didn't mind her orders and demands. But this had changed, too. Now I was giving Bethany orders of my own and trying to cajole my mother – I was worn out and at the end of the week. Now I had trouble jumping to all my grandmother's ideas. I bristled at the commanding tone in her voice where before I had craved it. I tried to avoid whatever she took my mother to do and I stayed behind with Bethany and tried to put the house in order, did the laundry, burned the trash. I had become nit-picky about the state of our home – at times I felt like a peevish old woman.

Not long after she took the tree down, my grandmother invited us to her place let us in on her big plan. Grandma Kyle was waiting for us on the front deck in her denim shirt and jeans; her salt and pepper hair was caught behind her ears.

“Get up here, Rae,” she hollered to us when we pulled up. Grandma Kyle had a beer in one hand and the gleaming, polished wood butt of a rifle wedged in the pit of the other arm. I shook my head and went to get Bethany out of her car seat.

My mother disappeared into the house and emerged on the deck, a flat redwood strip with railing that let my grandmother accost whoever might come to see her before they stepped up to the front door.

Behind the heavy shuttered double doorway was a rack of guns, some old collector types, but they weren't real clean or cared for like they might have been, and some just for shooting, mostly squirrels or aimed at the feet of the deer who ate my grandmother's bushes, and all for show, all those guns, to whoever stepped inside. I'd never questioned my grandmother's infatuation with guns. I knew she liked to appear bold, capable to everyone around her and I never sought why or how she had become like this. Asking that question would not have been permitted.

I followed Bethany over to a tall elm where a red plastic hummingbird feeder hung. Bethany stood on a little stepladder and tipped the feeder with her finger to look inside the spigot. I minded Bethany, but I was also watching Mom on the deck with Grandma Kyle, unsure where to go. "Lei, you got to take a look at my new toy. I've got a problem to solve here," my grandmother called down to me.

The problem she had was squirrels. Red squirrels were driving my grandmother to frenzy. They had taken over the front part of the clearing near her house.

I backed out to the drive a little to see Grandma Kyle pull a new cherry colored rifle up on her shoulder, her new toy. She took aim into the elm tree with the hummingbird feeder. The blast was hollow sounding, deep, but my grandmother missed whatever she had shot for and shards of bark flew down over Bethany and me.

"Eyesight's going," ragged my mom.

“My eyesight is fine, Rae,” grumbled my grandmother. Her face was red and she was mad, I could tell. My mom disappeared a second while she grabbed a black barreled shotgun from where my grandmother kept it on a hook inside from the over hanging porch. My mother stepped up, even with Grandma Kyle and aimed the shotgun over my head.

“Give me that gun,” barked my grandmother. “You’re holding it wrong.” Even though my mother was holding it just the way my grandmother had taught her.

“No, I got it, Mom.”

I went to pull Bethany away from the hanging bird feeder to take her out of the line of fire. She ran closer to the house. She didn’t like the noise of the guns. I hated that Bethany would act so scared; it was shameful. I stood my ground under my grandmother’s aim. I wanted to see what she was shooting at. When I looked up into the branches of the tree I didn’t see anything moving.

Grandma Kyle lifted her rifle up and eyed the same tree as my mother.

“Watch out for my car, Mom,” my mother grumbled, but she meant to watch for me. She couldn’t say, “Leigha” for the same reason that I wouldn’t openly attempt to protect Bethany.

“I’m not aiming for your car, Rae,” my grandmother said and squinted one eye and pulled her muscles taut. Just as my mother squeezed the trigger, Grandma Kyle slid her elbow out and jostled my mother’s aim. My mother’s shot went through the high branches of the elm and out into the open front clearing. In that same second my mother’s shot was lost my grandmother fired her rifle.

Over my head, the blast seemed enormous. A spray of pine needles and warm blood covered my head. I turned to look at squirrel, a half of a squirrel. The back paws and tail were on the gravel and pine needled ground behind me. I touched my hair and felt something sharp and wet and then looked at my hand, it was red with the squirrel's blood. I held a front claw between my fingers. It was warm and smelled of musk and iron. I let the squirrel claw drop, pushed away the thought of the squirrel alive, or the blood on my hair and back as anything other than mess. Because thinking too clearly would have made me sick. I stayed still even though my heart and breath were fast inside me.

“Better get out of the way, Leigha,” Grandma Kyle hollered down to me and she grinned her mean smile, upper lip curled flat to her gums.

I walked inside slowly because no way was I giving them any satisfaction in my humiliation. Grandma Kyle might have shot the squirrel over my head but I hated my mother for it; maybe it was easier to hate someone weak than someone strong. I decided I would take what had happened as if it were nothing to me, prove to my grandmother how tough I could be.

When I yanked the neck of my sweatshirt over my head the soaked in squirrel blood streaked my face. I felt hot inside, tears stuck behind my eyes, my throat burned. I turned Grandma Kyle's shower on cold, and dunked my head under the stream. I thought about my father leaving and I thought about Bethany somewhere outside still. Even in the shower stall I could hear the report of the Colt and the rifles from the front deck. They sounded like cannons.

Dinner was beef ribs and corn cooked on the grill. We sat in the light of Citronella candles, although it was still too cold for insects.

“Listen up, Rae,” my grandmother set down the beer she was drinking and stood up like she was calling to order a meeting. “You, too, Leigha.” My hair was still damp and it was cold but I forced myself not to shiver. I’d earned some of Grandma Kyle’s consideration by not making a fuss about the squirrel guts.

When she handed me a beer, I took it. That wouldn’t have happened back when my dad was still here but now my mother didn’t flinch and I wasn’t about to either. Grandma Kyle leaned forward with a bottle opener and popped the silver top off.

“So what did you want me to hear tonight?” asked my mother. “What’s your big plan?” her voice was hoarse and low and didn’t really sound like her.

My grandmother frowned. “Stop talking so much and just listen and you might find out...”

Bethany must have felt the tension because she moved closer to me on the picnic bench. I wasn’t worried about a fight, even with my mother drunk. My grandmother always had her own way.

“I’ve been thinking about us and this mountain. I’ve been buying and selling chunks of it for years now and I think I finally found myself a chunk to keep.”

“You’re going to sell your house?” I asked her.

“Sure, I would. Everything I own is for sale -- if I like the other guy's price.” Grandma Kyle and I grinned at each other because this was a favorite mantra of hers. Then she got serious again. “I’m talking about the land in back of here. Up the mountain and over another six acres, is all going to go on sale and they offered it to me

first.” I looked out into the dark night of my Grandmother’s land, the tall pine and the mountain range surrounding our clearing invisible in the dark but the sense of their depth and their height still in the wind, in the smallness of our circle.

“Where are Bill and Irene going to live?” asked Bethany because that was the old couple that owned at least some of that land right now.

Grandma Kyle was watching my mother. “What are you going to do with it?” my mother asked. She seemed barely interested in my what my grandmother said, but I was catching a little of my grandmother’s enthusiasm.

“What are you going to do to it?” I echoed.

Grandma Kyle sat down in her spot at the end of the table. We were crowded on the picnic benches and she’d dragged a real chair out for herself. She leaned in towards us, no longer announcing the news but letting us in on it, like partners.

“There’s the river up in those woods and Bill and Irene’s place has lots of fence to keep a horse in. I was thinking we could make our own resort up here. One of those places where rich people pay for fishing and camping. We could tell them we’d be their guides and take them hunting – a little horseback riding.” She was drunk, was talking loud.

“You got it all figured out,” my mother said. My mother changed when she drank but she kept herself in check in front of Grandma Kyle. People throw away the word rage like it is interchangeable with anger or upset, but what my mother had inside her couldn’t stream out even a little, couldn’t be acknowledged or it would drown us all. But I saw it when she drank, when she was drunk, it was hiding there in the void of her eyes and the graveled control of her voice and her smile, which was tight and carnal.

“I guess I do,” my grandmother said. She was lost in her vision of the resort she would make and didn’t notice that my mother’s mood had gone black.

Grandma Kyle took a drink of her beer. “You know, Rae, now Paul is gone, you girls need to move out here with me and get away from them Indians next door.” Grandma Kyle leveled her eyes at me. “You been getting friendly with one of them?” she asked me. “Which one was that I saw you with?”

I just shrugged.

“That was Samuel out there yesterday, wasn’t it, Lei?” asked my mother.

“It’s best to leave those people alone,” my grandmother said. “They might act friendly but trust me, they’ll steal, lie to you, get what they can take because they’ll never really see you as anything but a white person.” She always seemed to fear that we would step across the barbeque pit some day, shake hands and get to know them. For a long time I thought the likelihood of that happening was no likelihood at all.

“We don’t want them thinking we’re just going to hand over our half so we’ll have to keep an eye on it but I want you moved out of that dump and into here, Rae.”

“It was always good enough for us before.” Still Grandma Kyle couldn’t see that my mother was barely containing her drunken anger. It would be a hard drive back to the house with me trying to get her to drive slow and not take it out on the twisted mountain roads.

“Now you’re working for me, you don’t need to keep so separate like Paul liked things, that bum...couldn’t keep a job.”

My mother gritted her teeth and in the night they showed far whiter than they did in the day. “He couldn’t find work...”

“Oh, I don’t want to hear about it, Rae, he should have come asked me for a job if he needed one. I’d a found something for him.” My grandmother let her beer bottle fall heavily to the table. She couldn’t be serious about my father coming to her. She’d have laughed in his face.

“Rae, You aren’t going to keep the girl’s last name as Sloan are you?” said Grandma Kyle.

My mother tipped her beer into her mouth before she answered. “Paul is still their father, Mom.” My mother’s nails were black on the tips from the gunpowder; the quicks were white from the force of her grip.

Grandma Kyle nodded, “Guess we can’t do much about that.” Then Grandma Kyle shook her head as if to say that is was too bad she couldn’t erase my father completely from our lives. “Leigha and Bethany are Christianson women, just like you. Some bonds are tighter than others. Family, we’re blood family,” she said.

Bethany’s eyes glowed in the dark and even though I couldn’t make out her features, I knew she was sitting rapt at the sound of authority in my grandmother’s voice. Grandma Kyle ignored that for Bethany and me, my father was also “blood family.” Again it was what my mother didn’t say and didn’t do that make me the angriest.

“Dad is still our family,” I said into the dark space between us all.

“He left,” Grandma Kyle snapped back at me.

“He left Mom,” I hadn’t meant to sound so accusing. It didn’t matter, though; my mother was already lost in the world of her head and the bottle in her hand.

“Oh yeah?” My grandmother squared her shoulders and I took a deep breath. I always knew that I better mean it when I tried to cross her. “He left you, too. He left your sister. You better forget all about him,” she said and her voice was a harsh cold whisper. Then, like my grandmother could see inside me she glowered again. “You stay away from the Opichka boy,” she told me. I started a little and she smiled the same mean smile of an animal that my mother made.

## **Five**

“If you have to go to jail, can I come with you?” Bethany’s face was so like my mother’s face, pale and pleading in her worry.

“What are you talking about?” The house was a mess and I was moving from room to room gathering my clothes and Bethany’s clothes to wash. When I came to any of my mother’s things I threw them angrily into her room. She’d come home from Grandma Kyle’s house, started drinking for real; because we were out of vodka she gulped down the beer between little gasps of breath like a swimmer might take. I knew she hurt and I wanted to comfort her – wrap my arms around her the way that I would for Bethany but her desperation for the alcohol had made her more repulsive than pitiable. I couldn’t go to her. I couldn’t even look at her. By morning, she was passed out on the floor of her room and even the dirty clothes I whipped onto her didn’t rouse her.

“Lei – I can come too?” my sister tried to slap a shirt from my hand to get me to look at her.

“Come where?” I grabbed the shirt back and threw it into the pile of our clothes that I would wash. “Stop it!” Bethany kicked the pile and our socks and jeans and grimy t-shirts slid out across the floor. “Come to jail? I’m not going to jail.”

“If you go to jail, Lei, if you do I come with you, right?” She kept kicking at the clothes, skittish and desperate the way my mom had been with the beer.

“Okay! Just stop that alright? Calm down.”

“I go to jail with you?”

“Right. I’m not going to jail but if I do then you can come too.” My sister was panting from all the laundry kicking and I wanted to scream at her. I looked over at my mother’s door and thought about her open mouth obliviousness to the clothes I’d thrown at her. Bethany looked like she might cry from relief to be able to come to jail with me.

“Put this stuff back into a pile,” I told her but then I patted her on the head the way I saw parents do to kids on television. Two weeks had passed since the night I shot the wolf and we had hardly spoken to each other. I’d gotten him involved in what I’d done because I’d been afraid and a little horrified by what I’d had to do. Samuel had come right out after I did it; grabbed the hot end of the gun and pointed it in the air.

“Fire again,” he said. In one strong swing he threw the compost bin over on top of where the wolf lay.

“What?”

He turned on me so quickly and urgently that I flinched. “Fire into the trees.”

I fired again. Then I pulled my face from the gun. “I don’t need your help here,” I hissed at him.

The back door to his house slammed open and his mother looked out. A curtain moved aside from an upstairs window too; I’d woken up his family.

“Sorry,” Samuel called towards his house. He motioned into the night sky and then looked down at my grandmother’s rifle and held it to his eye like he was thinking of buying it from me.

“It’s too late for ...” his mother paused. I think it was so strange to her for me and for Samuel to be doing anything together that she wasn’t sure what to say. “People are trying to sleep,” she ended up finishing with before the door slammed shut again. After Mrs. Opichka went back inside, Samuel tipped the compost bin back to look closely at the wolf. He nodded, his full lips a straight, hard line. “We need something to wrap her in,” he told me.

My sister stumbled down the stairs to see Samuel and me knot the ends of a bloodied canvas tent with the wolf rolled tight inside. “Bethany, get your shoes on. I need you to help me.”

She obeyed without asking me anything, without the sluggishness of having been wakened only hours after being put to bed. I had been too anxious to worry about what she might be thinking.

Before she’d come down the stairs there had been tense, frightened debate between Samuel and me about what was legal and what was right. Samuel had looked around our house and at Bethany like he was considering not just what to do with the

wolf but what to do with us as well. It made me angry. “You know, I’m not afraid of what might happen,” I’d told him. “If you’re thinking of turning me in, then go ahead.”

“Shut up, Leigha. I wasn’t thinking that at all.” Even though he sounded mad, he put his arms around me. And even though I really was mad, I let myself lean a little into him.

“Then I guess I should thank you,” I grumbled half angry at him and half at myself.

“I guess your grandmother should thank me,” he said back. I tried to push him away then, but he held on tighter. “But your grandmother isn’t here. Is she?”

I didn’t answer him but I felt my eyes fill. Even when my father lived with us I didn’t have someone I could turn to for help. We stood looking at each other. “No, she isn’t,” I finally whispered. We were standing awfully close to each other. Samuel seemed to notice this at the same time that I did and he took a quick step back.

“What happens when you kill an endangered animal?”

“Two years in jail? I think it is,” he mused to himself. “We better not take a chance,” he decided. “I’ll take care of the wolf. I’ll find a place to bury her. You take care of the mess in the clearing.”

After Samuel was gone and the clearing reasonably cleaned of gore and footprints, I still didn’t think to reassure my sister. I just wanted to see Samuel come back from the woods empty handed, for all traces of the night before and of what I’d done put to rest. After Bethany and I ground the blood and bone and flesh into the dirt of the clearing, I spent a long time standing at the back sliding glass door waiting for him. It had been hard work in the clearing because the ground was still so hard and

cold. I'd made Bethany work fast beside me before anyone in Samuel's house woke up or my grandmother came nosing around.

At last Samuel emerged from the woods with a shovel and a line of rope under one massive arm. He watched the ground in front of him as he walked from the woods. At the property line he looked up to the house. Samuel found me in the window and he raised a hand to signal and I raised my hand against the pane to let him know that I saw him. I hadn't really noticed that I was trembling until Bethany leaned against me. "The wolf is gone?" she'd asked me. "It's over?"

"Yeah." But after a moment of quiet I thought I better make sure she understood. "This is a secret, Bethany. Do you understand? I could get into a lot of trouble." My sister nodded at me. "Or Grandma Kyle could and that would be bad, too. You have to keep everything a secret."

Now I could see that Bethany had been worried this entire time about what might happen to me because of what I'd done and what might happen to her if anything happened to me. When the laundry was all back in a pile I tried to decide if I needed to warn her again. I didn't want her to be afraid but I didn't want her to not be afraid either. I was all she had with Dad gone; it was pretty obvious that my mom couldn't take care of anyone and Grandma Kyle didn't care about Bethany.

In the late afternoon my mother finally came down the stairs. Bethany was bouncing a ball against the back of the house and the noise drew my mom to the back clearing where she slumped on the back step to watch me string the clothes line. Bethany stopped bouncing and gave her a wary sideways look. "I'm going inside, Lei," she called and my mother leaned to one side to let her younger daughter pass into the

house. Even though the air was cold, sweat made my mother's face shiny. She was downwind but I felt my nostrils flare like some instinctual part of me could smell last night's drinking binge on her.

I looked over at her because she was watching me like she was waiting to say something. "Yeah?" I prompted her. She sure didn't look too happy.

"You know, one day, Kyle's going to want us to move in with her." Her hands were shaking but she grinned at me, her upper lip rolling against her teeth.

At my grandmother's house there would be structure – regular meals and a clean house, expectations. But even if I should have been glad about it, I wasn't. I didn't imagine I would like living with my grandmother – watching my mom live with her.

My mother stood and kicked at the ground with her bare feet. She turned in her boneless way so her face was to the wind. "I hate this house. It's a dump. I hate the whole goddamned mountain." Her hair flew behind her like a flag.

"We could have moved down to the city with Dad." I watched her but she didn't move, didn't even act as if she heard me. "Can't we still, Mom?" Once, my mother had wanted to be an artist and had even moved down to Denver after she finished high school to study art at Metropolitan State. My grandmother had been furious with her for leaving; for Grandma Kyle my mother's wanting a life of her own was a betrayal. Mom only lasted barely a year in the city before she came back up the mountain, broke, pregnant and with my dad in tow. They were both artists and neither had any idea of how to make money or support themselves or a child. My dad had encouraged her to go back to her mother – when my grandmother offered them the house in the clearing he had imagined them living a bohemian artist life in the mountains. My grandmother

encouraged this belief until they had severed all their ties with the meager lives they had created in the city. She wanted to make sure that her daughter Rae wouldn't have anywhere to go next time she left.

“It would never work.” Her voice came so rough that I thought she might cry and that I couldn't stand. I guess I had my grandmother's intolerance for all displays of weakness – tears most of all. She sniffed and I was glad to see that her face was dry. She turned from me to the house and the metal slap of the doorframe shut her inside. I gritted my teeth but kept my lips together in a straight thin line, squared my shoulders. Then I went inside.

My mother had her boots up on the table in front of her and her bare toes curled against the dirty linoleum floor. She pulled one boot upside down between her legs. With a pocketknife, she dug between the heel and the sole. Chunks of drying mud flew from the knife blade across the room with the volition of a thrown rock.

“Stop it, Mom, you're making a mess.”

“Where's Bethany?” Her voice was a little muffled and I saw that she held the butt of a cigar in her back teeth. Bethany was probably hiding from her in our room and I thought of saying this but I guess I chickened out. She might just be mad enough to try and pull rank as Bethany's mother and I didn't want that.

“You smell,” I said instead. “You drink too much.” My jaw ached from gritting my teeth against yelling at her.

My mother squinted up at me, the pocketknife in one hand still, the boot dropped to the floor. Her hair was lank hanging down against her face. “It's my business.”

“You just let Grandma Kyle decide everything for you – you don’t have any business of your own. You don’t have anything you want to do, any ideas, everything you have is hers.”

My mother threw the knife on the table and it circled crazily until it dropped to the floor opposite her. Her whole body was trembling. “We need money, Leigha.” She brought her hands to her face and curled down into herself on the chair, “I just...since your dad left...” She pressed her fingers down on her closed eyes, the pink of her nails finding the contours of the sockets.

“Then get a job! Grandma Kyle is just giving you money and giving you something to do in the day so you don’t sit up in your room and...”

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do,” she shouted. She took her hands from her face and her eyes were bloodshot and her lip looked fat and chewed on.

My father had wanted us to come with him when he left. He wanted a new life in the city. I think he wanted to get away from my grandmother and her constant sneering at all he did. My grandmother resented his influence on my mother and me. She blamed him for all the ways he seemed to encourage our lives to be separate from her control. I hated the demeaning way Grandma Kyle treated him but in some ways it was a relief to have him gone. My grandmother was happier and the constant tug of war tension between her and my father had ended.

When my father asked Mom to leave with him my mother refused, “I’ve lived my whole life right here. I wouldn’t recognize myself somewhere else,” she said. She wouldn’t leave my grandmother is all it was. He loved her a lot, even when he packed up his truck and left us I could tell it was my mother he hated to leave most of all.

Bethany and I were girls and we belonged there at her side, he'd said. But he nearly cried to say goodbye to my mom, watched her in his rear mirror until he made the bend where our graveled drive met the twisted dirt mountain road. My mother stayed outside a long time like she was waiting for him to drive back up to the house. When she finally came back inside, she took a bottle of vodka into her room with her. When my dad sent letters he never asked to come up or for us to go there but I knew if he had any hope at all for it that he would want us with him. He was having a hard time making money, though; he had spent too long living off of my grandmother's charity and odd jobs. I didn't want to ever be so dependent and hopeless as either of my parents.

"Did that wolf ever come back?" she asked. She'd gone back to picking the mud from the bottoms of her boots. "Leigha?"

"No, Mom," I answered.

Later that day, after my mom had gone back to her room, an officer from Colorado Wildlife Office came to the door. I'd gotten really lucky because the officer came round the house when no one answered the bell. I'd been in the back tugging the line from the clothes pole with a heavy basket of wet clothes under one arm.

When I saw him I went back in, but thought again and came to the back glass. I kept the doorway blocked with the basket of wet clothes. I thought Bethany was going to faint when she saw him, she got so white and scared. "Take that ball and go inside," I barked at her but I flicked my eyes to my mother's window. I needed her to watch out for our mother.

The officer already knew about the gray wolf coming up round our house. Some campers had chased her away not more than half a mile from our house. Still, when he asked me questions he sounded angry, like he thought it all might be a joke.

“Did she look sick?”

“Huh?” I just shook my head no.

“Didn’t look like she had distemper?” the officer tried again. He was dark haired and dark skinned and talked a little stilted like the Opichkas talked. His coat was the shiny brown parka that the forest rangers wore. “The campers said that she looked like she had distemper,” he said and he blew air from his nose, like he was disgusted. But I noticed he had said “she” and not “it.” That meant knew what he was looking for. Somewhere there was data on that big female wolf and that data needed a response.

“No, she wasn’t sick,” I kept my voice so even that there was no way he could see my worry over the wolf having a radio collar. But maybe I should have sounded irritated that he asked again or uncertain about what I remembered. I had worked out what I would say; a healthy wolf might just roam back to where she came from. But I hadn’t worked out the way it should be said. I was afraid that I might sound like my grandmother – like she was daring everyone to contradict her.

The officer filled out the report with a black felt tip marker, sometimes shaking the pen and leaning against the sliding glass to write on it. “Did you or anyone...” he looked up from the bottom of the report where he had written my name and Samuel’s name as the people who had been present, “make any attempt to call to the wolf?”

The wildlife officer looked into my eyes and I looked back at him as steady as I could. I wasn't the kind of girl who made a lot of expressions anyway. "You sure that it was a wolf? Not a dog?"

"It wasn't a dog. I know what a wolf looks like." It wouldn't do any good to pretend I had seen something else, some dog and wolf mix. I figured he was just going to check all the way up the mountain, track the wolf through the forest. And eventually the wildlife officer would be back.

I thought how my mother would be with this officer. She would ask him inside and stutter and stand over him while he looked at the tracks out back. But when I thought of how my grandmother might be I felt stronger. I just elbowed past him with my clothesbasket, slapped each piece of our clothing, heavy and wet, on the taut clothesline. I made him find the tracks on his own.

"This area is really trampled. Sure just the two of you were here?" I nodded but I didn't look to see if he saw me or not. I kicked at the plastic laundry basket, tried to determine how heavy it was, how much more to hang out on the line. My mother could never stare back into the eyes of this man, like I could. He looked squinty eyed over at the Opichka's place. He didn't believe me, I was sure.

"How long did you see the wolf?"

"I already told you."

"Oh right, you did. About thirty minutes, right?"

"That's what I said."

"Neighbors see him too?"

"No."

“I’ll be by again later just to check on that.”

“Fine.”

The officer looked back at the yard and down at the ground. He followed me up and down the clothesline while I scooted things apart and twisted the dripping sheets. This stuff was too wet to dry in all of a summer day, no way would it dry one cold spring afternoon. But it gave me something to be busy with instead of the wildlife officer. He kept looking down at the ground around the edge of the clearing and following the tracks that were still barely visible there.

“Thanks for your time,” he told me, finally.

I watched the officer walk back around the house and I followed him and stood in the space between the Opichkas house and ours until he got in his truck and drove away.

Bethany came out of the front door then. “Is he gone?”

“For now,” I told my little sister and she stared back at me with a solemn face and black eyes shiny like a mouse’s under her tangled hair. Samuel had been right to say be ready. This wasn’t going to end with me killing the wolf.

I’d spoken to Samuel the afternoon that my grandmother took the tree down. He met me when I went to take the trash out to the bin in back of the house where we burned it. We worked out what to say if the Wildlife Office sent an officer around. It was what happened in Wyoming and Montana where the wolves had been introduced again after fifty years of extinction. Sometimes farmers killed the wolves because they were afraid the wolves would kill their sheep or cattle. I’d thought they had a right to it until I saw the wolf up close myself. It was strange but I felt a kind of kinship to the

wolf I'd had to kill. I'd killed her because I'd respected her life and her suffering. I hoped some of her spirit was watching over me.

## Six

My mom didn't come out of her room all that often anymore. She went places with Grandma Kyle – to get lumber and cement mix for the resort ranch. She went to Ellie's to drink and get a break from Grandma Kyle. She sometimes left in the Blazer and I didn't know where she was; Grandma Kyle would call and Ellie would call and I told them she was working on something out back or gone to the store when I had no idea where she was or when she would come home. Once she did, she went inside her room and locked the door – it was usually the last Bethany and I saw of her. I tried to get her to come out a few times, yelled and told her to let me in – I think she started to feel bad about how I'd been picking up all her slack: taking care of Bethany, taking care of the house. Actually, I'd started to worry that I might have to miss a lot more school to keep all of it up. My grades weren't that great in the first place and now it seemed like I missed more classes than I went to. So when she came downstairs one night I was as ready to make peace as she was.

She ate a spoonful of the beans and franks I'd made for dinner. Even though she had always been thin she looked frail and brittle since my father had left. Bethany prattled to her about a chunk of quartz she'd found in back of the house and my mother pretended to listen but I could tell she had her mind on something else. She was drinking, of course, red wine that night; she was always drinking now.

She poured it in a tall plastic cup and later added a shot of rum. Finally she smacked the cup down on the counter like she'd made up her mind to talk.

"I want to show you girls something," she said and she went back out to the Blazer. Bethany and I looked at each other while she was gone. I think we both were wondering if we would hear the Blazer start up and that would be the end of our family night. But Mom came back in with a stack of wide sketchbooks in her arms. She smashed her cigar to the table under them. Inside were charcoal and pencil drawings.

"Look, Leigha. Remember the lake we hiked to and the way the water was like a mirror?" She held up a drawing and there it was: the lake with the surface that was silver and perfectly smooth. The sunlight could only reach the top of the tallest trees and the woods beneath were cool and dark. I'd forgotten that until I saw it again in the drawing.

"Hey, that's good, Mom. I didn't know you could draw like that." I took the paper from her fingers and held it up in front of me. The rocks near the lakeshore had been slick and shiny. I'd carried Bethany – who was only two at the time – on a pack. The hike had been hard with the extra weight and I'd wanted to drink the icy clear lake water. It was all there in my mother's drawing.

My mother leafed through her sketchbooks, sometimes frowning and sometimes smiling. “Here you are, Bethany, when you were just a baby.” Bethany let the crayons she had lined up roll from the table and she reached for the heavy paper that my mother held out.

On the thick paper was a little drawing of Bethany’s round baby head and newborn dark slanted eyes. There weren’t many strokes that made the drawing, but just all the right ones.

“Do you think that it’s good?” my mother asked us.

“Well, I like it,” I told her.

“I like it too, Mommy,” said Bethany.

In the shadowed frame of her dark hair, my mother’s eyes shone like an animal’s. She jumped from her seat. “Wait there! Wait there!” she called to us. “I want to show you something else.” Her long legs took the stairs three at a time. Her dirty jeans hung loose on her hips and thighs. “I’ve been doing some night drawings and I want you to see them,” my mother shouted down from her room. “I’ve been working to show on the paper that there is night but not ...” My mother came back down the stairs with her arms filled rolls of paper and two big tablets, a handful of the charcoal pencils she liked. “See?” she squatted on the kitchen floor in back of the table and unrolled the sketches. Then she smoothed and weighed down the edges with the plates and cups from our mess on the table.

“Here,” she said and Bethany and I stood to see the papers as she lifted each from the sheath: the moon in a shaded sky against the tips of pine, a black silhouette of trees, a gray cloud passing over a mountaintop.

My mother nodded and paced between the sketches on the floor. They reminded me of the way her friend Ellie's garden is lined up in haphazard rows and clusters. She left some of the drawings on top of others and some weren't weighed down on every corner, but the floor was covered from the back sliding glass to the television to the table and around the couch. She had run out of the dishes from the table to weigh down her drawings. When she stopped she squeezed her bottom lip between her fingers and squinted at her sketches on the floor.

"But do you see what I'm trying to do?" she asked. She straightened from looking at the floor and looked between Bethany and me. I think we both knew what she needed to hear.

"Yes," I told her and Bethany was looking between her face and mine, and she nodded in agreement.

My mother's shoulders relaxed and she went back to her squat on the floor.

"Good," she said. "Good, I knew you would."

I sat back at the table and opened my biology book again and Bethany crawled under the table to retrieve the crayons that had rolled away.

Mom was still shuffling around on the floor beneath us, muttering and moving around the sketches, clinking the dirty plates on the floor. When I took Bethany and went up stairs to bed she called to me. "Lei?" Bethany was bounding up ahead of me on the stairs. "Yeah, Mom?"

But she ignored me and stood looking at her drawings. "Mom?" Her eyes were watery and her hands trembled. If I looked at her one way she seemed excited, giddy and if I looked another way she was very afraid. I wanted in that moment to take all the

drawings away from her -- take them into the trash bin and burn them. They were doing something to her that made me uneasy. I was certain my grandmother wouldn't like them, either. Bethany tugged at my hand to get me to follow her to bed. My mother had turned from me and was back shuffling through her drawings, sorting them and critiquing them, I thought.

That weekend, when I was certain my grandmother had taken my mom driving around, scoping out land and sights -- something she liked do she said because it gave her ideas for the resort she was going to build -- I went up to Bill and Irene's old place to check it out. They'd left the little boxy home they had lived in looking pretty good but not very much like a mountain resort place. I guess Irene had wanted a little two bedroom yellow house with a picket fence and all the trimmings of a place that belonged in a neighborhood with sidewalks and a friendly road in front. My grandmother had already yanked out the goofy little hedge of bushes near the front door. Inside I could see she was knocking down walls to create a great room -- sort of a main dining area was what she was thinking, with the little cabins all around.

Bill and Irene had kept two horses, a nice outdoor stable, and a little training corral. I'd never had a horse and I didn't think my grandmother had either. We were going to need horses if we wanted this thing to work, though. When people came up to places like what Grandma Kyle had in mind, they wanted to ride horses, fish, hike. We could make a good horse trail that went into my grandmother's place and ended up by the stream so the horses could drink.

There was a dirt path leading down to the creek -- it was a good foot path. Too wide and boring for the horse trail, though. I wandered off the path, keeping the noise of the stream and all the little birds it attracted to my right.

Wire and wood posts made a kind of informal divider between my grandmother's place and Bill and Irene's land. All of it was my grandmother's land now, though, our land. If my grandmother were to say it I would grit my teeth but in my head it sounded good – Christianson land.

My grandmother came over that morning, like she did nearly every morning. My mother scurried to get all her artwork out of sight but she'd papered the entire floor with it so the job was too big.

"Stop messing with that stuff and let's go," Grandma Kyle had said. I'd smirked at her when she said it.

"That's art, not stuff," I'd answered my grandmother over my mother's head. "Mom made it – don't you think it's good?" I'd crossed my arms against my chest and stared at Grandma Kyle until I realized she was standing with her own arms folded against her chest and staring at me in the same hard way. Then I dropped my arms. Grandma Kyle looked around her at the chairs, the table, the floor, all covered in my mother's art work. "Rae, you did all this?" she asked a little astonished. My mother froze where she had been crouched to gather the heavy papers together.

Grandma Kyle picked up a drawing of the horizon that my mom had done in some kind of black oily chalk. "It's all right," she said. But she held it by one corner and scrunched her face like the paper smelled bad or something. I didn't like the hopeful way that Mom had her face turned towards Grandma Kyle, so like the way

Bethany sometimes looked at me. I bit my lip; I'd meant to put my grandmother on the spot, not Mom.

“You’re wasting too much time with this, though,” said Grandma Kyle. “Look at all these!” She gestured with the drawing when she said it and the paper flew out of her fingers and sailed across the floor towards one of Mom’s piles. “I spent a lot of money to get us that place next to mine. It needs a lot of work before we can use it for the resort like we talked about.” Grandma Kyle was getting all worked up about it now. “What the hell are you doing here, Rae? You’re still living like you’re a kid. You’re still messing around with Ellie and fingerpaints like you’re a kid.”

I interrupted her, “Take it easy, Grandma. We’re still going to help you with that place.”

“Help me with it?” she was really getting mad now. “We were all going to do it – not just me – all of us together.”

I made the mistake of glancing back at my mom and seeing her face was white and her eyes were getting glassy and crazed looking again. In a way I could see my grandmother’s point; I was still sort of pissed about having to take care of my sister and the house all the time. Grandma Kyle was looking at Mom, too. “Well, aren’t you going to say anything, Rae?”

“Say? About the resort?” my mom sputtered.

“Yes about the resort! What did I buy the place for if we’re just going to talk about it?”

Mom looked pitiful sitting in the mess of her drawings, with her hair hanging down and her hands shaking from whatever was going on inside her. Bethany really takes after her in looks and I love my sister more than anyone.

I moved to stand in front of my mother and crossed my arms on my chest again, “So we’d be more like partners, then? Not you in charge? Like partners?”

Grandma Kyle narrowed her eyes at me. “What do you want, Leigha?” She took a step back from me. “I’m not going to listen to this crap from my own granddaughter. You ungrateful little...”

“You’re telling me to quit school, to move up with you, to work on this place and I’m telling you back what I want. I’m not going to be your work hand up there.”

My grandmother gave me one more, hard, stare and then marched over and yanked my mom to her feet. “Get up from that crap, Rae. I’m done standing around.”

I bit at my lip to keep from saying everything else I wanted to say – to both of them. My grandmother had dragged my mom out the door before I realized that I had done something I’d never seen anyone do. I’d made my grandmother back down.

The snow was still deep in places around the shaded thick woods I was hiking. But it wasn’t hard-packed anymore and I started to sink to my thighs in the drifts. I was too busy thinking about the morning – my grandmother – my mother – Bethany – and I had lost the sound of the creek. Snow was in my boots and my feet started to sting and burn. I trudged out towards a wide plain of scrub grass and flowers to dump out my boots and wring out my socks. At least I know where I am, I thought. The flowered plain was what had once been the far edge of my grandmother’s land. Behind me to the

north was the line of woods and another five miles down would be the clearing she had made in them for her place. To the west was the snow banks and wire fence that marked the new land. To the south was the slope of a valley with the creek I'd been following nestled into its middle. I began to feel a little of what my grandmother was feeling I think -- that it is a powerful thing to own a piece of this earth because it's far older than an building or object you could own. Rightfully you should belong to it.

Which one turns to dust, is forgotten in just a speck of the life of the other? The man or the land he owns? But owning it mixes that up in the man's mind. I know it was mixed up in mine. I stood on something older, more powerful, more beautiful than anything I could ever make myself and it belonged to me like an animal I'd shot, killed and was ready to stuff like the animals on Mr. Gilbert's walls.

## **Seven**

Monday morning I woke up knowing Samuel was waiting for me. The night before, I'd had to ask for his help again to get rid of my grandmother's gun. I didn't know where Samuel had taken the wolf's body or her radio collar but I didn't want to hang on to the gun that had killed her. The wildlife officer had spooked me. I went to the front doorway, pressed my hand against the cold splintering door, braced it open and watched Samuel rev the engine of his gleaming black pick-up. Samuel's father owned a garage in town and Samuel and his brother were always buying used cars, fixing them up and selling them again.

At last the sun was getting strong enough to warm the weather during the day. Samuel had left off his usual heavy coat. His white snap front western shirt was dirty and open in front and something silver hung round his neck on a leather strap. His skin beneath the flashing charm was smooth and brown and looked warm to me. I had tried to stay clear of Samuel Opichka since the night I'd killed the wolf. But the feeling of

his arms around me that night, leaning into him, feeling like I wasn't alone wore away at my resolution. I'd have to look over at his side of the clearing and there he always was, looking back at me. I wanted him to come over and talk to me and I wondered why he didn't. Maybe I'd caused enough trouble for him with all this business with the wolf. I knew I shouldn't expect him to want anything more to do with me.

Samuel emptied the oil pan from under the truck into a hole he'd dug at the end of the drive. His long braid was a little loose. Wings of his black hair fell over the sides of his wide cheeks so that I could not see his expression or his eyes, but I felt certain that he watched me, too. I didn't know what to say or do; if I should interrupt him or go back inside. Was he waiting for me to say I was ready to go? Would he come to the door and get me when he was ready? When I turned back to the house he finally spoke up, "I'm ready to leave if you are, Leigha." He was looking at me, trying not to smile I think. I felt embarrassed about the way I had been watching him, so obviously uncertain about what to do. "I can wait if you aren't," he said looking right at me. He had walked over to the edge of my house. We were still following the old unspoken rules of the feud between our families about his side and my side. They were hard to break.

For so long I believed all the terrible things Grandma Kyle had said about why we needed to buy the Opichkas from their side of the clearing. She told me that our living next to the Opichkas made other people think less of us, that we were poor and trashy. It felt like all Grandma Kyle told me was in my blood, I wasn't sure if Samuel's being nice to me should be able to erase it all.

Samuel held the door for me, "Well?"

I shrugged because I didn't know what else to do. "Let's go," I tried to sound nonchalant but it was strange to be in the truck with Samuel, to be friends instead of the hostile strangers we had always been.

We were going to his father's garage. But first we stopped to get Samuel's younger brother Manny, who was waiting down at the bottom of the drive for the bus. Manny was thirteen and the youngest of the Opichka boys, also the only one still in school. He stood alone in his tan corduroy duster at the end of the drive where the bus stopped. Usually I stood there next to him. Because he never brought books home, Manny's hands were empty. He packed his lunch in all the various pockets and pouches in the coat and then ate it in his classes all throughout the day. All the teachers at our conglomerated high school hated the Opichka boys.

Manny climbed in between Samuel and me to sit on one of the tiny foldout back seats in the truck's cab. He didn't look very surprised to see me sitting up front with his brother. I felt that he damn well ought to be surprised. In the bed of the truck was Grandma Kyle's rifle – the one I had used to kill the wolf. I tried nagging my mom to bring it back to my grandmother's house but there wasn't anything I could do after Grandma Kyle had insisted my mother keep it. I didn't want any way to trace that shot back to me, even though I wasn't sure it could be done. I think I also wanted the gun out of the house. Grandma Kyle had a lot of rifles but we'd never had one at our house before. My father hadn't been a hunter. He'd kept an unloaded 38 special in his nightstand. He said it was to scare off prowlers. Grandma Kyle had tried to give him bullets for it nearly every time we'd gone to her house but he always refused. It made

my grandmother furious. "Something happens to my girls and I'll load those bullets into your chest," she told him once.

At the garage Samuel handed Manny some change, "Here, get a pop." Manny scrunched his nose and sighed. I guess he thought that he was getting treated like a little kid. I tried to imagine Bethany pouting and sighing like that but I couldn't. In my family you were grown before you knew it, and way before you could work up an attitude about it. When Manny left, Samuel took the gun from the back of his truck. In his arms the rifle looked thin and brittle as a stick. Samuel and his two older brothers stood over a car engine and talked and I hung back. The Opichka shop smelled like gasoline and grease and the light was weak through the grated windows. I stood at the mouth of the garage, at what I felt was a respectful distance. But I kept my eyes trained on Samuel and his brothers. They swiped at their noses when they talked and one of them chewed gum, the one with the scar near his nose, who I remembered was Lawrence. I tried to see the expressions they made because I knew that they talked about me and about what I had done. But their faces were hidden in the shadow of the raised car hood and none of the Opichkas ever really spoke in a voice louder than a murmur.

Finally one of them came towards me, wiping his hands on his jeans and then reaching in his back pocket to pull out a sack of chewing tobacco. I couldn't remember his name. The two oldest boys were only a year apart and always so much older than I was. They did things that scared me when I was a little girl. They threw knives at trees and put rocks inside snowballs that they hitched at the school bus.

"This won't be no problem, right?"

I shook my head, “No.” I knew him from when we were both younger. I could remember myself across the yard from him, myself just a little girl. I had my hair pulled into braids and my Indian costume on for Halloween. It was a second-hand costume and the fringe was coming off the bottom and the shoulder was a little torn. My father had bought it for me even though we could barely afford to eat.

Then I remembered this was Daniel, Danny Opichka, and I remembered that he had looked at me with slit eyes and a curled lip while he leaned on his shovel. He was helping his father dig the Opichka’s barbeque pit on the property line.

“Go away, little white girl,” he’d said to me then and I had run in the house.

I gritted my teeth against the memory. I wasn’t a little girl anymore.

“No problem,” I told Daniel Opichka. I held my breath, chest swelled and shoulders squared. I thought about how you are supposed to do just that if you encounter a mountain lion in the woods. Take a deep breath and fan your jacket, puff your chest out so that you look bigger – too big to eat.

Danny Opichka was rolling tobacco between his index finger and his thumb. He was handsomer than Samuel – his features more cut or maybe just more Anglo. Was there some other place, some place off the mountain and far away, where Samuel was the handsome brother? Danny wore his hair short and was big, like Lawrence, but not fat, like Samuel and Manny. Danny walked away from me knowing I was looking at him. He swaggered. I came forward into the garage towards where Samuel was waiting.

When Danny slammed the car hood down he grinned at me. His eyes raked over my body.

*Go away, white girl.*

“Manny!” Samuel bellowed, and he and I got back in the truck. Manny didn’t ride in the cab with us this time. He waited and jumped into the bed when the truck was already rolling and closed his heavy coat around him like a tent.

I thought it must be hard to be brothers with Danny – and probably Lawrence, too. Again, I remembered them pitching the rock snowballs at the tail of the elementary bus where I had sat and watched as we pulled away. Lawrence had a missing front tooth, I remembered. He looked like a jack-o-lantern when he smiled. I turned my head to face Samuel and thought how much better I liked his round, flat profile. He glanced over at me and nearly smiled, I could tell. His face loosened a little and he nodded towards me. “So you told your brothers?” I asked him

Samuel shrugged. “They don’t ask me questions. I don’t ask them questions.” He looked more serious. “They don’t want problems with your grandmother, no more problems with your family.”

“No,” I said it to myself, softly but I cleared my throat and told him no again. It seemed that something more should come from me, I had dragged him into this. The wolf had come back on our side, not his. Maybe I wouldn’t have helped him if the wolf had been on his side, if he had killed it. I thought about the summer nights when his family was outside and I slammed my window shut to send my message over to them.

Samuel was watching me in quick moments as he took his eyes from the twisting mountain road. We were going back up. “Well...”my voice just gave out. There was nothing to say.

“This won’t be over yet. That wolf had a collar and it’s gonna be found. You know it, right, Leigha?”

“I know it.”

He nodded, eyes back on the road. “Be ready,” he told me. I thought I knew what he meant, what the words “be ready,” meant but I didn’t. You just can’t be ready sometimes. You just can’t be.

I got nervous as Samuel pulled up to the front of the high school with Manny and me in his truck. I told myself it was ungrateful the way I was feeling. Samuel was helping me and I was still ashamed to be seen with him.

“Okay,” I said without turning around. I’d opened my door just as soon as he’d stopped. I wanted to tell him thanks but the word was stuck.

For almost a week I pretended it was over between the two of us – I told myself not to look his way and I told myself he wouldn’t be looking back anymore. But I couldn’t stop thinking of the wolf. I couldn’t keep myself from looking for her in the woods near us.

At the end of the week I hiked high up into the woods in back of our house to try and find the place Samuel had buried the wolf. My cheeks were numb and stiff from the cold air that coming over the mountaintop at first. But the sun is stronger up high and soon sweat rolled down my back and my ears and nose were burning.

My hands stuck to my wool gloves. My feet were damp in my boots. The ground was unyielding, frozen earth for a few steps and then suddenly spongy and damp from the melted snow. If I got used to walking on one, then the other appeared and I stumbled and skinned my knees and elbows.

I thought about all the times I had seen Samuel that week, out messing with his truck or working on his side of the clearing. I hadn’t talked to him, even to ask the

question that was bothering me – where the wolf was buried. It would have felt weak to ask, like admitting that he had scared me with his warning to “be ready.” But I thought about his warning... I think that I searched because I needed to prove that I couldn’t find the gray wolf, to prove that she couldn’t be found.

Colorado didn’t care, a predator was dead as far as the state was concerned, but the Environmental Protection Service did care. The way they saw it, an endangered animal was missing – 2 years in prison and 150,000-dollar fine. If I let myself, then I would remember that I had killed a wounded animal on my own land, in back of my own house. It was Grandma Kyle who had shot it in the woods, and the woods belonged to no one. I pictured my grandmother behind me when I hiked -- proud of me for protecting our family like she would.

Beyond the aspen forest the trees and their branches budded with new growth but their dead leaves, twigs, and seed casings, once covered in deep white snow, had been frozen for months. They had only begun to thaw and to decay. The entire woods smelled a mix of green wood and pine and decayed leaves and earth—the mix of life and death. And it seemed that my own life was held in that same sort of place, not quite one, yet dangling close to something very like the other.

I came back into the clearing from my hike determined not to search again, defeated, exhausted. Jeans wet to the thigh, snow clinging to my hair, face scratched, I wiped my nose on my frozen glove. I was both hot and freezing, the sun, the wind, there was nothing that just was.

My boots were soaked in mud. I walked around to the back of the house to look for the hose.

Samuel sat on his back porch step, his big arms folded over the knees of his jeans, his hair pulled back in the long braid and so shiny that it looked wet. I had never noticed how glossy his hair was before. He sat in the sun, in just a white T-shirt that stretched tight across his middle but I didn't mind. He looked warm.

"Lei!" My sister rode her big wheel in circles across the back of our house, the porch, the barbecue pit, the clothesline, the compost bins. She pointed me out to Samuel but he had already seen me. "We been waiting for you!" Bethany called. She wore Samuel's corduroy hat on her head. I guess it was nice of him to let her wear it, but it made me frown. There was too much of my grandmother in me.

"Give the hat back to Samuel," I told her. But I took the hat from her head myself and walked to Samuel with it. Bethany continued her circling behind me.

"Your mom left," he told me when I crossed the barbecue pit.

"She left?" I squeezed his hat in my hands. My mom had been in the kitchen watching Bethany color when I left to go on my hike. She wasn't the greatest mother to Bethany but she had never just left – just left without any idea when I was coming back even. The sun was on my back and I still wore my heavy jacket but I knew my shirt underneath was soaked in sweat. I was breathing hard from my hike.

Samuel held a long stick between his fingers and he twisted it back and forth on the porch step so that it sawed at the wood there in a little circle. His dark eyebrows came together for a minute as if something caused him a moment's hurt. "Bethany was on the front drive, crying. Your mom musta forgot you weren't here to watch her." When he lifted his face to meet mine again the eyebrows were flat and straight and we both acted like there wasn't anything in his explanation.

He would have thought that it was a serious slight to imply that my mother hadn't acted right. I would have thought so, too.

“Was she with my grandmother?”

Samuel shook his head, no.

Grandma Kyle took up more and more of her time – they drove all over looking at horse barns and riding trails for the resort. They went into town to see antique shops for furnishings and priced lumber for guest cabins. I was always excited to hear about what they had seen and bought but my mother looked like hell when she came back from these outings with my grandmother. She would rummage around in her room and leave again with a pack over one shoulder or a bundle under one arm – take the Blazer and be gone for the night. She came home in the morning smelling like cigarettes, dirt, animal and fast food – the inside of the Blazer. Once her hair was heavy with the scent of campfire smoke. There was a quick shower and she left again to spend the day with Grandma Kyle. I didn't think she slept anymore. She didn't look like she slept.

“Well...” I didn't move to hand him his corduroy hat but I didn't go back to my side right away. I felt strange having mentioned Grandma Kyle, with the problem of her wanting the whole clearing and treating his family so bad all these years. And here he had taken care of Bethany and not even said something bad about my mom for leaving her. “Samuel, why have you been helping me with all this stuff -- the wolf, I mean?”

Samuel looked at the ground where the stick touched the wood of the porch step and he scratched my name in long curly letters. He put a little star to dot the i. And I remembered that I used to dot my i with a star when I was in grade school -- when he

and I were in grade school together. My face got hot and I wanted to smile but that would be like admitting I remembered.

Samuel was watching my face. “Where did you go?” he asked me.

“Just over to the rock cliffs and around,” but I cleared my throat to change the subject. I realized that I didn’t really like that he had helped me with the wolf. A big part of me didn’t like thinking that the wolf made us even as far as my grandmother’s being able to buy out his family’s side of the clearing, or his being Indian, but I couldn’t deny that I felt it had. “What are you doing watching me, anyway?” I said. “Shouldn’t you be down in town at the garage?”

Samuel shrugged, “My dad don’t care if I leave sometimes.” He looked back at the white circle in the wood that his stick sawed. “I been thinking about trying to finish school again.”

Now that, in my own way, I knew him better I couldn’t imagine him walking in those tiled hallways with the doubled panes of glass and the painted locker and painted doors. I was sure that he would have to go back more than one year, maybe more than two, and Samuel was bigger than most men I had ever seen. He was watching my face again and I thought he could see the picture I made of him walking in that sterile, vast, consolidated school building.

“No, Lei, my GED, I mean. I’m not going back there.”

We both smiled. That’s right, what was I thinking? He’d said my name the way that Bethany did and for me that was a part of the smile. “Then what will you do?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.” He was serious again. “I’m not staying here, though. I’m not a mechanic.”

I frowned and twisted the hat again. “Well, what are you then?”

But he just turned to watch Bethany ride her circles beyond the barbecue pit. I struggled to say something else to him, to stay in the sun and watch him twist the stick against the wood. I was cold again. The wind was back up and the light was failing. The sweat on my body made my flesh prickle. I dropped down next to Samuel on the porch step, in the last patch of sun in the clearing. Bethany was off her bike and stood at the barbecue pit. Then, watching my face, she crossed it slowly and carefully, like it was lit and hot. Samuel waved her over with the stick. He made a big arc in the air that I thought I could still see when the stick had dropped. Bethany sat down between my legs and held my hiking boots with her small hands. Samuel slid his arm around me, first just like a hug, as if he was keeping me from shivering. We sat like that for what seemed like a long time and I finally turned towards him, looked into his eyes. I meant to smile at him but his face was so pained, as if there was something he wanted to tell me and didn't want to tell me at the same time.

“What is it?” I asked. When he didn't say anything I reached up to grasp his hand in mine. “Is it the thing between our families? The wolf?”

Samuel brought his arm down from my shoulders sighing like he there was something he had decided. I tried not to be angry. “Samuel?”

The Opichka's jeep pulled onto the drive with Lawrence and Danny talking loud and Samuel's father grunting along to what they were saying. I knew whatever he wanted to tell me wasn't going to get said.

“Tracker girl,” it was Danny and he smelled of the garage, like metal and oil and dust. “Just the person I was thinking of.” Bethany jumped to her feet in front of me and darted back towards the barbecue pit.

I stood up and faced him because I was no coward and I could tell that he would like to make me cower. I was glad Bethany had gone back home. I guess sometimes I didn’t mind her being so scared of everything.

Samuel was looking up at me from the step and I knew that he wanted me to look at him but I wouldn’t. I stared back into Danny’s eyes.

“They’re looking for you,” Danny said in a singsong, the way that Bethany sometimes teased. I knew he meant because of the wolf and I didn’t pretend differently.

“Who are they?” I said instead.

“Defenders of Wildlife. They got a 3,000 dollar award for any information on a missing female gray wolf.” When he grinned it made me think of a mountain lion – the way it had in the garage. “That wolf was collared, white girl.”

*Go away, white girl.* I remembered what my grandmother had said that night at dinner – that I couldn’t trust the Opichkas because they were Indians.

I kept my grandmother in my mind, her toughness, her bravado, and I turned from their porch like I carried a gun in my belt. I walked as slow and steady as I could tolerate back to my side of the clearing. I would need to be careful of Danny. And, because they were brothers, I would be smart to be more careful about Samuel. I was just a friend. That nearly stopped me in my tracks. Had we become friends after all?

## **Eight**

Bethany had climbed to sit at a stool at the kitchen counter. She picked at a grilled cheese that I had made her yesterday.

“Don’t eat that,” I told her. I rummaged through the cupboards for something to give her – there was pasta in a jar from over a year ago, when my father lived with us. Back then, my mother kept the kitchen decorated with wooden apples she had painted herself and colored ceramic that she tried to shape into a collage on the walls. I opened the pasta jar. I figured we could still eat it if I boiled it long enough. I left the lights off and lit a candle on the counter instead and the kitchen began to fill with the scent of cinnamon wax and noodles boiling. Bethany dipped her fingers in the pooling wax around the candle’s flame.

“Samuel is nice but I don’t like his brother,” she said, stirring the wax with her finger.

“Huh,” I grunted back to her. I thought about how my grandmother had talked about the Opichkas when I was Bethany’s age. I wouldn’t have been allowed to think one of them was nice. But Samuel had been nice to me and to Bethany just now while my mother had left her alone.

“Their dog is nice. Their mom is nice, too. She gives me strawberries from her vines.”

“She does?” I looked at Bethany and her face turned red.

“Don’t tell Grandma Kyle,” she whispered.

“Okay, Bethany, I won’t tell.” I remembered Mr. Opichka giving my dad a polite wave or two – neighborly. And Manny...he was just a quiet kid. Danny and Lawrence were bad, though. They were what Grandma Kyle had talked about.

“Stay away from the older brothers, though, Bethany. They aren’t nice.”

“But the others are nice, right, Lei?” She was looking at me with her eyes filled with her wish to puzzle out our neighbors and Grandma Kyle’s words about them.

I had been told how to think about them. And I thought I should tell Bethany to think the same way I had been taught, but I just couldn’t do it. I didn’t have inside me whatever Grandma Kyle had when she talked about them. “The others might be nice,” I told my sister. And then to myself I said, “Samuel. Samuel is nice.” He helped me when I had nowhere else to go and he didn’t expect anything in return. That was the problem with my grandmother; she always wanted something in return.

The phone was ringing when I woke up the next morning. I was going to be late for school. I could tell that much. The sun was already bright and high in the window. Bethany was still a snoring bundle in the bed beside me. I didn't get the phone in my mother's room even though she wasn't in there. Her door stood wide open. Whoever called waited for me to make my way downstairs to the kitchen.

"Hello?" the receiver squawked in my hand, "Rae? That you?"

I rubbed my face with my free hand and yawned. Outside the sliding glass the sky was layered in pink and gray and blue. "Mom?"

"Leigha? It's Kyle. Let me talk to Rae." She sounded irritated. Suddenly it was my fault that she had called at dawn and I wasn't expecting her.

"She isn't here." My grandmother was talking to me, but I wasn't listening. I could still smell the roasted meat ash from the Opichka's dinner in our house. On the counter, where I had slept, sat the plates of stale noodles I had made Bethany and myself.

"Leigha?"

"Yes, Grandma?"

"You need to get the cobwebs out of your ears, girl."

I bit the inside of my cheek so I would remember to stay nice.

"I asked you where she was." meaning Mom was late and I was getting the start of a lecture that should have gone to her.

"I don't know. She didn't come home last night." I thought maybe she had gone out drinking with her friend Ellie and spent the night there. I was mad. I was mad at my mother. No food in the house and she had left Bethany alone. I was hungry. I

thought about how my mother just expected me to take care of Bethany, to take care of everything.

“As a matter of fact, I was just getting worried about her,” which was a lie because she hadn’t done anything on time or responsibly since my father had left. “I have to go to school soon and I don’t want to leave Bethany alone.”

My grandmother didn’t like my mom when she was under the influence of Ellie but she hadn’t liked Mom dragging Bethany with her every day, either.

“Well, maybe this isn’t the time to be thinking about school, Leigha. Rae has a lot to do right now with getting the resort ready and she can’t be bothered with taking care of some little child.”

“Do you mean she can’t be bothered to take care of Bethany?” My voice was shrill and the night of bad sleep was making me shake. I was losing control. “Bethany is her daughter!”

“You’re her daughter,” my grandmother barked back. “And you need to help your mother concentrate on the business. You stay home from school today. You take care of your sister and let your mother do her job.”

I think I went cold all over then. I was finished taking all that I had taken from my mother and because of my mother. I had lost my father and I sure as hell didn’t need my grandmother telling me what to do – telling me that I should take my lumps and live with it. “She isn’t doing her job. She doesn’t care a damn about her job. She’s probably at Ellie’s place.” The words were raspy when I said them with all the different things I was feeling fighting each other inside me. I knew that my mother would be in

trouble now. She had gone and made a mess of things just like Grandma Kyle had warned her not to do.

“She been drinking with Ellie? Getting herself in trouble?”

My stomach felt tight, my hands moist. “She hasn’t been here any night this week and she isn’t here now.” Upstairs the floor creaked as Bethany got out of bed.

“If Rae comes in you tell her to call me, Leigha.” But it seemed that she had stopped talking to me and was mostly muttering to herself, “I’m going to put a stop to this.” She hung up on me without saying good-bye. I sank on to a chair and sighed. It seemed like the worse my mother’s drinking got, the bigger bully my grandmother became and that just made my mother want to drink. I dropped my head into my hands. I had to find a way to feed my sister tomorrow; I couldn’t worry about what my mother and grandmother were doing to each other. I couldn’t see any way around turning to Samuel for help again. Grandma Kyle would have starved rather than go to a neighbor for food and I guess I would have myself. But there was Bethany. And there was the anger I had for my mother, maybe Grandma Kyle, too. After all, my grandmother only thought of my mother and her resort plans and not of me, not of Bethany. I tried to think through what I would do the next day – how I might catch Samuel alone but I was exhausted and hungry and I fell asleep before I could come up with a plan.

My sister came into the kitchen as I was trying to figure out what to do about our empty cupboards. “Leigha?” Bethany was behind me. Her black hair was tangled and damp from sleep. I lifted her into my arms. “Do we have to eat the noodles for breakfast?”

“Come on, Bethany,” I hoisted her up on my hip and carried her outside into the back clearing and stood at the space between the two houses. Bethany’s legs dangled down against my thighs. She was really too big to carry and heavy too, but I couldn’t set her down. Bethany relied on me to take care of her and I needed her faith in me to do what I was going to do.

Mr. Opichka shuffled outside with Danny and Lawrence. They each had steaming cups of coffee and walked in jerking slow steps. Mr. Opichka folded his long legs into the passenger side of the jeep and Lawrence sat behind the wheel. They talked in low voices, settled their coffee cups onto their thighs. They were all going down into town to open the garage for the day. I wasn’t about to come over looking for a meal while Danny was still around. I waited with my sister in the shadows between our two houses for him to leave.

Danny sneezed and spit onto the ground. He looked behind him but didn’t see us. Finally he climbed into the back seat. I moved a little closer – the uneven, crafted frame of their home made a better hiding place than the blank sides of my own house. Danny’s eyes were two dark slits and he looked from the corners of them, like he knew he was being watched.

“Shhhh,” I whispered to Bethany and I pressed us both against the stone fireplace that jutted from the Opichka’s house.

Lawrence started the jeep, then and it roared down the gravel drive and away on the winding dirt road. I walked with Bethany in my arms to the Opichka’s front door. My hand snaked forward under Bethany’s weight and I saw that it was shaking.

Samuel answered after one knock and didn't say a word to me, didn't even act like it was strange for me to be standing barefoot at his front door with my sister in my arms.

"She never came home last night," I told him. I thought if I said *my mother*, it would break me. "We don't have any food left."

He stood aside and let me into the front hall of his house. Rows of shoes were lined against the wall there and the door rubbed against a braided red and green rug when it opened and closed. His house smelled of bacon and eggs, frying pancake batter and coffee. Mrs. Opichka shuffled out of the kitchen wearing slippers and a yellow terry cloth robe. She made a clicking noise with her tongue and took Bethany from my arms.

"You need to eat, little dollie," she said.

Bethany smiled into tiny Mrs. Opichka's face and let herself be carried into the Opichka's kitchen. I stayed beside Samuel.

"You need to go look for her? You need me to take you to find her?" he asked.

I shook my head and I think he could see how hard it was for me – that I just wanted to stay mad and not worry, not switch to where I might throw myself into her arms when I saw her again.

"Okay, then," said Samuel. His hair was loose and hung to his waist. He was barefoot and his shirt was as dirty and wrinkled as my own. But he looked so solid and his brown skin looked smooth, soft. I wished I could touch him. My skin was prickly with sweat and I felt damp under my clothes. My hair was tangled crazy, I knew. Samuel smiled at me.

“You need to eat, too,” he told me and I cast my eyes down and let him lead me into the kitchen. His mother piled thin blue corn pancakes with butter and syrup in front of Bethany. Then she cut big chunks of bacon from a slab in the bottom of their refrigerator and made eggs with green and yellow peppers. She gave Bethany a glass of buttermilk with cinnamon on top and me a cup of coffee and a little pitcher of cream. Samuel sat beside me and even though I think he had already eaten, he ate a little more, maybe to stay in the kitchen with me. He leafed through a social studies book that I remembered from sophomore year.

“I gonna get my GED, Leigha,” he told me and I nodded with my mouth full of peppers and eggs.

“That’s good, Samuel,” I finally told him. I said it so seriously, so solemn that he looked into my eyes to see if I was mocking him I think. But I wasn’t. I thought he was very brave.

I left Bethany with Mrs. Opichka and let Samuel drive me to school. Manny was in the back seat again. No one spoke. At the school, Manny jumped out and I waited in the seat beside Samuel.

“You better get out,” he told me. And I frowned at him. It was hot in the cab even though outside was frosted, chilled as ever.

“Samuel,” I was going to thank him, finally, but he interrupted me.

“Leigha, you wouldn’t want anyone to see you getting out of my truck,” Samuel said. “You better get out.” But he wasn’t mad. He just looked serious, worried. And I felt ashamed.

My voice was coming from someplace deep in my throat. Could he hear me?

“It’s my grandmother,” I told him. But then I couldn’t say anything else and he didn’t seem surprised or confused but just looked at me like he knew exactly what it was I meant. He had left his hair down and it came over one side of his face and down his back and his eyes were dark and expressionless. But as foreign as it felt to be sitting in his truck, he was still Samuel who I had known, in a strange way, all my life.

“It’s that you’re Indian and my grandmother, she...” but I trailed off because he had moved his head back a little in surprise and his full lips parted, there was more, something I had interrupted.

“What is it?” I asked him. And I’d found my voice again. I didn’t like there to be something I didn’t know and it seemed there was.

Samuel’s eyes went dark. “It’s more than that, Leigha. Ask her. Ask your grandmother.”

Why don’t you tell me? I should have asked him. But maybe I didn’t want to know. I was certain that I didn’t want him thinking he had rattled me, if that was his intention. I climbed from the cab and walked towards the school without looking back. The heavy glass door was like ice in my palm.

My leather gloves were back in the pocket of my jacket and the jacket was hanging on a peg by my front door. I was wearing Mrs. Opichka’s denim coat. She’d pressed it on me before I left their house but the sleeves were short and the shoulders tight. Her jacket smelled funny to me like cooking and cedar oil. Everything in my house smelled of fire smoke, gunpowder and dust.

When I got out of the truck I walked towards the glass doors of the building without looking around me but I could still feel some people staring. There was a weird

mix of people who went to my school – rich ski resort kids, the children of hippie outdoor enthusiasts who wanted to live close to nature, the children of survivalist parents who had come to the mountains to avoid other people. Some of the kids that knew my grandmother and knew my family would be surprised to see that I was with an Opichka and others would assume Samuel was my boyfriend. I squared my shoulders to let everyone know that I didn't care what any of them thought.

All those gray lockers in a row against the streaming sunlight – high ceilings and high windows, it really was a beautiful building where I went to high school. But it was cold and impersonal for all of us. I had to walk fast if I didn't want to be late for my first class, which was Biology. I didn't need it to graduate but the teacher was a taxidermy fanatic and I liked his classroom. At the conclusion of the semester in every class, Mr. Gilbert taught taxidermy -- no matter the subject. He was a small man in cowboy boots and partially shaved or grown in beard – wispy unkempt hair and always in the quiet brisk manner of someone who knows he is offending but still can't help but demonstrate this hobby – this art – this gruesome occupation that he loved so much.

In nearly every section of wall there were deer heads, fish, birds made stiff and still in a variety of positions to reflect docility or aggression, some thoughtful and still, some posed in an action that it might have done in its life or seeming to attack whatever it was turned to. When I walked in all the animals stuffed and posed seemed almost horrific to me. I thought of how I'd been forced to kill the wolf my grandmother had injured. She was probably the only wolf to come into Colorado. I winced. At least Mr. Gilbert had never gotten a hold of a wolf of his own – I didn't think I would like to see a wolf treated like a decoration or a trophy, no matter what I had done. Of course, the

wolf was endangered, I reminded myself and took a deep breath. Mr. Gilbert would never be able to hang one on his wall.

Over my desk there was a new animal – a buffalo head stared with bulging black glass eyes. I had never seen a buffalo up close but this head wasn't slovenly stupid like a cow's. There was some kind of sad dignity to its face and I wondered if what had happened with the wolf had made me soft. I felt a little crazy. Especially when the rabbits posed in their fake greenery and the squirrel holding shellacked acorns hadn't bothered me before. Maybe it was the size of the buffalo or its rarity that made it seem magnificent to me suddenly. It was horrible that the buffalo's head hung above me, both decorative and yet defiled at the same time.

Suddenly, the thing I had loved most about Mr. Gilbert's room didn't seem right. I felt sick looking at all the animals that had been killed and stuffed like this.

“Interesting news I have, class,” he said, his voice straining. “Today after 6<sup>th</sup> period I will be assisting Colorado Wildlife Office in an investigation for a missing collared gray wolf.” His eyebrows rose in question: was anyone interested in the search? A gray wolf? Only about half the class bothered to stop talking, rustling papers, sipping their soft drinks. We mountain kids, we conglomerated school children didn't often think of our schoolwork or regard the teachers or each other as any more than a passing event and association in our lives.

The teacher went on, “It's a large female named Luna. She's probably dead. That's what they're thinking.”

“Then will you stuff her?” someone asked. Everyone laughed. My teacher turned red in the face but smiled.

“Oh no, no, I don’t think so,” he said softly. Then louder, "But I have offered the help of our biology class. This is an important environmental issue facing our state and..."

"Are we going tracking?" a boy in front asked. He had the same straight dark hair of Samuel's family. I didn't know his name and he didn't know mine. He probably lived an hour in the other direction from where I lived. That was how a conglomerated school felt.

"I know how to track," another boy offered, a red faced blond with a cowboy hat and the faded back pocket ring of a chewing tobacco can. I knew how to track, too. I would bet that most of us, excepting the kids from the ski slopes, had seen a little tracking done. We probably would be a help to the investigation.

"Do we have to go?" I said and nearly the entire room turned to look at me.

"Well," Mr. Gilbert took a breath. Obviously he'd been hoping he wouldn't face opposition. "Right now there are no Colorado laws that protect a gray wolf. It's status as an endangered animal is at risk."

"An endangered enadangered animal then?" someone said but it didn't get as many laughs as ribbing Mr. Gilbert about the taxidermy had.

"You could say that. The gray wolves were introduced back into Wyoming and have been traveling down this direction. Some ranchers just over the mountain ridge have killed them, complaining that they are a threat to their animals. Right now there is a hefty fine and a even a small jail sentence that they face as punishment." Mr. Gilbert looked thoughtful for a moment. He flipped the biology book he was holding open even though it was plain that he wasn't going to start class yet. "It's unusual for a grown female to wander from the pack. She may have been sick." He looked up from the

book and addressed the class again, more sure of himself. "Friday morning we will meet at the school at seven thirty AM as usual but we will be going up the mountain for the day to assist in the search." Mr. Gilbert cleared his throat as if he was trying to soften his burst of authority. "And experience tracking animals will be appreciated, I'm sure." He nodded at the boy in the cowboy hat. "Bring a sack lunch and water," Mr. Gilbert made a point of looking at me, "We'll be at it all day." Everyone smiled at each other and someone whispered "Yes!" from behind me. I was the only one in the room not looking forward to it.

## **Nine**

I found my mother at Ellie's house smoking a cigar on the sagging porch. Ellie had a tequila and lemonade in one hand and a watering can in the other. She was roving the little lawn and garden she kept in front of her house. "Hey there, Lei," Ellie waved. I could smell the tequila on her breath. I'd hitched a ride to get out to Ellie's place and then still had to walk a couple miles more. I was sweating and tired. "I'd offer you something to drink but I don't have anything without booze in it," she added.

"That's okay," I told her.

I turned towards the sprawled form of my mother in one of Ellie's old porch chairs, "You didn't come home last night," I said and my voice sounded so low and growling that it could have been my grandmother that said it.

My mother just rolled her eyes at me. "So what? I didn't feel like it." She had a glass of the tequila spiked lemonade in one hand and her cigar hanging sloppily from

her lips. “What’s your problem with me, anyway, Leigha? You’re not a baby anymore...”

“But Bethany is!” I cut her off. “You left her alone.” My voice cracked with the angry tears stuck in my throat. “There was nothing to eat and I had to go next door to the Opichka’s for help.”

My mom scowled and straightened up. “You shouldn’t have done that,” she said. “Kyle will whip your ass if she finds out.”

My vision blurred; I wanted to hit her. “You left Bethany alone! You never came back!” I screamed. My mom flinched and looked away. Ellie stopped watering the edges of her little lawn area and watched us. “Rae, you can just pay the Opichkas back some time. Help them out sometime,” she said, her voice trailing off. It was hard to imagine that the Opichkas would ever need help with something that would prompt them to come to us. Ellie cleared her throat. I guess she had been thinking the same thing. My grandmother didn't tend to like her any better than the Opichkas. And this gave her a soft spot for them, I thought.

“There's nothing wrong with those people,” Ellie gestured towards my mother with the watering can and droplets arched into the air. “It’s okay to go to them for help when you need it, Lei.”

My mother made a loud whistle, “Ellie, you must be drunk or you’ve forgotten what Kyle is like. She doesn’t believe in asking for help.”

I didn’t like the way my mother was talking about Grandma Kyle, trying to make her sound ridiculous. She hadn’t known how hard it was for me to go over to the Opichka house that morning. I’d believed in what my grandmother had taught us.

“Well, there wasn’t anything to eat. I’d already made those noodles.” I sounded whinier than the way I had imagined saying it to her. I cleared my throat to start again, made my voice harder, “Those noodles were older than Bethany. We could have had food poisoning.”

“You look fine to me,” my mother said looking at the cigar in her fingers. Her nails were stained black at the tips. She wasn’t listening to me but I could tell she was sorry.

“Did you talk to Grandma Kyle today?” I studied her face to see if my grandmother had found her and let her have it. I hoped so.

“Not yet.” My mother chewed at the cigar. Her hair was twisted up off her neck. It looked greasy and dirty.

“So she didn’t call you?” I was worried about ratting out my mother. Grandma Kyle would be have to furious with her. I hadn’t thought about it before that, but my grandmother might even fire her from her resort idea. Then what would we do? “Cause she called up at the house in the morning...” I let my voice fall off – I didn’t want to tell her that I had ratted her out. Suddenly it felt like going to the Opichkas for help was the bigger secret to keep from my grandmother.

“Oh, she’ll get a little mad that I might be goofing around with Ellie, not working, drinking too much...you know.” My mother spit cigar tobacco on the porch and waved away a look Ellie gave her for it. She was right. My grandmother wouldn’t think anything of her leaving Bethany, of her not coming home and leaving us with nothing to eat. My grandmother would only see that my mom hadn’t been at her beck and call when she wanted her.

“So you’re not worried.” I think it came out sounding like a question but I had said it to myself. My mom just shrugged.

I couldn’t believe it! Here I’d been counting on Grandma Kyle to finally force my mom under control, even feeling a little sorry for the scene she would rain down on my mother. But it had all been a fantasy. My mother and I both knew that nothing I said to Grandma Kyle about her would make any difference at all. My mother was her creation, her possession. My grandmother had made it her habit to only see what she wanted to see when she looked at my mother. I rubbed the soles of my shoes back and forth on wooden porch floor until rubber came off onto the paint in raised black streaks. “That’s it?” I asked her.

“Well, and then she started talking about how maybe you should just take the test for your GED. You know, quit going to school so you could help around the house more – take care of Bethany.”

“Well, I’m not going to do it,” I said.

But she was back to chewing the cigar end and staring drunkenly into the yard. I don’t think she cared that I was dead serious with her now. I wasn’t going to play along with whatever Grandma Kyle wanted when Bethany and I were so expendable to her, to my mother.

“Well, Lei, you know it would really help out if you did,” she said but I could tell that she was barely aware of what she said to me. “But do what you want. Kyle ought to forget about wanting you to drop out of school with all the work she’s got on Bill and Arlene’s place,” said my mother.

“And if she doesn’t forget I’ll still tell her no.”

My mother pulled the cigar from her mouth and looked at me then. I could see that her skin was dry and her eyes were bloodshot. She looked like she needed a shower and a change of clothes. She looked like she should have eaten breakfast in the Opichka kitchen herself. But she didn't look angry and that was what I had expected, had hoped for even. She was going to let Grandma Kyle try and bully me into dropping out of school like it was nothing. My grandmother was going to crush any future I might have away from this mountain. I wanted to yell.

“Be careful, Lei.” She told me in a voice that was soft as a whisper but also graveled with emotion or wear. “It's not as easy as you think it is.”

“It is for me,” I told her and I hoped she saw all the disgust I felt for her when she looked in my eyes.

“We'll see,” she answered me and looked back to where Ellie was stumbling through her impatiens and tomato plants with the watering can.

Had she said it in any tone but the one of defeat and sadness that she used, I might have said something smart back to her, something to hurt her. But I would have been too late. Whatever could hurt my mother already had.

My mother tossed the cigar out into Ellie's yard and scratched the chair back to stand. “Let's get out of here – get some food, Lei.”

We drove to Kroger's market. My mother filled a basket with cans of soup, tuna, jars of pickles, and boxes of rice – things that last on the shelf. For Bethany she threw in a Barbie plate and cup. For me she added hand lotion, mini pads and expensive shampoo that smelled like pineapple. These things were luxuries to us even before my father had left. I had never been able to open a cupboard or closet and say, “Here it is.”

I found a coloring book for Bethany of mountain animals. The animals were all posed to look ferocious or adorable and none of them looked the way they did when you saw them. My mother and I both laughed at the pages while the clerk rang everything up. My mother paid with a credit card made out to Christianson Resort. I felt a little hopeful to see that – like maybe this idea of my grandmother’s was really going to happen and we would all be swept up in its success.

We came to get Bethany at the Opichka’s house and Mrs. Opichka patted my mother’s cheek and smiled. My mom got stiff but she tried to smile back. We weren’t use to being affectionate like that with each other.

“You and Bethany look like Arapahos,” she told my mother. My mom just nodded, embarrassed, while I hoisted Bethany onto my back. “Goodnight,” I said as politely as possible to Mrs. Opichka, trying to make up for how awkward we all were. I was careful not to look over her shoulder for Samuel.

My mother made chicken and potatoes and we ate the baked bread from Krogers Market. I dished out canned peaches and vanilla ice cream for dessert. We used all the silver-wear we had.

“Just leave the dishes there,” my mother said. “I’ll do them in the morning before I leave.” So we stacked the dishes in the center of the table and on the kitchen counter behind us. I pulled out books and notes from school – I had a biology test and later that week and I had a paper to write. Now that I knew my grandmother wanted me to quit school, my homework seemed precious to me. Bethany colored in the new coloring book, “A mountain lion,” she said turning the pages, “A bear.” “A deer.” “A wolf.”

My mother sat at the table fingering another cigar but after just a moment of staring into space she sighed and then disappeared up the stairs and into her room.

Tomorrow I had to meet with Mr. Gilbert and my science class to search for the wolf and I would have liked to disappear upstairs myself but I wouldn't leave Bethany the way my mom did. I nodded at my sister when she held up the pictures she'd been coloring but I was thinking that I would like to find that wolf before anyone else did. I wished I could talk to Samuel about it but I'd already been there that morning and I didn't want to run into Danny. He would know what I wanted with Samuel. When I sighed I sounded so much like Mom that Bethany looked up from her coloring and worry was plain in her round soft face. "Let me see your pictures again." Bethany smiled at me, relieved, and I tried to smile back.

It wasn't hard to put together a sack lunch with all the food my mother had bought. I packed leftover chicken, chocolate chip cookies, and a thermos of water into my backpack. Bethany woke up early to see me off. Mom was snoring in her room, there was a trail of beer cans holding down the edges of her drawings -- the drawings still spread over most of the floor. Bethany had put her hands on her hips, her dark hair hanging down her back. "I'm going outside to play," she had said, disgusted with the little walking space left downstairs.

"Don't make a lot of noise or Mom will wake up," I told her. It wasn't that I'd been worried about my mother getting enough sleep but that I'd been worried about what she would do when she was awake. She might leave my four-year-old sister alone again. Or worse, take Bethany with her into the mountains while she drank and drew and tried to avoid my grandmother. "Bethany!" I'd hissed up the stairs at her. She had

gone to dress for the outdoors and appeared at the top of the stairs in her flannel lined jeans and hooded sweatshirt. She slid down the stairs on her bottom, a smile on her face.

"I can go over to see Mrs. Opichka if she leaves," she said. I was glad to see that she took some pride solving her situation alone with my mother.

"Good idea," I said. I wasn't just worried about her, I was worried about what this search for the wolf would bring. The boy in the cowboy hat had said that he knew how to track, and then there was Mr. Gilbert, who I figured had first had to catch and kill all those animals before he'd stuffed them. I took a breath and nodded at my sister. Bethany had hugged me before I left. That was something we didn't usually do in my family.

I took the bus into school. I didn't see Samuel's black truck when I left the house, only the jeep that Mr. Opichka, Lawrence, and Danny took to the shop. Manny Opichka wasn't at the bus stop. I tried not to look for him or for Samuel.

Mr. Gilbert drove a van out to where we would meet with other people that were going to look for the wolf. The route we took perfectly traced the reverse of the route I had taken to school. My biology class was packed in an uncomfortable silence and we drove past the drive to my house and even the area that I had hiked in back of the house. Finally we stopped at the spot where some campers had reported seeing a sick female gray wolf.

The woods smelled like fire smoke because the Colorado Wildlife rangers had camped there the night before. All the biology class stood dully, waiting for the rangers to tell us where to go.

"Hear that?" one of them pointed towards the sky. A single-engine Cessna swooped into view and circled closely over the tops of the trees. The wildlife officer that had come to my house appeared at the edge of the group near Mr. Gilbert. The wildlife officer introduced himself as Davis; he didn't say if it was his first or last name and Mr. Gilbert called him "Ranger" when he asked about the Cessna overhead. I dipped my head and stared at the ground. It was way too trampled where we were to get a good fix on any one set of tracks.

"We've got a receiver and antennas in that plane that can track the wolf's collar up to twenty five miles away." Davis shouted to be heard over the lawn mower growl of the Cessna. "The system is called CyberTracker. It activates when the animal has been inactive for more than an hour." When he looked down the officer squinted at me like he was remembering coming to my house. I'd turned my face upwards to watch the Cessna nearly brush against the tips of the tallest pines.

"We haven't been able to get up here until now and we're certain that the animal is dead. But we need to know how she died. Whether it was natural or if she was killed." He was looking right at me now. "A sick animal might have tried to attack a human. There wouldn't be anything you could have done except for shooting it."

I stared back at him, looked him right in the eyes. If he thought I was about to blurt out that he had guessed correctly the wolf had tried to jump me and I'd shot it...well he was crazy if he thought I would do that. We'd come too far with this. I didn't know what the wolf's body would show about what had happened. I thought about the resort that my grandmother wanted to build and what the death of an endangered gray wolf might do to her dream. Wouldn't that taint the thing before we

even got it started? Wouldn't people shun a place owned by someone who had done that? I thought of the wolf and how I'd had to make the decision to kill her when she'd come back from the aspen forest with her hide ripped from the muscle. It was none of the officer's business what I had done. It was mine.

A man stepped forward to introduce himself in a mumbling sort of way. I couldn't make out his name but only that he was on loan from Montana where the wolf had gone missing. He didn't look hopeful about our biology class assisting in the search. A couple other vans had pulled to the clearing and some other volunteers were gathering up.

"Who knows how to track?" one of the Colorado Rangers bellowed out. I could and so could the cowboy hat guy from my class. There was a hippie looking guy with a lot of beaded jewelry and white socks and sandals who raised his hand. I didn't turn around. There might have been more behind me who had raised their hands too.

Davis was looking right at me. "I'll take that group," he said. The Montana man nodded towards Davis. And Mr. Gilbert piped up that he could help guide a group of novices. But Davis had turned away and so had Montana so the important parts were already decided.

"We're going down this way," Davis told the group. The cowboy hat smirked and walked out in front of me. Davis was at our backs. He was confused about me, I could tell. Was I here to help find the wolf or to make sure no one found her? I wasn't sure myself. The hippie was carefully stepping over branches and piles of hard pack snow on the ground but he had a lot of questions and he asked them so fast that it

seemed a little chatty. "How did you get to this spot in the first place? Was the wolf's radio collar here?"

"Nope," Davis grunted. "They had her going down in this direction, though. We think she was probably sick, maybe distemper. She might have come across some people." Davis was talking right into the back of my head. I crunched forward to where the cowboy hat was leading.

"You mean that people might have saw her or people might have killed her? The wolf attacked them? Someone would have reported that by now wouldn't they?"

The cowboy hat had stopped and turned to wait on what Davis said. "Where we going to, anyhow?"

"Up ahead," Davis stomped out to the front. I knew where we were. It was near a towering rock formation where I had hiked since I was a kid. We must have been four miles or so up the mountain from my home and I was getting suspicious of what Davis wanted to prove here.

He'd stopped beside the cowboy hat and looked to be waiting for the hippie and me.

"Leigha, right?" Davis said.

The cowboy hat raised an eyebrow at me. He must have thought that he was going to be Davis' buddy on this track...the big hero who knew how to find the wolf.

"We're up in back of your house, aren't we?" Davis said.

"Maybe."

"I already tracked that wolf down this mountain up to your property."

"Then why are we doing this?" I asked him.

"To get a fresh set of eyes out here," the hippie said from behind me. He was the only one who seemed oblivious to the accusation. The cowboy hat folded his arms over his chest. "Well, is that true?" the cowboy hat asked. "Did it come on your place? Did you see it?"

"I saw it," I told Davis and the hat. "But I told you, already, the wolf went back into the woods."

"I'm not saying it didn't," said Davis. He looked at the hippie and I could see plain that Davis didn't like guys like him. He didn't like the cowboy hat much, either, and I thought that I might have gotten along fine with him except that we were working on two different sides of this problem of the gray wolf. We couldn't trust each other.

"Let's move out horizontal here and start down -- see what we each come up with." Davis snorted at the sandals on the hippie's feet. "You stay on the path." Davis nodded cowboy hat over to the right. "Go about 20 or so yards down and Leigha and I will go to the left. You all can whistle, right?" No one bothered to say yes because no one needed to say no. "I'll whistle every 20 minutes and we'll whistle down left to right."

I had already started off the path and swung wide of where I knew the rock formation would be coming up. Davis passed me by to be on the far left. "Guess we'll meet up at your property."

"Unless one of us finds the track leading off from there," I countered.

He was kicking at some mud and pack snow near me, not quite stopping to chat but not moving off very fast. "Why don't you tell me what happened with the wolf?"

You have a right to shoot an animal that you thought was attacking. You got scared. You did something you regret."

"That isn't what happened."

"What about those Indians living next to you?"

"They had nothing to do with it." I was surprised at how fast and hard the words came. Davis had stopped and nodded.

"Maybe you feel like it's too late to tell the truth. You can tell me right now and we can find the wolf and end this search. This plane tracking the collar and all these rangers out here costs a lot of money. It'll only make it harder for you when we find the wolf."

I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't make it seem like I was agreeing that there was something to hide...some involvement in the death of the gray wolf. But that was also the problem with telling him. Was I protecting myself, or what Samuel had done for me? That isn't what it felt like. I was protecting my grandmother. She fired the rifle shot that left me no choice but to kill the wolf. I crouched down at the ground to start to track. "We'll see," I told Davis and he shook his head and crunched off to my left on the horizontal line of pine forest.

## **Ten**

To track an animal you have to turn your face to the side and lay your cheek against the ground. On movies the tracker squints like he's looking straight ahead but in real life you want to look wide. You make your eyes scan as broad an area of the ground as your sight can reach. Scatter you brain across the area that you are watching; that's what a good tracker will tell you.

When I lay on the ground it was wet and cold and smelled of the mixture of decay and bloom that is particular to spring. Sparrows had made a nest in the root pocket of the tree beside me and their tracks and the tracks of squirrels were pressed into the earth closest me. I could have seen those tracks without scattering my sight. It was pretty damp on this side of the rock formation, a good spot for lizards and toads, and I saw the little caves they had burrowed into the ground for winter. Tiny whirlpools of dirt slid down into where they had slept until the bulk of the snows had melted. I was trying too hard. I was focused forward like a person and needed to look wide like an

animal does. I concentrated on the width of the place, tried to push my vision as if I could have found Davis on my far left and the path on my right. It hurt. At first I couldn't see anything but then I saw the little three pronged prints of the birds in their circular wanderings from the nest. Farther left were some bigger tracks, round and flat, bobcat maybe. Lots of the little jagged marks that a squirrel would make.

I hadn't been back this far but I knew from my after school hikes where the wolf tracks were closer to the rock formation. I had been more intent on tracking Samuel on those hikes. Well, not so much tracking him, I finally realized, as just combing the area up behind our houses the way that any hiker might. I had feared coming across a pile of stones of a patch of earth that was clearly the wolf's grave. When I hadn't found anything, I'd started to believe that there wasn't anything to be found. That wasn't true, though.

Overhead the hum of the circling Cessna engine reminded me that the collar was doing the job that the mound of rocks or earth did in my imagination. I rose from the ground and hiked closer to the rock cliffs where I knew to find the tracks.

When Davis whistled I was about 40 feet ahead of him. The others sounded even a little farther behind than that. I jogged after I whistled until the towering slick rocks were in sight. Then I slowed and laid my cheek to the ground again. Lots of mice and other small tracks near the big rocks. One set of the wide careful prints of the gray wolf.

The wolf's tracks curled around rocks towards and into a gap between two tall cedar trees. A few more yards into the forest, a pile of her scat had dried. It hadn't been bulky enough. She'd been sick. I'd known that already, of course, but it was a different

thing to be piecing it together as I tracked her. I walked forward into the woods and behind me the whistles of the cowboy hat and hippie and the ranger, Davis, called out to each other.

The woods grew dense as the aspen appeared. Their peeling white trunks huddled together. There were tiny tufts of gray and white fur clinging to sticker bushes and places where the wolf had dug at the roots of the trees. I found more of the thin, dried scat deeper in the thick aspen forest and the remains of an owl that the wolf hadn't finished. I was on my hands and knees over the tracks, the heel of my palm sinking into the back pad print of the wolf, my face finding the path through the tight twigs and stickers that the wolf had broken before me. She hadn't had much to eat or drink. The trees she'd urinated under still stank. She'd been thirsty. I stopped just behind the back clearing of my house, a thick crop of aspen between where I tracked the wolf now and where I had killed the wolf then.

To my right I found where the wolf had gone back into the forest, where I had found her in the scope of Grandma Kyle's rifle. But there was nothing left to show that I had seen her through the scope and let her go.

Two of the aspens showed chunks of pale wood gone from their trunks, splintered from narrow trunks and causing them to list to crazy angles against the others. My grandmother's bullet had left a path. Blood and matted fur caught against the splintering timber. What had happened here was plain to see. The wolf had left deep dragging tracks back into the clearing. Long ago, I had brushed her tracks away beyond the aspen veil where they entered our property.

I sat back on my haunches. Something about the violence of the spot made my stomach roll.

I could hear someone crunching over the ground and breaking through the brush from behind me. Davis, I figured.

“We’ll probably find the radio collar today,” he said. He crouched down beside me. “Why don’t you tell me what happened? Where is she?” he asked me. I could tell he was trying to sound casual, like it was no big deal – like we were just two friends talking.

I rolled my eyes and grunted. I wasn’t going to fall for that. He made me feel glad to have my secret. When I didn’t say anything he tried to answer for me.

“Here’s what I think happened. The wolf came on your property and you saw she was sick. You got scared. You shot her.” So, he’d already been this far and he spent his time tracking me instead of looking for tracks on the gray wolf where he knew he wouldn’t find any.

"It didn't happen like that."

Davis moved closer to me. His face was soft and that surprised me. I would have been angry but I guess he just wanted to know. And he thought he had me cornered with the radio collar. Maybe he did.

"What is all this for, anyway? You already tracked the wolf. You know where she went," I said. I guess I was curious too.

Davis shrugged. "Trying to get people involved, ya know. We want people to watch out for the wolves when they finally move down this far, down into Colorado, I mean." Davis smiled and his teeth practically glowed in the shadowed aspen forest.

"Hell, the rest of your science class is probably hearing a lecture on preservation right now and getting all excited for the day those Montana wolves stray down this far."

The walkie-talkie on Davis' hip crackled, making both of us start.

"We picked up a signal," a voice deadpanned over the static. Davis looked at me with the question written plainly on his face.

"I don't know," I answered him.

He gripped the walkie-talkie still looking questioningly at me, "Copy that. Is it the collar?"

"Yeah."

"Is it the wolf?"

"Looks like a grave. It's 16 miles up the mountain from you," came the steady expressionless voice. I didn't know how the man talking could sound so calm, so uncommitted, when we were all out here looking for the very thing he had spotted. The wolf's grave had become almost mythical to me, like the city of Atlantis or Mount Olympus. I waited with my whole body for the next words from the walkie-talkie. I began to recognize the sound to the static as the hum of the Cessna flying overhead. The man in the little plane was talking to someone else – I couldn't make out what he was saying.

Davis' brow wrinkled, "What was that?" he barked into the walkie-talkie.

"The grave is on private land. You'll need a warrant."

"I'll get one." Davis told him. He'd turned away from me. I didn't have my secret anymore. I stood up – started to make my way through the aspen towards my home. Sixteen miles up from us? I had a pretty good idea where that was and my mind

felt numb all around this idea. As I made the last step from the cloying fingers of the aspen branches into the clearing I heard the monotone voice of the man in the plane say the words aloud, “Kyle Christenson is the owner.”

Samuel had buried the wolf on my grandmother’s land.

## **Eleven**

As soon as I broke through the trees into the clearing I went right for the Opichka house. I was mad – mad enough to bang on the door with my fist and mad enough not to be ashamed when Mrs. Opichka finally opened the door with a bewildered smile.

“Lei!” My sister called out to me. “Look at what I made!” She held up a bracelet with pieces of polished quartz tied all around with bright blue string.

I could feel a little of the shame start to warm my face then, but just a little, “Is Samuel here?” I asked Mrs. Opichka. She didn’t need to answer me, though, because Samuel was behind me, breathing hard like he’d run to catch up with me. “Come here,” he pulled me back out the door with his hand on my shoulder. “You passed me back there like you didn’t even see me,” his voice was hoarse. “What’s wrong, Leigha?” His eyes were soft like he wanted to help me. He looked the way he had

when I had first come to him – when the wolf’s body lay in the back clearing and my hair smelled of gun smoke.

He’d been watching that night, too. But the wolf had come back to our side instead of the Ophichka’s side. So he’d watched me kill her even though he’d been ready to do the same.

All of that came back to me when I looked at him and I couldn’t speak. No one had ever helped me with any problem as much as Samuel had helped me. No one had ever helped me at all. My eyes were sore and my cheeks were wet when Samuel crushed me to him. “They found the wolf,” I told him. The shame of crying didn’t just stay in my face. It made my whole body burn. I hugged him back and we stood there a while until I wasn’t crying anymore. I swiped at my face with the back of my hand. When my eyes cleared enough that I could see his face, I was surprised that he didn’t look the least bit guilty. “Why did you do that?” I choked out. “You buried the wolf on my grandmother’s land.” The anger started to swell up inside me again. “You left the collar on her.”

“That was where the wolf belonged. Your grandmother killed that wolf. Not you, Leigha, not really.”

“She was sick!” My voice was high and cracking. I hated the way I sounded but I couldn’t seem to catch my breath to steady it. “You thought about killing her, too; we talked about it that morning.”

“That wasn’t the way your grandmother shot the wolf, Leigha. You know that.”

He was right. My grandmother shooting the wolf was like what Mr. Gilbert did to the animals all posed and stuffed around his classroom. There was a difference –

even if I couldn't explain it – between that and how Samuel and I had talked about killing the wolf. Samuel and I had respected her. I leaned back into him and let him hold me again. His hands were on my shoulders and they stroked down the length of my arms but it was the same mix of hesitancy and desire that was always present between us. He jerked back and let go of me and I sighed loudly in my frustration. I didn't understand how he could scoff at my grandmother for carrying on the feud over the clearing and then always let it come between the two of us. "Samuel?" I breathed. I wasn't sure what I was going to say but I knew I needed him right then a lot more than I cared about who should own the clearing.

Samuel shook his head like he didn't want me to say anything past his name. then he quickly took another step back.

Samuel's long hair was loose and it fell down both cheeks as he turned to look at the ground.

"My grandmother bought the place next to hers – she wants us to move up there and work it for her," I blurted out. "Maybe all this business with the clearing will finally be over between our families." I tried to see behind the drape of his hair to read his expression. I was sure his feelings for me were the same as mine and that the land feud was behind all the moments I felt him pull away.

Samuel bit at his lip like he was thinking. Then he looked up into my eyes again. "You'll be okay, I think," he said.

I nodded but I wasn't really sure what he meant – *I'll be okay*. He had been thinking about the move to Grandma Kyle's house now that the wolf had been found.

Maybe he thought I was afraid of her. He wasn't wrong but I didn't like him guessing at it. "Yeah, of course I'll be okay," I said.

Samuel frowned like what he had to say hurt him, "Maybe Bethany should stay here for a while?" he offered. I was angry and embarrassed but we both knew no one was going to step up to take care of my sister except for me. I couldn't speak so I just nodded in agreement. Grandma Kyle would ignore that Bethany was with the Opichkas if it meant getting rid of her for a while. She'd let me take my little sister over this morning without a lot of fuss.

"But your mom," Samuel said.

"What about her?" My anger at finding the wolf's grave was still underneath everything else. I didn't like talking bad about my family. I didn't like Samuel doing it. I stared at Samuel with the old feelings I'd had driving here. *Don't say anything else*, I warned him with my eyes and the grit of my teeth. "I was tracking the wolf with a group from school," I said quietly and quickly. I didn't want to talk about my mom, especially not with him, especially not after he had forced my hand with my grandmother. I was stranded there at the house and needed his help again. That need made my chest hurt like when you run too hard and too long.

Samuel looked back at me straight like he knew I was thinking all that he couldn't say about my mom. "I'll take you to your grandmother's house," he said instead.

## **Twelve**

The gate to my grandmother's long drive stood open and a police car blocked the way inside. A news station from Denver had a van parked a little off the road and part way into the brush of my grandmother's property. The lights for their cameras were flooding the area when we first drove up. "Must not be much news in Denver tonight," Samuel muttered to me. He'd parked his car a little ways behind the news van and we pretended to be curious onlookers. We were waiting for the reporter and the cameraman to go back inside the van and leave.

"That search got a lot of attention," I answered. We were whispering even though no one could hear us inside his truck. "And then there's the whole part about this being the first wolf in Colorado in a hundred years."

Samuel frowned while he tried to search my face. “You aren’t guilty of anything,” he told me finally.

“You might be the only one to feel that way,” I whispered back. He put his arm around me. A few other cars were parked nearby. Samuel had tinted windows and it was starting to get dark so no one recognized me.

When the news van left the other people watching thinned out. Finally it was just us and Samuel rolled the truck forward, even with the police car. It was good and dark by then and the police had turned their headlights and strobes on. Now it looked like a real crime had taken place. When Samuel pulled up I forgot that we’d been lurking on the road like all the other on-lookers and that the police wouldn’t know us. I leaned across Samuel. “Can I go in?” I asked as business-like as possible and nodded up the drive.

I recognized one of the officers from around town but I didn’t know his name. The officer squinted at Samuel. “You one of them Opichka boys?” he asked him. Oh, great, I thought. Who knows what Danny and Lawrence had gotten into around town? I didn’t need anymore trouble than I already had. “Your old man did some streamlining on my Mustang. You remember me?”

“Yeah,” Samuel grunted. “Can I take her in?” He gestured towards where I sat. My face was warm because of what I’d been thinking about Samuel’s family. “Ms. Christianson is her granny.” I almost choked at the word granny – I might call her by her first name but never *granny*.

The cop who’d recognized Samuel moved the car to the side so we could go up the drive. There were a lot of lights and some forest service jeeps parked a little ways

off the drive near a gulley that ran down the side of my grandmother's property. Because it was impossible to mow or plant there my grandmother left that part of the land alone. Samuel had picked a good spot to hide the grave. But I checked my thoughts; he'd hid it from my grandmother, from me...but not from the people who would come looking for the wolf. "*That wolf had a collar...*" he'd said to me once. He'd known what he was doing. And here I was sitting beside him in the truck.

He stopped the truck near my grandmother's porch and I think he could see the mixture of gratitude and anger was still at war inside me.

"I think I better come inside with you," he told me.

"I think you'd better not." I took a breath and got out of the truck. Grandma Kyle was already at the door, with my mother behind her looking pale and disheveled.

There wasn't anything uncertain in the way my grandmother strode up to where I was getting out of Samuel's truck, though.

"Looks like you fixed things good, didn't you, Lei?" Grandma Kyle growled at me. "You got a problem with how I do things? You think you know better than I do when it comes to our home, our family?" Her face was red and her teeth gritted. I'd never seen her so mad about anything.

"I didn't..." I don't know what I was going to say. But it didn't matter because she balled a fist and punched me in the face. I should have seen it coming, I suppose. The crush of bone against bone rattled my teeth and snapped my head back against the truck door. I could feel the blood run down my throat before I tasted it.

"People are down on my property, digging in my land like they have a right to it...calling me a murderer because of that wolf..."

I could barely hear what she was saying past the blazing pain in the right side of face. I felt my jaw and spit onto the ground. My mother watched with eyes so round and stunned that she looked like a perfect imitation of Bethany when my little sister was afraid or surprised.

“Step back, Ms. Christenson,” Samuel had gotten out of the truck and was standing beside me, pulling me straight from where I’d started to slump. “Leigha didn’t put the wolf on your land.” But that wasn’t how to handle my grandmother when she was angry – telling her what to do – telling her the truth. When Grandma Kyle was mad you did what she wanted you to do and you told her what she wanted to hear. Spit flew from her mouth, “What do you know about all this?” she hissed and jabbed a finger against Samuel’s chest.

“I put the wolf there,” Samuel said calmly. “I saw you shoot it and leave it to die on our land so I brought it here.” I let my arm out of Samuel’s grasp and nudged him back towards his side of the truck. But it was like my grandmother hadn’t heard or cared about the part where he’d said he’d been the one to bury the wolf -- it was as if she only heard the part where he called the clearing our two families shared his own.

“Your land?” my grandmother scoffed. “That land belongs to me – that should have all been my land. Your father and his brother stole it from me.”

Grandma Kyle grabbed at my t-shirt and brought my face close to hers. She had the neck twisted tight and high so that I was on my toes, half hung, in her clench. Spit and blood wet my chin. I couldn’t seem to keep it from dribbling though my lips. “You go inside. I’m not done with you.” But she didn’t let me down from where she was choking me. I couldn’t go inside or anywhere else.

“I think Leigha better come with me,” Samuel said from behind me. I still couldn’t find my voice or even stand straight because of the pain in my head. I rolled my head to the side and spit on the ground again. My arms flailed until I managed to grasp where her hand gripped my shirt and I tried to pry myself loose.

“Ms. Christianson...” Samuel wasn’t going back to his truck. He sounded worried now and not so calm and in control. “Your problem isn’t with Leigha...”

“You don’t know what my problem is, Opichka boy.” It was the first time I ever heard Grandma Kyle sound shrill.

“I know some of it,” said Samuel and I felt the heat as his hand closed around mine and yanked my shirt from my grandmother’s fist. All the spit gathered in my mouth from where she’d hit me and the t-shirt untwisting from my neck left me gasping for air. Samuel lifted me back into the truck.

“Get out of that truck, Leigha!” Grandma Kyle screeched. Samuel ignored her and slammed my door.

My mother said something then. I think it was “Let her go,” but I couldn’t hear that well because of the passenger side door being closed and Samuel was already climbing in beside me. I’m pretty sure it was “Let her go.”

“What did you say?” said my grandmother. She was half-crazy by that time and my mother knew this. She knew it just like I did.

Grandma Kyle spun and hit her hard -- I think even harder than she’d hit me, because my flimsy-boned mother crumpled to the ground in a dark heap.

Samuel had started the truck and was already heading back down the drive. He saw what happened in the rearview mirror, because he gripped my arm like I might jump out. I wasn't going to, though. I wanted to get away from both of them.

The forest service people must have finished what they were doing. They were breaking up from the gulley and some were walking up the drive. I saw Davis look towards the truck. He held up his hand in the flat wave -- a sign of recognition -- and Samuel made the same flat wave back at him. I knew, then, that Samuel had told him about the wolf and about Grandma Kyle. I didn't even care. I put a hand over where my cheek and lip swelled. As far as I was concerned, Grandma Kyle was going to get what was coming to her.

## **Thirteen**

Samuel cupped his hand with water from my kitchen sink and let it trickle down the side of my face. I held ice to my jaw and it felt better. Two of my teeth were loose but Samuel helped me pack gauze into my cheek to hold them fixed. I let him rinse the blood from my hair. “You’ll be better in a few days. I been hit harder than that.”

I opened one eye to see him. He smiled, “back when I followed my brothers.” His smile made me smile and I nodded at him, “I remember.” I tongued the gauze lower and tighter into my cheek.

“I guess we know each other pretty well for two old enemies,” he said. “I knew your family held a grudge against mine and I guess that kept me looking over to your side of the clearing – watching you.” Samuel’s voice was soft and low. He’d brought aspirin and a first aid kit from his house when we first pulled up on the drive. Then he’d

cleaned off a spot on the counter and emptied the sink so we could doctor me up. I was trying not to think of my mom. I knew how things like this went in my family – everyone would act like Grandma Kyle’s burst of violence wasn’t worth mentioning. The same would go for my bringing Samuel over or anything my mother might have screamed at my grandmother after we left. The wolf and whatever trouble that came with it would be bad luck or maybe even something else to blame the Opichkas for. I rubbed at my forehead and closed my eyes. Aspirin wouldn’t fix everything that was making my head hurt. Samuel put an arm around my shoulders, “You should get some sleep.”

He walked me up the stairs like something was wrong with my legs instead of my face but it felt good to have someone take care of me. It had been a long time since anyone had.

When I lay in my bed and remembered that Bethany was next door I felt like crying. “I could stay for a while,” Samuel offered. He’d stood in the hall while I kicked my way out of my boots and jeans. The morning this whole mess had started I’d come outside wearing the same clothes that made me feel shy in front of him now. The blanket was wrapped around me like a sleeping bag, “It’s okay,” I told him. “You don’t have to.” He sat down on the bed next to me. “So tell me,” I asked him. “My grandmother says your father and his brother stole your half of the clearing. What really happened?”

I knew Samuel could tell me the truth and, for once, I wasn’t too proud to ask him. “My father told all of us never to talk to you or Rae about it,” Samuel whispered. “It’s Kyle’s story to tell.”

“But I’m asking you now.”

“Okay.” Samuel’s voice sounded so far away to me. “Maybe you should sleep for a while.”

“Don’t let Bethany come over here...” My own voice sounded really far away to me now, too.

“I won’t,” he whispered. I couldn’t stop myself from drifting off then. I was so tired, more tired than I had ever been before.

When I woke up, it was to loud angry voices coming from downstairs. For a minute I thought it was my grandmother and mother that had come home just at daylight. I thought of trying to make the jump from my window to the ground to get away from them and whatever they were planning on hurling at me. But it was Samuel’s voice coming from downstairs I realized in the next instant and I climbed out of bed. My head was aching from where my grandmother had hit me.

“I couldn’t just leave her alone last night,” Samuel was shouting. “I don’t know what you think or care what you think but it isn’t right to just ignore them anymore.”

I stood at the top of the stairs and I saw that Samuel was yelling at Danny. And behind Danny was his father. I felt like hell and they did have my sister at their house but I really didn’t think they had a right to have their little family meeting over at our place.

“After the trick they’ve been trying?” Danny yelled back.

“She doesn’t know,” Samuel said in a flat low voice and I was surprised to see that it stopped Danny and he seemed to really pay attention. “She never knew,” Samuel

said. “I don’t think Rae knew, either. Kyle never told them anything about their family.”

I was halfway down the stairs before anyone paid attention to me. “What don’t I know?” I asked Samuel. Both Danny and Mr. Opichka stepped back as if this was something only Samuel could answer. He was holding something in his hand that he put behind his back. “What is that, Samuel?”

Samuel had that apologetic look on his face that I had seen him get so many times with me – the look like he was trying not to cause me pain. “I need to be alone with her,” he said looking at me and I started back before I realized he meant it for his father and Danny. “Let me tell her by myself.” He was looking at them now and not at me.

His father held out a finger like he was warning him of something.

Samuel made a heavy angry sigh. “I’m just going to show her these.” He brought what he had been hiding from behind his back. It looked like little stack of paper and photographs. “Then, I’ll let you tell her everything, Dad.” Samuel glanced at me and his face was hard and determined but I wasn’t sure if he meant that look for me or for his father. “You should be the one to tell it to her, Dad,” he said in a soft voice.

My heart was beating hard in my chest. I wanted to see what he had to show me and I wanted to know what he had to tell me but I was afraid at the same time. I didn’t want to know as much as I did.

At the back glass door Samuel’s father turned to him with his shoulders rigid and his mouth tight. “After that you should go, Samuel. Pack a bag and go visit your

mother's cousins in Wyoming for a while." Samuel just nodded but I gasped. He wouldn't just leave me would he? Not now. Not after everything that just happened.

His father had his eyes narrowed with suspicion at the two of us. "I want you gone by noon," he told his son.

When the door closed I rounded on Samuel. "So that's it?" I bit out at him. "You left the wolf for the Wildlife Service to find and now you're leaving me to take all the blame?"

"That isn't what I'm doing." He was giving me the same sad eyes but it only made me angrier.

"You're taking off for Wyoming," I choked.

"Leigha," Samuel put his arms around me and it was almost like that first night when I had needed his help but hadn't wanted it. "I have to show you something. I'm not leaving because of the wolf...it's something else." He tugged me over to the couch and set the little pile of papers in my lap. "I want you to look at these."

My grandmother's story was always what she told me it was. She didn't like my father because he didn't make enough money – didn't improve on the house we lived in once Grandma Kyle had given it to us. "He doesn't stand up for himself," she'd say. I'm not so sure that she would have liked him better if he had. But I believed her that my father was weak and that loving him was a weakness of mine. She thought my mother's having Bethany was impractical. She thought Bill and Irene shouldn't raise horses if they were too old to ride them. She didn't see the point of going to school unless it helped you earn money later. She hated the Opichkas because she wanted their

half of the clearing. She had reasons, good reasons for everything that she thought and I believed those reasons.

In 1957 my grandmother married my grandfather – a man I had never met nor heard about. I had always imagined that Grandma Kyle didn't know the man that well, that maybe a night of drinking had led to her pregnancy with my mother. My mother had once said that she imagined she'd been adopted but how much I looked like Grandma Kyle had left her thinking the same thing as me. My dad had chimed in that he would bet his life on Kyle's never having been in love. But when I held the copy of my grandmother and grandfather's marriage certificate in my hand he wasn't there to give his life for it. She'd been in love and even married. Holding the marriage certificate made me miss my father a lot more than it made me sorry for my grandmother. I felt like it would have made a difference to him to know that all of us Christianson women hadn't been predetermined to live only with each other.

And telling me the story was like me bringing him to my grandmother's house that night. It was his side of the bond between us to each other. I had my responsibility to Bethany, to my mother, even to Grandma Kyle but my loyalty would be to him and his to me. It was like our blood was more the same to each other than to anyone else who might claim that right.

The first picture was of only the clearing, a roughly cut swath of land that fanned out from 3 sepia-toned figures in an old photograph. I didn't recognize the stumps and rocks and logs but I did know the line of aspen, the tall pines ringing them, the shadowed blue of the mountain range farther beyond.

My grandmother, looking very much like me, was one of the figures; she had wispy light brown hair that hung onto her shoulders and her pale eyes, stared hard and somewhat distrustfully at the camera. Eber Opichka, Samuel's father, was wiry and handsome as Danny. His older brother Hector, tall and broad, face scarred from acne and weather, was a grown man with one hand resting protectively, possessively on Danny's shoulder. My grandmother grasped Hector's other arm between both her hands so that they were all three linked. Also grasped in Kyle's hands was a bouquet of lavender mountain impatiens. It was her wedding photo and Hector was her husband, my grandfather.

## **Fourteen**

“I look out at the back clearing, at that place where we divided the land, and I can still see the home Kyle and Hector dreamt of making for themselves,” Mr. Ophichka said. He rubbed his hands together; they were calloused but, at the same time, still thin and delicate looking. “Your grandmother...” he began but his voiced died out. He wasn’t looking at me but looking out the window at the back clearing and I could really believe that he did see the imaginary home that his brother and Grandma Kyle wanted. He made a nod to a spot in between our houses as if he wanted me to look there and to see what he was remembering.

“Your grandmother, Kyle, kept the bouquet of lavender flowers from when she married Hector and she hung it over their bedroll, but, even though it smelled nice, the drying petals fluttered down and got into everything. It wasn’t easy to stay clean while

living in the tents we had up here. Hector and Kyle slept in a tall white canvas tent and I slept outside in the maze of pale hanging sheets and crazy colored Indian blankets. The maze was our house that summer.

Hector and I were building a real house in the clearing. We were all very proud of what we made; there are not many real homes up high in the mountains and back deep in the woods. Your grandmother grew up in a steeple notched log cabin – so did I and so did Hector. But the house in the clearing was framed with flat walls of thick lumbered wood. This fireplace?” Mr. Ophichka slapped his hand against the smooth river rock in satisfaction. “I laid the stone for this fireplace myself – built the whole thing – myself. My brother only checked it over each day to make sure that it was right.” Mr. Opichka stood and marked the height of the hearth. “See this?” he asked me and I nodded even though I wasn’t sure what I nodded at. “Kyle said a hearth should be tall enough to boil a big pot and wide enough to warm the room.”

I got it. He was showing me that this fireplace could do both. I nodded. I wanted the secrets about my family not the secrets about his fireplace and I couldn’t hide my impatience.

“You’re a lot like her,” he said looking at me with the hard face that I had seen him give Samuel. “You know that?”

I didn’t pretend to misunderstand him. “I look like her,” I clarified. “But, I’m not her.”

When Mr. Ophichka was thinking he looked just like Samuel did – his eyebrows knit together and he stared thoughtfully at the floor. He’d had to send Samuel away from me because of this secret. “I need to know this,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “You do,” Mr. Opichka agreed.

He began again. “‘Eber, you made a good base here.’ My brother told me when he first saw this hearth. He patted me on the back and told me ‘good’ and your grandmother smiled at me too.

Hector was a good man. He was more of a father to me than a brother. Even though Kyle and I were the same age she treated me the way Hector did – as a child, as her own son. He winked at her. ‘What do you think? You’ll have to cook here all winter, little wife.’

Hector could never quite believe that the pretty girl your grandmother once was had pledged herself to him. I don’t know much about her before Hector but I know she’d had a hard life. Most of the time girls would want to be with me because I was younger and handsome and not as tough as Hector, but your grandmother didn’t look at me at all. She saw right away that Hector was the better man. Right after they married I went with them to work the clearing and build the house and I would hear them together in their tent at night.

‘My face is old,’ I could hear my brother say.

‘You’re not old; you’re a man,’ his Kyle would whisper back to him. She and Hector would laugh and she would shush, ‘Do you want your brother to hear?’”

Mr. Opichka scratched at his chin and I tried to imagine a Grandma Kyle young and in-love and laughing in the dark but it was impossible and sad. I already knew the end of the story was bad; my grandmother would be bitter and lying and the man that was my grandfather would be forgotten.

Mr. Opichka was staring at the fireplace again, still seeing it as it was in the past when he was just grown from boyhood and Grandma Kyle was a happy newlywed building her first home with her husband.

“The laughing and playing at night drove me crazy. I was a young man and even though the idea of the house made me proud, I felt restless up on the mountain with my brother and his young wife. I started going into town and drinking or buying bottles and bringing them up here to drink at night.”

“I know that Hector felt guilty and wanted to give me some time off to find go down to Denver and find a girl. Have some fun, you know?” Mr. Opichka shrugged. “But Kyle knew that if we didn’t finish building the house before it got colder then it would be another year before we could work on it. We would have to move down off the mountain for the winter. And that would be another year of paying rent, after all the money we had put down to get this land... If we didn’t finish that summer she might not get her house. She knew it. She was right. She made Hector get after me about my drinking and how I needed to help them finish the house and then I could go into Denver and do whatever I needed to do.

The night I made the fireplace hearth, I was drinking whiskey by the fire. I tried to wait as long as I could to go to bed so that I wouldn’t have to lie on my blankets and listen to them. I was drunk by the time the fire had died out and I tried to stumble back to my blankets but I could barely walk. Then, I dropped the whisky bottle and it shattered on the hearth. I was too drunk to clean it up but not too drunk to worry about it. Hector had been so proud of me for the hearth I had built. He had patted me and told me it was good and then I go and break the bottle that same night. I hated disappointing

him. I hated that Kyle would be angry and maybe not want me to live with them once the house was finished.

The next morning I was sick as hell but I still got up early to clean up the bottle pieces. But when I went to clean them I saw that they were already gone and the whole area was washed and neat.

‘Don’t worry about the bottle,’ Kyle said from behind me. I was feeling really guilty already but now she had cleaned it up for me and I felt even worse. She’d brought a pan with water for us to wash in just like she did every day so I splashed cold water in my face and tried to get myself ready to work and not let on that I was sick from the whiskey.

‘Hey, I’m not mad. You know?’ Kyle said. She had been watching me the whole time and I guess she wasn’t fooled about the way I was feeling. She looked a little sorry for me and I really wanted to believe that she was. Here Hector had pretty much raised me and was like a father and Kyle was his wife. I wanted her to like me. I wanted to feel like a family with her and my brother. ‘You’re not?’ I asked her.

‘No,’ she said. ‘And I didn’t tell Hector, either.’ She smiled at me then and I think it was the first time she ever really had. It was like she was seeing me for the first time and I was seeing her for the first time, too...away from Hector.” Mr. Opichka had been telling his story to the fireplace – not really looking at me and I was afraid of what he had to say. All the events of his story had happened a long time before I was born. The people had done what they’d done and it was too late to warn them away from each other but I felt sorry for them. There are moments when big things happen between people even though they seem like little things at the time.

“Kyle wanted the house finished,” Mr. Ophichka said. “She wasn’t really seeing me the way I thought she was. She was only seeing that she needed to keep me on the mountain and sober long enough to help build or she might never have the house that she dreamed of building in this clearing.” I smiled at him because I knew what he was feeling, that bitter, sad kind of regret. I knew I felt that same way whenever my grandmother used me to get what she wanted.

I let him tell me the rest of his story but I listened not just with his words in my mind but, also, with all I knew about my grandmother and the way she would think and act. When he was done telling me I walked out into the clearing and I saw the things he told me much more clearly than he had even. I saw things the way I thought they really had been.

## **Fifteen**

*Hector watches his wife and brother talk together. Maybe she is telling Eber that Hector wants to give the boy some time off from building the house. More likely, she is asking him to stay. He remembers that Kyle disagreed about giving Eber some time off from building the house.*

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*The two brothers work all day framing the house until the sun starts to drop. Then Kyle makes a fire and boils beans and rice. She turns roast grouse on a flat rock set in the flames.*

*She fills both brothers' plates before she fills her own. "Tired?" she asks Hector when he sits heavily on a log beside her.*

*"Yes."*

*“Go on to sleep then,” Kyle nods towards the white tent. “Eber and I will raise the first wall.” She looks to Eber with the challenge – tries to will the boy to remember the broken bottle and the pretended secret she keeps for him.*

*“You aren’t too tired, Eber?”*

*The boy shakes his head because of course he will not admit to being exhausted from working all day in the hot sun, not to his brother’s pretty young wife. “Not me.”*

*“Then we can raise the wall. I’m strong enough.” Now she knows that Eber will not back out.*

*Hector can sense that something is not right between his brother and his wife. There is some kind of tension between them and about him. “Kyle, maybe Eber wants to go into town for the night.” He turns to his brother. “We could start a little later tomorrow and you could have some fun for once.”*

*Eber glances at Kyle. She looks back at him expectantly. “I can raise the wall. I’m not tired,” he says. He looks up at his brother, “or bored.” Eber shrugs.*

*“Okay,” Hector stands and his knees creak. He arches backward to stretch. “I am tired.” He smiles when Kyle rises on her toes to kiss him goodnight. “Don’t work too hard, little wife.” He touches the top of Kyle’s head in a pat – the way he has stroked the hair of his little brother since their mother died.*

*“Don’t worry about me,” his wife whispers back to him. Hector doesn’t know what to think about this side of Kyle. She is different from the women he has known all his life – women who take care of men – women who never seem to want. His little wife wanted this clearing made in the woods, now she wants her house to be built on time,*

*and she even wants Hector himself. He doesn't understand what fires all this want boiling from her. "Goodnight."*

*When Hector disappears inside the maze of blankets, Kyle looks to Eber with a fierce smile, "Ready?"*

*In the moonlight they lift the thick slab of wood wall to lay it flat against the frame of the main room with the fireplace. Kyle presses the wood steady. She leans into the wall while Eber pounds the long nails into each framing beam. The air turns colder as the sky darkens and their breath comes like a damp fog between them. Eber aches with each slam of hammer against nail. His back and arms are worn-out from the day's work with Hector. When the wall is finally in place and he pants beside his sister-in-law he finds that he is angry. "There," he tells her. "You have your wall now."*

*Kyle is also breathing hard. "You're mad."*

*Eber doesn't want to be angry with his brother's wife. "I'm not," he lies. Kyle isn't fooled easily and she frowns at him. She has to keep Eber up in the clearing to get her house.*

*"This will be a big help to Hector. There will be less for him to do tomorrow," she says to Eber. He shrugs to tell her it was nothing.*

*"No, Eber, I mean it." Kyle starts to shiver as her sweat cools in the frigid air, but Eber is still steaming.*

*"Hector does alright," Eber tells her.*

*Now Kyle shrugs to say she isn't so sure about that. "I guess," she says. She knows that Hector is more of a father to him than a brother. She watches how eager Eber always is to do well in front of him – how reluctantly he shares Hector's attention*

*with her. She keeps her face from scrunching in disgust at him – he is spoiled and babyish.*

*“Eber, you and I are young and strong. We need to find ways that we can help Hector with this house.” Eber meets her eyes again and she smiles at him. She knows he is used to being petted and praised. “Don’t worry, Eber, your good-looks will last. There is plenty of time for you to go down to town and meet girls.”*

*Now Eber smiles at her. He has not known how to treat the pretty, young wife of his brother; half bashful, half jealous, he has been awkward in her presence until now. He takes Kyle’s hand. “I won’t leave until the house is finished. I promise.”*

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*Hector bends to lift the last wall with Eber. His knees creak, the bones inside scratching together. Sweat soaks the bandana tied on his brow. His muscles tighten and shake when he locks his elbow to hold the wall flat with one hand. He grips the hammer with the other hand. Kyle holds a nail steady for him against where the wood of the wall meets a framing board.*

*At the start of the day he can slam the hammer hard enough to drive the nail through in one downward arch. But late in the day, like this, the nail crunches first through the wall and waits for another and another blow to move into the beam until the flat head is a shiny disk flush with the wood.*

*For each of Hector’s nails hammered in, Eber has two – then three – then four. “Take a break, Old Man,” Eber teases him. He doesn’t know that Hector calls himself the same thing at night when he lies beside his young wife.*

*“You aren’t old,” she tells him at night.*

*But in the daylight she smiles at Eber’s words –Hector can see that she isn’t telling the truth when she reassures him in the night.*

*So the pretty young wife thinks he is old, then? Hector throws the hammer away from him and stretches the worn muscles of his back. One shaking hand sweeps the bandana from his brow. He lets Eber finish the nails on the great room’s last wall. His brother and his wife both stand back and admire the room – the first room of the house.*

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*Eber rinses his bandana in the pan of cold creek water Kyle brings them every morning. This morning she finds thin plates of ice in the shallows. Eber watches Hector rub the slivers of ice against his neck. “You all right?” asks the younger man.*

*“I’m sick.”*

*Eber doesn’t know what to say – Hector has never been ill before that he can remember. Kyle comes up behind him, her fists perched on her hips. Eber is relieved; she will know what to do.*

*“I’m going to drag the bed into the house, near the fire place. The weather is nearly turned – you’ll feel better inside.”*

*“No!” Hector’s voice is harsh. Eber jumps back a little but Kyle doesn’t flinch.*

*Hector feels sorry that he has spoken so roughly to her. “I will go back in the tent and sleep a little more. I’ll be alright.”*

*“But I was going to drag the bed inside.”*

*“What is the hurry?” Hector tells her.*

*Kyle purses her lips. Why wouldn't he want to sleep in the finished room by the fire? Inside the tent the blue light of the early morning makes the air even colder than it is in the sunny yellow of the open clearing. “The fire is inside,” she tells him.*

*“I don't need the fire.” He still has the ice water dripping at his neck.*

*Eber and Kyle whisper about him. They fold the blankets, stack dishes and pans. The odd pieces of furniture are carried into the house. Hector hears the sanded flat door scrape against the floor, the creak of its hinges as it opens and closes with each of the things Eber and Kyle carry inside. Soon the two young people laugh and run as they rush to ready the place for their new lives indoors.*

*Kyle ties the spindly reaching branches of an aspen tree to make herself a broom. She polishes all the little pieces of furniture of the dirt and smoke stains they gathered from their outdoor home. Everything glows golden from the fire and she puts a pot of soup on a hook to boil. Eber smiles at her from his little log stool; he knows she will wake Hector from the tent now. He is proud of all that he has done to make the house for his older brother. This is the first time he has been proud of something he did instead of something he was. He has always been a pretty man but now he has helped to build this house; he is an accomplished man. He is Hector's equal.*

*A snow is starting to fall when Kyle goes to the tent for Hector. Thick flakes stick in her hair and wet her old cotton dress. She doesn't believe that he has been asleep this whole time; she and Eber have been so loud in all their preparations; the*

*door has opened and shut a thousand times. "Hector?" Now it is Kyle's voice that is much too harsh. Kyle wills her voice to soften, "Everything is ready."*

*The bedroll is untouched from where she folded it this morning. Hector is gone.*

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*Eber won't leave his sister-in-law alone on the mountain. Even when she tells him that she will manage on her own. There is only the one truck Hector has left them, for one thing. Hector has taken the more battered pale green pick up they'd hauled all the wood in during the summer. Hector has left nearly all the money he'd had with Kyle, the keys to the nicer of the two trucks with Eber. What did this mean? Eber can't puzzle out what he is meant to do except stay.*

*Eber thinks that it is right for a husband and wife to be together but he also believes in his brother; Hector has left Kyle on the mountain for the winter. Perhaps he intends that Eber take care of her; surely he could see the change building the house has brought in the younger brother.*

*The two of them, Eber and Kyle, live in the house for the months of deep snow. They sleep on blankets near the stone fireplace as the snow edges up the shuttered windows. Eber leaves to hunt and to bring snow and ice for water. They don't speak very often and Eber isn't sure if this is normal. Kyle is pregnant with his brother's child. Her body is slow and big and she sleeps for most of the day. Eber hasn't spent any time with pregnant women before this winter.*

*"I kicked the door free this morning," he tells her blanket wrapped form. He can't see her face but he has learned to sense when she is awake after the long winter*

*months inside the house together. The waxed paper on the windows is shredded and damp but the light from beyond them is warming. “I’m going to hike back to the creek – break some of the ice for us.”*

*Kyle looks up at him, a flicker of interest in her eyes. “You think you can make it that far?”*

*“By now? Easy.” Kyle starts folding blankets and hitching her flannel pants up over the bulk of her stomach. They both are wearing a mish mash of their warmest clothes – the same clothes that they have worn all these months of the deep snow and hard winds.*

*The house has held up well: no leaks in the roof, no fracturing in the wall. He and Hector did a good job. Or he and Kyle...he doesn’t forget the nights that Hector slept and he and his sister-in-law raised walls, cemented the chimney stones, sanded the shutters. Living in the house that he built has made Eber more serious. He doesn’t needed Kyle to flatter and baby him the way he once did.*

*She doesn’t treat him the same way since Hector left, anyway – she has turned in on herself and the baby she is growing. When he looks back to wave at Kyle before he leaves the clearing, he is awed at the sight of the house behind her. Wood-smoke curls from the chimney – the smell of it heavy with the aromas of pheasant and biscuits. Eber feels the shotgun across his back, the bucket for the ice is tied at his hip. Kyle barely acknowledges his leaving for the ice but he knows that she will want it. He takes care of her and of the baby now.*

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*That night, Kyle boils the frozen creek water to make soup for herself and Eber. She acts no different than she has been all the months of their winter months by the glowing fireplace. But the knowledge that the snow has begun to thaw makes her feel alive again. It is the feeling of watching a fire spark and leap from the pit.*

*After Eber falls asleep, she looks around the snug room that her husband has never stepped inside beyond that first day it was built. She knows the good man that Hector had been and what was in his heart when he left her. He thought he had given the house to his brother – given all his money – given his good truck – given his blessing to his brother. And Hector thought he could give her to his brother as well. Kyle puts a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming.*

*She watches Eber sleep open-mouthed and innocent beside her. She thinks of the shotgun that rests against the door and what she would like to do with it. But the baby kicks inside of her and it jolts her to her senses. It won't be long now before the baby is born. Hector also gave their baby to Eber. Kyle's gaze turns from the thick barrel of the shotgun to the puffed belly of Eber's money pouch. She moves silently through the room, gathers her clothes and the pouch and slides her hand under the clip of truck keys near her brother-in-law's makeshift bed. Her fingers curl slowly around them until they are held tight and soundless in her fist.*

*Eber has done nothing, she reminds herself. If she leaves him – takes the truck then he will be trapped here for another two months at least. One hand goes to her stomach, her baby. Eber is Hector's responsibility. Hector is the one who left him here*

*to fend for himself. Kyle takes one last look at the fire-lit room of her house, at Eber sleeping by her fire.*

*I'll leave him the gun, she decides. He can survive up here long enough if he has that. She wants to pull with her the walls she helped to raise, the shutters she sanded, the door she hammered to its hinges. She wants to scrape the whole house, the whole clearing -- that is hers and should be only hers -- along the melting ground behind her. But she leaves it behind and lets the truck roll down away from the clearing.*

## **Sixteen**

“When Kyle came back to the mountain with your mother – she had changed into the woman you know,” Mrs. Opichka had one more photograph that she could show me. It was a grainy looking color photo of the framing of our own house. She sat on the back porch with me, looking into the clearing. I’d been standing out there a long time just staring at this space I’d grown up in like it was something I’d never seen before. I guess she was worried about me. “Kyle still owned half the clearing as Hector’s wife,” she said. “She had your house built once the road came through decently but she didn’t ever live in it.” Mrs. Opichka held one hand over her mouth when she looked at the picture. It was like she still half-wanted to keep the story inside of herself or maybe away from me. I couldn’t feel anything for the photo of my house in its youth just like I couldn’t seem to feel anything for the younger version of my

grandmother in the black and white photo. They were unknown to me – these strange early versions of my home and my family.

In the photo, beside the house, was also my mother as a little girl. I felt fierce and protective when I saw her small face staring up at me. I could look right out from where I sat on the Opichka porch to an almost identical little girl playing in the same clearing. Both my mother and my little sister had the same triangular face and almond eyes; both were small boned and looking warily at me. Only my Bethany smiled and waved when she caught my eye. My mother's face was frozen in its moment of uncertainty and trepidation. Mrs. Opichka took the photo from my hands and sighed over the little girl in the photo.

“Your mother was such a lonely little girl, I thought. No matter what had happened before, we were all still family. I thought it was bad what your grandfather had done to her and Eber and I both wanted to help her. But she would only be happy to own the clearing and to take back the house. By that time Eber and I had babies of our own and the house was three times the little place that she had lived in that winter. We should have been able to share this land and raise our children to know each other.” I didn't need her to tell me how that had all gone. Grandma Kyle had rented the house at first – made hardly anything on it for so long that my mother said it nearly broke them plenty of hard years when my grandmother couldn't find work. If she had been a man she would have worked construction, I think. She found a way to be as close to the business as she could. Eventually she found a living selling property for development – building.

I knew what she wanted with the Opichka's half of the clearing. She wanted the house. And as soon as she had it she would pull down the cheap house I'd grown up in – staking her claim; she would have that first house again. I knew my grandmother and I knew how prideful and stubborn she was. I'd never known the woman who married Hector Opichka but I knew the result of that marriage. My grandmother had built her life and the lives of my mother and me from her anger.

I stayed on the Opichka's porch for most of the day and Mrs. Opichka kept everyone out of my way, even Samuel. I was glad about that. I knew that my mother would be back eventually and we would never mention what had happened on Grandma Kyle's drive. That was our way, or it was her way, at least. But Samuel wanted to talk, I could tell. I knew he was watching me from the kitchen window. When my mother finally drove up to the house I went out to the front of the house to meet her. We stared at each other both of us stone faced. I saw Samuel's solid shadow move from behind me to the porch.

My mother looked me over like I was someone she couldn't quite recognize anymore. Her hair was hanging down all around her face so I couldn't see what my grandmother's blow had done to her. I think it caught her on the ear but it had been too dark to be certain. "Bethany over there?" she asked nodding her head towards the Opichka's. I didn't want to turn around because I was afraid I would see Samuel. I thought seeing him might make me cry and I knew my mom was counting on me to be strong, be aloof to all that had taken place between her and me and my grandmother.

"You want me to get her?"

My mother shrugged. “I guess.” My mother moved closer to me. She grabbed me by the chin and it felt like the pop of my grandmother’s fist again for a moment. “She got you good.” My mother was trying not to ask if I was all right. And she sure as hell didn’t want me asking her that.

I pulled from her hand. “It’s nothing.”

Bethany ran out of the Opichka’s front door to where we stood then. She was a little skittish in front of Mom and put her hands around my leg. “Did you see how Lei hurt her face?” she asked between us.

My mom just kept her eyes on Bethany. It wasn’t like she really saw my sister, though, as much as the way my sister clung to my leg and half hid her face against me. It was the same look she had given me, like she was trying to remember something, as if she had forgotten how she knew us, what we meant to her.

“I should have done something I guess,” she finally said.

I couldn’t hold back my surprise – that wasn’t like her. I didn’t know what to tell her. I guess I should have told her that there wasn’t anything she could do, to make her feel better, but I had thought the same thing myself at least a hundred times that night. She should have done something. What could I do? I think I was embarrassed for her.

Bethany shielded her eyes from the morning sun and watched us; I think she felt the discomfort in the moment. “It’s going to be a nice-looking day,” she offered up. “That’s what Samuel told me, Lei, that today is supposed to be a nice-looking day.”

My mom and I both nodded. There was something we could all agree on.

As a kind of peace offering, my mother took my little sister and me into the mountains, with a cooler of beer and a grocery bag packed with sandwiches, fruit and potato chips. She had one beer open on the car seat between her legs.

We drove up, the air got colder and the sun brighter as we climbed. Snow was on the ground as we wove round the higher bends. Mother crunched the beer can in her fist and dumped it to the floor beside her. She lit one of her Swisher Sweets and sucked at it. Finally we cut up onto the double tire track paths made for four-wheel driving only. Bethany gripped the plastic edges of her child's car seat and gave me a dark, searching look. She wanted to determine if I was afraid as our silent dark haired mother negotiated the Chevy Blazer up a cradle of mud and hard pack snow. I frowned at her for being afraid again.

The car swung wide around a hairpin turn and the mountain dropped out the right side window. Bethany shrieked and my mother huffed air out her nose.

"You'll get us killed if you just start screaming like that." But my mother seemed a little taken off guard herself by the wide rock cliff that opened before us on the blazer's last turn. She braked and we sat there on the edge for a moment. Then she swung her hand with the cigar back to grip the seat, "Open your door, Lei, and climb up past the car, see how much room is across this bend."

"What if someone comes the other direction?" I asked her.

"No one is going to come the other direction."

"Okay." I breathed to myself and slammed the door behind me, steadied myself on the thin dirt ledge off the car's right side. The sky was pale blue, cold and clear and

smelled of pine and smoke. The open space pinned me against the humming car in fright.

“Leigha!” my mother hollered from the driver’s side window. A twisted rope of smoke curled out of her cigar and dissipated. I shuffled along the car to the front tires and trudged the breathless steps ahead and around the bend. More deep woods. The road circled back into the mountain. I waved my mother ahead and got back into the car alongside Bethany.

My mother nodded towards a flat rocky path. “Shortcut.”

“I don’t think so,” I countered, although I knew it did no good. She couldn’t stand to feel constricted by my fears on the mountain when she wanted to climb. She would only get angry, if she paid me any attention at all.

We crossed off the logger road and onto a rocky creek bed, drove another bend, and were back on the mountain’s edge. Below us were the tips of pine that grew on a plain so steep it seemed impossible they could have found root and thrived there, so many, so close together. The heavy car tipped precariously to the left side, one front wheel rising over a slick flat slab of stone along the uneven bank. We ascended against the mountainside, against the pines, against sky, the winter mountaintop a postcard-like vista colored in high blue, white and green.

Bethany held her hands over her eyes. I reached one hand over and tugged her sweatshirt a fraction closer towards my side and the lingering cliff drop outside my window.

“Stop it, Leia.” She said it with her teeth clenched. She didn’t move her pudgy fingers from her eyes. Although she kicked one red tennis shoe out at me, I think she was a little comforted by my touch on her sleeve.

My mother, Bethany, and I all strained against the seat belts, leaning forward against the straight-up angle of our heavy vehicle. The tires made a hollow whirring sound against the mud, lost some traction against the rocky cliff and it seemed we might flip backwards onto the slick surface of the creek bed. Bethany made a whimpering noise.

The trickle of icy water had grown stronger as we ascended and began washing along the bottom of the Blazer.

My mother ground the tires over the slick boulder and through a break in the pine back towards the barely visible double tire track that was the logger’s road as we finally cleared the woods. The tracks started a flat zigzag across the gnarled grassy scrub.

Several angular shapes emerged from the rise, dark, meager and man-made. No tourist markers or cleared flat area to park, just the ruins alone on the mountain before we arrived.

We all stumbled out of the car and looked in silence at the remains of the old mining camp, mostly stone hearths and lonely, hollowed out wooden structures. I couldn’t imagine anyone working and living this high up. It hurt to walk just a few feet from the car in the sickly thin air. My heart and lungs ached with the effort.

Bethany looked around for interesting rocks to bring home. She wore wool mittens and carried her hot pink plastic sand bucket. My mother drank from a new can

of beer. She sat inside the driver's side door; one leg reached out and stood on the frozen ground and one bent on the torn leather seat. She looked off and across the bare land, tossed her empty can to the passenger side floorboard.

We were the only ones there that day. Maybe Mom was right to take the creek bed trail as we were set far from any typical mountain tourist site. But I still thought it strange that she yearned to climb through all the melted beauty of the spring mountainside to reach a place as vast and empty feeling as a winter prairie.

I think she wanted to conquer the mountain and plant her feet on the highest ridge she dared to cross. This was how I would remember her when I would try to puzzle out her existence and remember the moments she must have held council in her own head. What was she thinking, planning, even then? She wanted relief – that seems plain.

Her black hair flew in front of her face but she didn't seem to notice.

"I'm cold." Bethany whined. She came to put her small hands inside my back jean pocket. My mother took no notice. She chewed the inside of her cheek a bit. She'd left her chalk pencils and sketchbook in the car, untouched.

"Mom?" My mother was the kind of person that you had to let think of leaving on her own. If I said that I wanted to leave right then, she would insist on staying longer.

"Mom?" I said again. "Bethany's cold." My mother's eyes were the color of charred brick and I fought, like always, to find the glints of garnet in them that meant she loved me, but I hated her and hated myself for the puniness of the reminder. She turned and strode away from us with her head bowed, arms swinging ahead and behind.

It was late, dark, and quiet when we got back home. Bethany napped. I wanted to put ice on the swollen side of my face. It throbbed on the drive down from the miners' camp. But I felt like it would be weak on my part to act like it bothered me. I felt like it would make my mother feel her own weakness – it would acknowledge all that had happened at my grandmother's house the night before. I didn't think my mother would be able to stand this admission. It was a relief to have her grumble something about "swinging by Ellie's place." She grabbed the keys to the Blazer, which still smelled hot from the climb earlier, and tossed them in the air and caught them again in the same hand. I smiled at her. The way she looked back at me – not like she hadn't noticed me before that but like she was surprised I noticed her. It was like standing in a crowd and thinking you see someone you know, catching her eye and realizing she's just a stranger after all. Not the person you thought she was.

She was gone all that night – but this was nothing new.

My mother came back to the house at dawn. Ellie was with her – followed behind my mother's Blazer with her beaten red Ford. They were both weaving a crazy path up the gravel drive and when my mother skidded to a stop the Blazer moaned. I knew that sound, she'd cranked the emergency brake all the way back before it was stopped. Ellie smacked the horn with her palm when she stopped and kicked open her door. She had a lit cigarette in one hand and her jeans tucked into one of her leather cowboy boots.

My mother put both feet on the ground at once and then held her dark head over her knees – I thought she was going to throw-up but she bolted to stand. The hair around her face was wet. Her face was shiny, her eyes red. "Come on," she gestured to

Ellie with a big circular wave of her arm. When she was close enough to the door to see me she narrowed her eyes and her mouth dropped open, “Hey, Lei,” she drawled with the lazy mouth of the drunk.

“Mom,” but I had no idea what I was going to say so I stopped there. It was like her boots were on the wrong feet. She could barely walk. “Maybe you better go to sleep, Mom, Grandma Kyle’s going to want us to start moving tomorrow. Remember?” My voice got a little shrill at the end. My mother made her way up to the doorway, and when she got near enough I grabbed her arm.

“Mom,” I said.

She ripped her arm free and pushed me back from the door at the same time and I fell onto the front step. “Leave me alone,” my mother growled and she kicked at my legs and feet, which were still in the doorway. Then she was inside calling for Ellie. “Get in here – I know I have a bottle still.”

I scrambled up and followed after her.

“Come on, Ellie!” She pounded up the stairs, her boot heel coming down heavy on each step, making the linoleum flooring look as pliable as carpeting. Ellie had backed off from the door once my mother had knocked me down. I didn’t look back but I could smell that she was sucking hard on her cigarette – probably trying to keep busy and out of the way now.

“Mom, you’re going to wake up Bethany!” But it was a joke because I yelled it as loud as I could behind her. She turned at the head of the stairs and looked down at me. Her hair hung down so that just one eye showed and it was like looking at the crazed uncomprehending eye of the wolf again. “You’re drunk,” I hissed.

“You watch it, Leigha,” my mother hissed back at me. She was panting hard and one hand gripped the railing. Her skin looked damp and pale, and her lips seemed to disappear against her yellowed teeth, shoulders hunched down as she leaned down towards me. “You do what I say. Not the other way around.” Her voice came from deep in her throat. She didn’t sound like my mother anymore. “You do what I say.”

Behind her a shadow sputtered in the hall. Bethany. I wanted to grab her and go, run out of the house and away from my drunk and angry mother. But I was afraid to walk past my mother and afraid to call out to Bethany to come to me.

“Rae?” Ellie, just inside the house, shuffled her boots, coughing. “Rae, I’m going to go on back home,” she called towards us.

She might have seen me, but she couldn’t see my mother from where she stood. I couldn’t look away towards Ellie, I didn’t dare take my eyes from my mother.

“Hold on a second, El,” my mother called back. She disappeared into her room and I jumped two, three stairs at a time to get past her to my own room. Bethany was just inside the doorway looking sleepy and confused.

“What’s out there?” she asked me. I lead her by the hand back to her bed. “It’s too early, go back to bed.” I pulled the blanket up over her and grabbed my own pillow to tuck beside her. “I’m awake,” she said but she sounded like she might go back to sleep just the same.

“I’m leaving, Rae!” called Ellie. And the front door creaked.

“No, wait El. I’m coming.” But she was too late, Ellie didn’t answer. She was already headed to her truck, I was pretty sure she wasn’t going to hang around our home much longer.

My mother stomped back down the stairs, “Come back!” She must have opened the door again because I could hear Ellie’s truck make the banging noise it made when it idled. Finally the low screech as the Ford spun in the gravel and headed down the drive.

The front door slammed shut. Bethany closed her eyes. I was in the hall between our room and my mother’s. My feet were bare. I felt like something quiet, and light, and hidden, like a rabbit or a spider. I thought that if I held still my mother would pound back up the stairs and into her room and not notice me.

“Leigha!” My mother was at the foot of the stairs.

I was frozen in place – a little spider on its thread. She walked slower this time. There was no hurry. Ellie was gone and she knew what awaited her – the cigar and ashtray the nearly empty vodka bottle and the scrolls of paper that were her drawings all lying in a heap at her bed. She was breathing hard by the time she reached the top – came towards me in the hallway.

“Go to your room,” she said – voice low again hollow.

“You’re going to have to stop this when we live with Grandma Kyle,” I told her. Like my grandmother, I’d had enough.

Her teeth bared again, a laugh or cough or the start of a sob, “I don’t think so.” She walked into her room but the door was open, so I knew it wasn’t over. I was frozen in one spot. The rabbit, caught from its den. My mother kicked at her nightstand and the drawer hiccupped loose a little. I knew what she kept there.

Should I try and grab Bethany and run next door to the Opichka’s house? But then I’ve got Bethany in the hallway here with me. If I just run myself? Go next door.

It was in her hand.

My father's 38 Special.

Grandma Kyle had recommended a .45, which was what she kept by her own bed. A .45 will kill whoever you point it at while a .38...depends on where you hit him. A .22 is a joke, a woman's gun, no one in my family would be caught dead with less than a .38.

No, I would have never left Bethany alone. I never really considered it except to quickly mourn that it wasn't a choice I could make.

Of course, the gun was loaded because Grandma Kyle would have told my mother to keep it loaded. But she checked it first to make sure. It was a quick motion, the check. She didn't even turn to face me or say something more before she pressed it to her temple. There was no dramatic pause. Had I seen her face I bet she didn't even close her eyes before she pulled the trigger.

That was it.

The pop wasn't as loud as it would be if you shot a can or a squirrel or, I suppose, another person. If you push the barrel right up flush to something there isn't anywhere for that pop sound to go. The gun smoke clouds up too, and for the same reason. And the thing that the gun is held against sort of ...explodes.

She dropped against the nightstand. There was a black ball of smoke in the air and something thick, some chunk of something that flew against the wall with a slapping sound. The bullet had gone through her and into the wall opposite the pile of sketch scrolls, where it angled down in a hole nearly as big as my fist.

I screamed once. And then I just stood there – waiting for the smoke to clear. She was dead. I knew it before the smoke cleared, really from when I'd first seen her

with the gun, before she'd even pulled the trigger. I walked up to where her body lay – the blood pouring from her was the same dull black as her hair. I was looking for the gun but she must have dropped on top of it.

## **Eighteen**

That summer Bethany found a little hummingbird nest in a bush near the edge of the clearing. The center of the nest that cradled the tiny eggs was no bigger than a thumbprint and the tiny birds themselves never seemed to do more than hover about the babies when they hatched. They must have been caring for eggs in some ways I wasn't witness to or couldn't perceive, though, because by the end of the summer the little birds had hatched and found their way out into the world. Bethany put the empty thumbprint nest on a shelf in her little bedroom at the Opichka house. Samuel had helped me move some of Bethany's stuff over to his house. His mother emptied a big linen closet of extra blankets and towels and made it into a little bedroom for my sister. There was just enough room for her sleeping bag on the floor and Mrs. Opichka propped Bethany's stuffed animals on the shelves around her. The closet actually looked kind of like a cozy little girl's room. Still, it was hard for me to see the truth – that Bethany was happier to be at Samuel's house more than she had been at ours. I tried to tell myself that it was better this way than if she was crying and asking to stay home -- but it hurt my pride.

I visit her there sometimes, when I know Samuel is at the garage. I think he knows I'm trying to avoid him because he keeps a regular work-schedule now; that makes it easier for me. I just have a hard time seeing him. He has a hard time seeing me too.

In the second week of August the weather changed and thin weightless snow began to swirl high in the air most mornings. My sister had noticed the change too. "When do I come to live with you, Lei?" my sister had asked me in the morning. I'd gone to visit her and to have breakfast with Mrs. Opichka. She always hugged me when I came to visit my sister. She always made me something to eat and asked me how I was doing. These were all behaviors I was completely unfamiliar with and left me feeling awkward but still good. I'd come to love visiting her as much as my sister.

"Soon, Bethany, not too much longer," I told her, hating how vague that promise was but not having anything better to offer her. I was already getting into the Blazer and watching out my rearview window for Samuel. I was cutting it kind of close if I still wasn't willing to see him. At the doorway Mrs. Ophichka waved to me.

I was staying up at Bill and Irene's old place. The house was empty of all furniture except for my bed but I kind of liked it that way. It was bright and well-made. Irene had papered the walls of the master-bedroom in lavender flowery paper and I thought I would let that be Bethany's room. I was almost ready to move her out here.

When I pulled up to the house I saw my grandmother's truck was already parked outside the house. I'd buried my mother's ashes at the foot of a boulder off the trail to the creek. The boulder was its only mark but I still wanted it there – close and secret. No one needed to know exactly what you were doing if you wanted to go sit and pay

your respects...or just think. Grandma Kyle never got closer to it than to stand at the trail head and stare into that direction but she knew where it was if she ever changed her mind.

My grandmother was pacing the rickety wooden porch when I drove up. She scowled at me because she knew where I had gone. It was the only place I ever really went. “When you going to move her up here?” she grumbled at me. She’d gotten thin in the last four months since my mother died and she looked more wrinkled because of it. She’d aged, I guess you’d say.

I stomped on the porch a little when I climbed the steps, bit down into the wood with my heel. “That’s the same thing she asked me,” I said. I think termites had gotten the boards pretty well; I was going to have to replace the whole porch before long.

“Then go do it. Move her up here.”

“I want to get the place ready. Move the stuff out of our old house.” My grandmother had gone herself to the house the morning after my mother shot herself – before it was even light outside. She’d cleaned everything –something I couldn’t imagine doing. To be able to take a bucket and cloth and clean the gore of what her daughter had done took either strength or coldness that was completely unknown to me. It was days before I would go into the house and the place didn’t look or smell like anyone had ever lived there. My grandmother had taken out all my mother’s clothes and bedding to the barrel in back of the house and burned them. For a long time I thought she burned them down to ash because I’d seen the flakes of white and char floating in the air – then I recognized a curl of paper as belonging to one of my mother’s drawings and I knew that Grandma Kyle had burned all of Mom’s artwork. Everything

that held her scent was gone and yet the entire place smelled like the smoke that clung to her clothes and hair all those last troubled weeks of her life.

“Girl, you listening to me?” my grandmother asked me and she slammed her fist on the old cedar porch railing.

“Careful, Grandma.” I answered back and I thought about when my mom had said the same thing to me at Ellie’s house. She’d warned me then to be careful of going up against Grandma Kyle. I wasn’t afraid anymore. Hitting me was a mistake on Kyle’s part because I itched for her to do it again now. She would get back better from me if she tried it. My grandmother squeezed the rail under the palms of her hands. “You think you can give that house and that clearing to them Indians, don’t you? You better think again Leigha – I’ll never sign away that property,” she hissed. “Never in my life.”

“You won’t live forever.”

Because of the wolf and my grandmother’s plans for a mountain resort she had put Bill and Irene’s place in my name. It would have been bad publicity for the owner to have deliberately killed an endangered grey wolf. It was the only justice that wolf would ever get. Too many people still thought of wolves as a menace. My grandmother got a fine so small she didn’t notice the loss.

Grandma Kyle decided to ignore my last comment. “I got my tools in the truck,” she said. “I thought I might fix that corral – we ought to get some horses – get them used to following the trail to the creek.” The corral was a good ways from the main house. Part of what I’d accomplished in the months since my mother died was to

lengthen the trail out of the woods to curve around to a pre-fab metal stable Bill and Irene left behind. There was a stand of little pine trees that blocked it from the house.

“I’m going to finish the frame on the third bungalow,” I told her. She and I did better when we kept our talk focused on the resort we were building. She grunted at me like she didn’t agree but wasn’t going to tell me what to do. “We could have some folks staying here by next summer.”

“What about this winter? Everything will be built – “

“We better wait, Grandma.”

“We don’t need to wait.” My grandmother had her tool box and was walking away from me. Fighting me on everything was just her way of reminding me not to get too big for my bridges. We were both still raw inside from what my mother had done. We were both still trying to find a way to stop blaming and hating each other for the past. I guess I couldn’t expect her to forgive the Opichkas. She’d had everything warped in her mind for so long that she wasn’t going to change. I grunted back at her.

I’d left all my tools and the framing boards under a tarp overnight. My arms and back ached just to roll it up and shove the thing out of my way. I could hear the slow hammer of my grandmother fixing the corral – physical exhaustion was the remedy we’d both chosen for our grief.

I was drenched in sweat when I heard the crunch and rumble of a truck on the drive. It was Samuel’s shiny black pick-up. I dropped the board I’d been dragging to the frame -- my muscles burning -- but I managed to stand up straight to meet him.

He was dressed in dirty coveralls like he’d come straight from the shop. His hair was in a fat braid down his back. “Looks good,” he said nodding to the two finished

frames. I wanted to do the walls for all three bungalows at once – I wasn't about to admit that I liked imagining the drama of a space suddenly occupied by the structures – a kind of monument to what I was capable of doing on my own.

Samuel moved his gaze very slowly from frame to frame until he finally met my gaze. I was watching him closely and I could tell he really was impressed with the work I had done. He nodded again and then smiled at whatever he found in my face, “It really is good, Lei.”

Even if caring what he thought made me weak I still did care. I smiled back at him. “I needed something to do.” I said surprising myself further.

“I know you did.” His voice was so tender that I flinched but he didn't try and change the way he meant it. He never did that the way I did – fake that he was callous to things he really cared about – things that hurt him or that he knew would hurt me.

“I'm sorry we haven't really talked – since my mom – since that night they found the wolf.” I couldn't meet his eyes. There was something else I was having problems with and it didn't have anything to do with my mother's death or what he had done with the wolf. “I just needed...”

“It's okay,” he said relieving me. He stepped a little closer, “But I decided I gave you enough time.”

I could smell the shop grease and exhaust on him. I wanted him to touch me; I could see if his skin was as warm as I remember. “Enough time for what?”

“My mother told me that you were going to stay up here and work next year.” He pulled one lip between his teeth and then released it again, “drop out of school?”

I shrugged and turned away from him. “For now.” I looked back at him and he was watching me, squinty eyed, trying to figure out if I meant it. “I’ll go back one day,” I assured him. “This is what I had to do.”

“Had to do?”

I smiled at him again. “I don’t want my grandmother to claim that this land really belongs to her. The more I do on here then the better my claim.” But that reminded me of what Grandma Kyle and I had talked about earlier. “She had the paperwork on the clearing all locked up – it went from my mom and back to her.” I didn’t like how rough my voice was getting but I couldn’t help the tears that were forming behind my eyes. “I would have given it to your parents. I would have ended this.”

“It already ended with us. All this time we thought you and your mom knew about our families – we thought...” Samuel looked at the ground and frowned.

I was impatient for him to go on. “You thought what?”

“That you were trying to pass. That you knew you were Indian – that you said the things you did so that people thought you were white.”

I was mortified; since his father told me the story, I hadn’t once considered that they had thought we’d known. I sighed and dug the heels of my palms against my eye-sockets. “My grandmother...” but I let my voice trail off from the angry things I might have said. Grandma Kyle’s rage had lasted through three generations of my family and I was ready for it to die.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Samuel said consolingly and he placed his hands on my shoulders so that I would look at him again.

But this was what was bothering me, that things might have changed between he two of us. Or that all along I had misunderstood. “It doesn’t matter about the stupid feud over the clearing...about our families...” I said agreeing with him. He was so close to me that it would have been easy for me to stand on my toes and kiss him if I wanted to. But I didn’t know if he wanted that or had ever wanted that.

He was shaking his head, “No.”

“But when it had mattered – when all of that mattered,” I whispered. “You still helped me with the wolf.”

“I knew you wanted to do what was right.”

I still wasn’t sure that I really had done what was right. If I hadn’t killed the wolf that night would my grandmother still be my hero? Would my mother still be alive? I could feel the tears on my face now. Crying was humiliating for me no matter that I knew Samuel didn’t care. It was my own family – my grandmother – who hated these shows of feeling and weakness. “You helped me because you thought it was right?” I asked him. “Or did you help me because you thought I was family?”

Samuel squinted his eyes again, “What?”

“We’re cousins, after all. Maybe you thought of me like that...like a sister?”

“Maybe I should have,” he agreed. “I should have acted more like a brother.”

I was too embarrassed to look him in the eye. “It’s okay.” I took a step back from him and his hands fell from me back to his sides. “Maybe we could try to be more like cousins...now.”

“Maybe,” he said looking into my eyes for one intense moment before turning away to look again at the house, the half-finished corral and the woods framing the trail-head.

“You’re really going to do this then? The fishing resort?”

“I’m going to move Bethany up here before winter,” I told him clearing my throat. “I think that little closet won’t be feeling quite so cozy before long; she already comes up past my waist.”

“I can help you move some furniture up here. If you want me to?”

When I finally could look at him again I saw that he had the same face of patient affection that he always turned to me. No one had ever looked at me that way beside Samuel.

“Yeah. It’s time, I think.” I told him. He took my hand in his and everything awkward between us was gone. We were friends.