

1

BOONE

DAY 100: MARCH 17

I STEP ONTO THE PACKED DIRT JUST OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR and rub my hands together. I blow on them for good measure, which never helps. There's something comforting in the gesture, though, like maybe I have some minuscule bit of control over this one simple thing, warming my fingers.

Of course, that's a complete joke.

Where the hell are the leather work gloves, the ones I've only recently started to think of as my own? The gloves used to belong to my father, like most everything else in my life.

I head to the paddock, say, "Yeah, same to you," as the gelding grumbles a low whinny. The sound is both friendly and demanding, like, *I love you, man. Now, throw my freaking breakfast over the fence.* For some reason, it makes me want to

wrap my arms around the horse's neck in a hug. Diablo would never stand for it, though. Not until after he'd finished eating.

I grab a fat flake of alfalfa from the open bale on a pallet in the makeshift feed room. I take the purple bucket from its hook and scoop some sweet, expensive senior feed into it until the bucket's a third full. Try not to think about what me and Mom and Diablo are going to do now that my hours at the Feed & Seed have been cut to just weekends. Even though it's still cold, it's not the right season for loading up the truck with firewood and selling it on the side of the road. It's actually the opposite of the right season.

The horse is a ridiculous expense. If I wasn't able to turn him out into the big pasture from late spring until fall like I do, there's no way we'd be able to keep him.

For the past two-plus years, ever since horse chores fell to me (all chores, really), I've made a habit of checking Diablo's water trough for everything from slobbery clumps of half-chewed alfalfa to floating turds. Horses can be disgusting like that, and I like to clean stuff out of his tank before it gets too gross. When you live out in the middle of nowhere and have to haul your own water, you learn to conserve it pretty quickly.

This time, I don't find either of those things in the trough. Instead, I find two dead birds. Barn swallows, maybe, or wild finches—I can never keep them straight. Their wings are

splayed out on the slushy surface of the water. The tip of one bird's right wing and the other bird's left wing are touching, like only seconds before death they reached for each other.

I just stand there, can't believe it. The backs of their wings are totally dry. For a crazy split second I think maybe they could still be alive. But no. The birds are still, and the water is still. Which means they've been there for a while, possibly since right after I left for school this morning. I feel so awful all of a sudden—and so foolish for feeling awful about two stupid dead birds—that I clench my fists and hold them to my forehead. I tense all the muscles in my body as tight as they'll go until I feel like I might scream or explode. After a minute, I let everything relax again and drop my hands to my sides.

I walk to the shed for the mucking fork to fish the birds out of the trough. It occurs to me to wonder if they have a nest somewhere. Spring is just a couple days away, after all. It's not unusual at this time of year to see small birds trying to guard their nests from huge, pillaging ravens. Somewhere close by, a cluster of naked, wide-beaked chicks might be, right this very second, cheeping for their parents to return with some tasty earthworms. I could try to locate any potential babies, but then what? Their chances of survival with two dead parents would be nil, and it's not like I have time to nurse a nest full of newly hatched mouths to feed.

It does no good to linger on that thought. It does the opposite of good, in fact. Linger on thoughts like that is just

one more thing that makes me weak, so I push the image from my mind. Remind myself that nature can be a heartless bitch. Swipe at my eyes with the cuff of my jacket, then look around in case anyone saw. Which is moronic. Who'd be crazy enough to be standing around way out here in the middle of nowhere this late in the day in this kind of weather? *Don't answer that*, I think, trying to cheer myself up. It's probably the first sign that I've finally gone completely mental.

Back at the trough, I lower the mucking fork into the water and bring it carefully up under the birds. A part of me is half-afraid they'll startle and flap at the sensation, but nothing happens. One bird falls from the mucking fork as I lift it. Plops back into the water, wings akimbo. In the process of scooping it up again, both birds get twisted and tangled. When I finally get them onto the plastic tines, they're like feathered pretzels, dripping wet. They'll be frozen solid before some other animal finds and eats them in the next day or so. Circle of life and whatever. I say a few words in my head before flinging them as far over the pasture fence as possible, something like, *Thank you for these birds, amen.*

It will be getting dark soon. After hanging the fork back on its hook inside the feed room, I head toward the forest with a flashlight to look for a piece of wood to keep in the trough. Years ago, I overheard one of my dad's horseshoeing clients talking about how it was smart to keep a fat stick inside big water tanks so animals that got in could get out. Otherwise,

they'd drown in there, creating a botulism threat. And when that happens, you have no choice but to empty the whole trough and bleach it, wasting potentially hundreds of gallons of water that you've spent precious time, money, and wear-and-tear on the truck hauling from town to your cistern.

Which is exactly, I realize, what I'm going to have to do now.

2

MOIRA

DAY 99: MARCH 18

ANOTHER DAY. SPRING ISN'T EVEN HERE YET, AND I'M ALREADY sick of it. Sick of the relentless beatdown from icy rain, screaming wind, and half-frozen puddles of mud that soak through the worn soles of my Doc Martens the second I set foot outside the building. Judging by how sullen the lunch line is today, I'm not the only one who feels this way.

Even normally peppy Agnes is zombied out. She's not chattering the way she usually does as we wait for whatever slop is being passed off as lunch. Instead, she's focused on nothing in particular, totally lost in space. I look down at the top of Agnes's wig. She's wearing the blond bob. High gloss. It looks like Barbie hair, or the hair of one of the insipid pop stars she's always trying to emulate. Give me 1920s silent film

star hair any day. Louise Brooks (by way of Siouxsie Sioux) is the particular goddess my own hair's modeled after now.

If we can just get our trays and leave, things will turn around. I'm pretty sure the headache that's been inching its way up the back of my skull will go away once we make it to the home ec room and start working on the dresses that will be worth about half our grade in the class. The assignment is to design and sew an outfit for a special occasion. It has to fit, and it has to be something we'd actually wear. Agnes isn't sure yet how she wants her dress to look. Mine is inspired by two of Alfred Hitchcock's leading ladies: Eva Marie Saint in *North by Northwest* and Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*. I'm using gray silk with tons of slubs throughout the fabric, which gives it that wonderful, imperfect texture, almost like the silk is scarred.

The home ec room is, hands down, the best place to be during lunch. That's the only time the room is quiet and there aren't a bunch of other people hogging the sewing machines and spreading their fabric all over the workstations. I don't know what we'd do if the teacher didn't let us eat in there almost every day. Agnes and I both adore Mrs. Deene. She looks like she time-traveled straight from the 1950s. I imagine her crafting molded Jell-O salads and greeting her new husband with a martini every night when he gets home.

Sudden mayhem erupts in the lunch line behind us. An argument, probably, or a practical joke. Who knows? It's

always a madhouse in here, which is why I prefer to bring my own food whenever I'm not too rushed, like I was this morning.

I sigh and adjust my posture, instinctively transforming myself into a human shield to protect Agnes from whatever's going on back there. It's too late. An unstoppable domino effect is happening in line, and there's no time to get out of its way. Someone shoves me hard from behind, almost knocking me off my feet. *Tipping point*, I think. My hands fly up and brace against whatever's in front of me.

It's some guy I don't recognize right away. He's a mountain of a humanoid. Not fat exactly, not like me, but solid and tall, like the side of a barn. My hands are planted between his shoulder blades, my arms ramrod-straight and forming a bridge over Agnes's head. Agnes looks up at the bridge and smiles, has no idea how close she just came to being a pancake. Crushed by her protector. God, the irony. I regain my balance and clear my throat. Think about how to apologize to the person I just shoved, but apologies have never come naturally to me.

The guy turns around and glares at us through long, frayed bangs. Looks first at me, then down at Agnes, and back at me. When he does, a little shooting star of recognition fizzles across my brain. I ignore it. An unreadable expression passes over his face, and he turns away again. Like we're not worth his time.

I shoot Agnes my "What a dick" look, but she's busy fishing

for the lanyard looped around her neck. So she recognizes him, too. She finds the strap and follows it down to the little digital camera hanging from the end. “Hey, you,” she says to the dick’s back.

When he turns around again, she points, clicks, and shoots in one fluid motion.

“Not now, Agnes,” I say (too late) from above. I blink away the unexpected flash and listen to the sound of my molars grinding together. Remind myself to breathe. Remind myself that it’s Friday and that there are only a few hours to go before I’m free of this hellhole.

The guy blinks, too, says, “What the . . .” He notes the way Agnes is smiling up at him and the way I am definitely not smiling. *What a piece of work*, he’s no doubt thinking, *this whale of a girl I once knew bulging out of her Black Sabbath shirt. Skin like white paint now. Lips like coal.* He shakes his head and lets out a disgusted sigh before turning his back to us yet again.

My hands made indentations where I planted them against the rough fabric of his jacket. I stare at the handprints as the guy just stands there, not moving even when the line ahead of him thins out. “Sometime this *year* would be nice,” I say, insulted by what I know he’s thinking about me.

The guy turns back around like it’s all just too much. He wipes his hand down his face, dragging his lower eyelids down with it. Sighs. “What the hell did you just say?”

That's it. I belly up to him the way belligerent drunks do in movies, just before a bar brawl. I force my voice to come out as low and menacing as possible. "I said: Sometime. This year. Would be nice."

"I'll move when I'm ready to move. *Shamu.*"

I shrink back at the sound of my old nickname. "It's Moira," I say in a voice so soft and wounded that it surprises even me. *You know that*, I almost add, but then I think better of it.

Before I realize what's happening, Agnes is standing on tiptoe between the two of us. "That's mean!" she says, coming to my defense, her lower jaw thrust forward.

The guy lets out a bitter laugh, points his face in her direction. "Whatever, Gollum."

Agnes looks dumbfounded. One hand rises up, index finger punctuating the air. "Shame on you! Just . . . just . . ."

Nervous laughter bubbles up from the line behind us. Nobody calls Agnes names. Not to her face, anyway.

"Agnes, don't. Let's get out of here." I take hold of my best friend's hand and lower it down, my eyes never leaving Dickhead's face as I pull Agnes away from the line. God knows what he might do. It kills me that I can't come up with a decent comeback. No doubt I'll think of one tonight as I'm falling asleep.

Traces of adrenaline are still pulsing up my spine and through my veins once we get to home ec and start working

on our dresses. We never did get to eat lunch. I don't say anything about it, though. Don't bring up the fact that I'm still feeling shaky and combative, even once the weather lets up and a strip of sunshine cuts through the clouds.

After school, Agnes climbs into the booster car seat I installed for her inside El-C, my beater of an El Camino. "You're lucky I have an old car," I told her when I got my license a few months ago. "No airbags in this baby, so we can put your seat in front." El-C does have a truck bed, though. Also big black polka dots that I painted all over her primer-gray paint job.

"Anarchy in the UK" blasts from the ancient speakers as soon as I turn the key in the ignition. Agnes puts her fingers in her ears, even though I know she likes this song. She once told me her favorite part is when Johnny Rotten's voice cracks as he's singing about the Irish Republican Army.

Ever since we left the cafeteria, Agnes has stayed quiet. Now she's staring out the passenger side window. When we're a few blocks away from school, she reaches toward the stereo and turns down the music. "Did you recognize him?" she asks me.

"Who?" I'm already pretending that what happened didn't happen. Already stuffing it down the way I do.

"That guy from the lunch line. Boone Craddock."

"Of course," I respond. "What an ass." I'd say something worse about him, like the word that's been at the tip of my tongue since lunchtime—the one that starts with *mother* and

ends with *-ucker*—but Agnes doesn't like it when I use words like that.

“He didn't used to be an ass.”

“People change, Agnes.” The words come out harsher than I mean for them to, and I instantly wish I could take them back. But just the name of that, that . . . I can hardly stand to even *think* his name, much less say it.

“Hmm. I guess so,” Agnes says. “I've never even seen him at school, probably because he's been in those at-risk classes.” Then she says, “I wonder if he remembers us.”

I almost say, *How could he not?* But I don't. Instead, I reach for the volume knob and crank up the Pistols as loud as they'll go.

3

BOONE

DAY 98: MARCH 19

I REMEMBER THEM, ALL RIGHT. WAKING UP SATURDAY MORNING, yesterday's incident replays itself over and over again in my head, like a scene from some lame after-school movie special.

Standing in that lunch line, I'd been ready to slug whoever just shoved their hands into my back. People are always giving me shit. And for what? *For what?* What have I ever done but try to survive? Just last week, some guy in the hallway called me "retard" under his breath, hit himself in the chest with the back of his wrist when I walked past. A girl standing nearby gave the guy a little slap on the arm. "That's so mean," she said. And then she laughed at me, too.

It's the kind of thing that makes me miss the Alternative Classroom Experience track I've been on since starting high

school last year. So what if being an ACE student marked me as an “at-risk youth”? The Bad Seed Track, some ACE kids liked to call it. Maybe we *were* bad seeds. At least there was a place where we could hang out and be bad seeds together without getting into too much trouble. Now, thanks to budget cuts, that place is gone. ACE has only been shut down for a few weeks, but I can already tell things aren’t going to end well. Being mainstreamed into “normal” high school classes is going to mean constant vigilance. Daily navigation through a minefield of the kind of shit that might just get somebody killed because there won’t be an ACE teacher there to talk me down.

I get out of bed and head for the bathroom, wonder if I have any reasonably clean clothes. I have to hustle if I’m going to make it to work on time.

Judging by how dark the kitchen is when I go in there, Mom’s not up yet. Big surprise. I flick on the light and head to the cereal cabinet, the cafeteria scene from yesterday still replaying in my mind.

Feeling those hands shove against my spine, I turned around in slow motion, like whoever did it was going to get what they deserved. Who cared if there was no more Alternative Classroom Experience for guys like me? Who cared if juvie was my next stop? I was done. *Done*. The shover was about to learn what a heartless bitch nature could be.

But.

It was Moira Watkins who shoved me. Of all people. At first I didn't even recognize her under all the makeup. We haven't said zip to each other in . . . well, it's been about four years now. And it didn't make sense why she would have put her hands on me. Then I saw the fight or whatever it was that had broken out farther back in line and realized she'd been shoved, too.

I tried to hide my double take by glaring at Moira for a second and then down at Agnes Delaney, who was standing between us, as easy to miss as always. Then I turned back around like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

But I kind of had to pull myself together. Had to just stand there for a minute and get the kinks worked out of my brain. Had to refocus and breathe. I was just waiting in the lunch line. That was all. It was fine. It was a normal day. Nobody had punched me. Nobody needed to be punched. One of the things ACE teachers kept trying to teach us before the program shut down was to listen to the voices of our higher selves when we felt overwhelmed. That was supposed to help neutralize whatever negative energy was about to get us in trouble. *Bring it down, dude*, the voice of my higher self urged as I stood in that line. *Everything's okay. Just bring it down.*

Then Moira said, "Sometime this *year* would be nice."

When I turned around again, it looked like she was trying to melt my face with her laser-beam eyes because I wasn't moving fast enough. Which made sense. I was, after all,

standing between her and a counter full of food. Okay, so maybe that wasn't the most charitable thought, but with the adrenaline and the barely held back rage pumping through my bloodstream, it was the first thing that came to mind. At the same moment, images of a sixth-grade dodgeball game popped up before I could stop them. It was a pointless memory, one of those things you're embarrassed to think about. I've put it out of my mind in the four years since. Who wouldn't?

I took a deep breath. Thank God I hadn't knocked Moira out before realizing who she was or even that she was a girl. She definitely didn't make that second part easy with the black hair and lips, the white face, the crap around her eyes. Don't goths realize how ridiculous they look? Total freaks. *If you want to be dead, then be dead already! Stop inflicting your hideousness on the rest of us.*

My father's voice in my own head stops me cold.

We had words, me and Moira. Then she crossed the line by getting right up in my face. If I'd done that to *her*, I'd be kicked out of school so fast, it would make your head spin. True, some part of me instinctively felt cornered when she came that close. Still, if I'd had time to think, I know I wouldn't have called her what I did. Agnes, either.

The second I said it, the second I called her "Shamu," Moira's expression changed the way a just-punched guy's expression changes right before he hits the ground. Her face looked

like something from the pain chart I saw in the school nurse's office after my first fight this year. Ten faces on the chart ranged from smiling (*Feeling good!*) to scowling and tearful (*The worst I've ever felt*). Moira's face was roughly a seven, but at least she backed the hell off when I insulted her.

God, my head is a muddle this morning. I look down and realize I've poured and eaten two bowls of cereal without knowing I was doing it. I don't even recall getting the milk out of the fridge.

* * *

That afternoon, when I get back home from hauling a load of water from the standpipe in town to our cistern out back, Mom's in the hallway. She's wearing her threadbare bathrobe and she looks like a nervous wreck, as usual. Trembly and drained of her life force. Standing in the doorway of her bedroom like she's just woken up (which she probably has). *Who are you?* I sometimes want to ask her. *And what have you done with the woman who used to get up before dawn?* That woman used to fry up a big skillet of bacon and eggs just about every morning. She'd squeeze oranges and make French press coffee before waking me and Dad up so the three of us could start the day together.

"How was your day?" she asks me in the small, defeated voice she uses all the time now.

“Fine,” I tell her. “You okay?”

Mom nods before disappearing into the bedroom. As soon as she closes the door, I grab my dad’s hunting jacket to wear while I feed Diablo and chop some wood for tomorrow’s fire. It still feels subzero outside, but at least the worst of the sleet has let up a little.

Sometimes I think the hunting jacket still smells like my dad. He was wearing it the first and last time he ever took me elk hunting. At one point, I had a clean shot at a mature bull, but I couldn’t kill it. Instead, I raised the barrel of the rifle just a hair and missed on purpose, fired off the round just over the animal’s shoulder. The bull bolted, and my father cursed as if he hadn’t realized all along how misguided it was to bring me out there. I could punch guys out all day long for teasing me about being dumb, but I loved elk too much to kill one. I’ve always been much happier hunting for their antlers, which tend to break free in winter from the impact of the bulls landing hard on their forelegs after jumping over forest service fences. If I look carefully enough, I always find discarded racks along those fence lines come spring.

To keep my hands warm now, I bury them in the pockets of the hunting jacket as I walk toward Diablo’s paddock. My right hand encounters something solid, and I pull it out. It’s an empty snuff can I found in the forest last week. I hate litter, so I picked it up, meaning to throw it away later. I didn’t give it any more thought at the time, but now a memory from

out of nowhere catapults me backward to the day I first found a full can just like it. I couldn't have been older than eight or nine. The can was resting on the edge of the truck bed, beckoning me. I twisted off the wide, flat cap quick, before my father returned from whatever he was doing. Then I pinched out a gob of the mysterious brown substance that reminded me of wet mulch and stuffed it inside my bottom lip, the way I'd seen him do.

I didn't know you're not supposed to swallow. Within moments, I could have easily passed for the lead singer of a metal band called the Heaving Vomits.

My father returned shortly thereafter. It didn't take him long to put two and two together. Those cool gray eyes of his moved from the open snuff can to my pea-green face. He didn't cuss or remove his belt like I thought he would, though. Instead, he came toward me, looming large and blocking out the sun. I remember how huge his frame seemed to me at the time, even though he probably wasn't as big as I am now. "Well," he said, "I suppose you've been punished enough."

Back then, he could still be merciful like that.

4

AGNES

DAY 97: MARCH 20

MOIRA IS MY SHADE TREE.

I first met her when I changed schools halfway through fifth grade. I needed better help with my work as I missed more and more school due to doctor appointments, visits to out-of-town specialists, and time spent at home feeling generally not well. By then, I already had the blood vessels of a seventy-year-old and the beginnings of cardiovascular issues to match. No other Resource room in the district compared with Ms. Marilyn's Resource room at my new school.

I was wearing my Hannah Montana wig that first day, the one that best covered up my sticky-out ears. The fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Bhamra, had obviously told the students about me already; not one of them dared to so much as look my

way when she introduced me. Except Moira. She was sitting in the front row desk to my right. I saw her out of the corner of my eye, staring for so long that I finally turned with a frown and mouthed, *Can I help you?* Between dealing with my parents' divorce and changing schools, it had already been an especially stressful year. I wasn't in the mood to be gawked at today.

"Ms. Watkins will be showing you around," the teacher said.

At that, the staring girl smiled and held out her hand for a shake. "I'm Moira."

"Oh," I said. "I'm Agnes." Her hand was huge when it closed around mine. Everything about her was huge. She could have squashed me like a bug, but the handshake wasn't rough at all. Just firm and certain, like something between us was being decided once and for all.

5

MOIRA

DAY 96: MARCH 21

MONDAY MORNING I PICK AGNES UP AT HER HOUSE AS USUAL and force myself not to protest as she slides her favorite mix tape into El-C's old cassette player. I know every song on the tape by heart, and not because I want to. The song she loves most, "Dream" by Priscilla Ahn, sounds a little warbly now, probably because Agnes has rewound and replayed it over and over more times than I can count. I guess it's a pretty enough song, if you like schmaltzy, tear-jerker stuff, which I definitely do not. Sometimes I find myself humming it for no reason other than because it has been drilled into my brain over the past couple of years. I'm actually grateful for the song this morning. It seems to be distracting her, because she doesn't mention the name of my old nemesis even once.

Sixth grade flashed through my mind for only a split second as I stood in that cafeteria line with Boone Craddock looking like he was about to go all postal. But that split second was enough to make me shudder.

Looking back, I think some major hormonal event must have happened to everyone the summer after fifth grade, especially to the girls. All I knew was that when I returned in the fall, there was a new glint of meanness in the eyes of my classmates. It was as if the queen bees had gotten together over the summer and decided what part each kid would play in the Stephen King movie we'd all be forced to reenact. Some kids, the smart, quiet ones, got to be innocent bystanders. Others, the bees included, got to be perpetrators.

I, as it turned out, got to be the star, if not the heroine. My parents are hippies, which meant I usually wore clothes my mom made from tie-dyed cotton fabrics. For lunch, I brought reusable containers full of kefir and tabouleh, sandwiches made with tempeh instead of store-bought lunch meat, everything vegetarian. To top it off, I was already five foot eight and weighed as much as my weight-lifting brother, Grant, who was a senior in high school at the time. It didn't make sense that I could weigh so much eating the way I did, but my mom has always been the same way. One thing she started telling me that year was: *We just have slower metabolisms.* Another was: *You're beautiful, Moira. Embrace who you are. Someday, you'll be the kind of woman Peter Paul Rubens would have painted.*

As if that solved everything. Who'd want to model for a seventeenth-century Flemish Baroque painter, anyway?

It didn't help that much of the weight was in my breasts, which were the most recent gifts bestowed by the Puberty Fairy during my own summertime hormone surge. It took the boys a while to figure out what to call me. The nickname "Dolly Farton" was in heavy rotation, as was "Booby McGee." But I was big everywhere else, too. Hence the moniker that topped all others during that year for sheer usage: "Shamu." Killer whale. Between the name-calling and the fact that Agnes, my only real friend at school, spent most of her time in the Resource room, it wasn't long before every day of sixth grade felt like a slow lead-up to Carrie's prom night.

Thing is, this wasn't a new story. People who are different get bullied all the time. Interesting adults who contribute to society in amazing ways got bullied when they were kids, too. Even back then, even in the middle of it, I knew this. I'd watched *Sesame Street* when I was little. I'd seen the PSAs. Plus, my parents reminded me of this stuff all the time. But knowing I might one day help save the world wasn't much of a comfort when I was twelve and just trying to survive the school year. I was, after all, the one who'd been cast in the starring role by the queen bees at school. I was clearly the girl destined to end up drenched in pigs' blood under the disco ball.