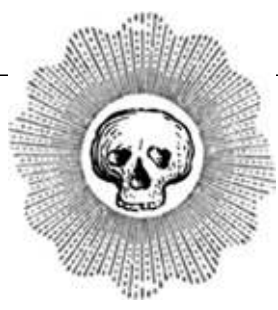




THE STEEP &
THORNY
WAY

CAT WINTERS

MORRIS AWARD FINALIST FOR
IN THE SHADOW OF BLACKBIRDS



CAT WINTERS



AMULET BOOKS
NEW YORK

A black and white illustration of a woman with dark, curly hair standing in a misty, wooded area. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless top and a light-colored, patterned skirt. The scene is framed by the dark, gnarled branches of a tree in the foreground. In the background, there is a small, rustic wooden building partially obscured by trees and mist. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ethereal.

THE STEEP &
THORNY
WAY

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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IN LOVING
MEMORY OF
MY COUSIN
JIMMY
HACKER

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: MURDER MOST FOUL
CHAPTER 2: LESS THAN KIND
CHAPTER 3: DESPERATE WITH IMAGINATION
CHAPTER 4: SOMETHING IS ROTTEN
CHAPTER 5: WHERE WILT THOU LEAD ME?
CHAPTER 6: WILD AND WHIRLING
CHAPTER 7: THOU HAST THY FATHER MUCH OFFENDED
CHAPTER 8: THE PLAY'S THE THING
CHAPTER 9: SEE WHAT I SEE
CHAPTER 10: THE MOUSETRAP
CHAPTER 11: WITH FIERY QUICKNESS
CHAPTER 12: HOW UNWORTHY A THING YOU MAKE OF ME
CHAPTER 13: THE PRIMROSE PATH
CHAPTER 14: CAST THY NIGHTED COLOR OFF
CHAPTER 15: WHO IS'T THAT CAN INFORM ME?
CHAPTER 16: NOBLE DUST
CHAPTER 17: THE WEEPING BROOK
CHAPTER 18: DESPERATE UNDERTAKINGS
CHAPTER 19: NEVER DOUBT I LOVE
CHAPTER 20: BE EVEN AND DIRECT WITH ME
CHAPTER 21: MOST UNNATURAL MURDER
CHAPTER 22: O HEAVY BURDEN
CHAPTER 23: THE DEVIL TAKE THY SOUL
CHAPTER 24: THAT IT SHOULD COME TO THIS
CHAPTER 25: A VERY PALPABLE HIT
CHAPTER 26: HAD I BUT TIME
CHAPTER 27: THE REST IS SILENCE
CHAPTER 28: REST, PERTURBED SPIRIT
CHAPTER 29: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE
AUTHOR'S NOTE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

[IMAGE CREDITS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

**DO NOT, AS SOME
UNGRACIOUS
PASTORS DO,**

**SHOW ME THE
STEEP AND
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WAY TO
HEAVEN,**

**WHILES, LIKE
A PUFFED AND
RECKLESS
LIBERTINE,
HIMSELF THE
PRIMROSE PATH
OF DALLIANCE
TREADS . . .**

—HAMLET



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HANALEE DENNEY, *daughter to the late Hank Denney, and stepdaughter to Clyde Koning*

GRETA KONING, *mother to Hanalee, and wife to Clyde Koning*

GHOST *of Hank Denney*

CLYDE KONING, *physician*

FLEUR PAULISSEN, *friend to Hanalee, and sister to Laurence*

LAURENCE PAULISSEN, *brother to Fleur*

POLLY PAULISSEN, *widow, and mother to Fleur and Laurence*

JOE ADDER, *accused of the murder of Hank Denney*

REVEREND AND MRS. ADDER, *parents to Joe and six other children*

MILDRED MARKS, *a neighbor*

BERNICE MARKS, *younger sister to Mildred*

MRS. MARKS, *widow, and mother to Mildred, Bernice, and seven other children*

SHERIFF RINK, *head law enforcer*

DEPUTY FORTAINE, *assistant to Sheriff Rink*

ROBBIE AND GIL WITTEN, *twin brothers, and friends to Laurence*

MR. AND MRS. FRANKLIN, *restaurateurs*

OPAL RICKERT, *sweetheart to Laurence*

HARRY CORNELIUS, AL VOLTMAN, OSCAR AND CHESTER KLEIN, *local boys*

SCENE: *Elston, Oregon*



WASHINGTON COUNTY, OREGON, EARLY 1900s.

CHAPTER 1

MURDER MOST FOUL

..... JULY 1, 1923



I DREW A DEEP BREATH AND MARCHED into the woods behind my house with a two-barreled pistol hidden beneath my blue cotton skirt. The pocket-size derringer roared against my outer right thigh, tucked inside a holster that had, according to the boy who'd given it to me, once belonged to a lady bootlegger who'd been arrested with three different guns strapped to her legs. Twigs snapped beneath my shoes. My eyes watered and burned. The air tasted of damp earth and metal.

Several yards ahead, amid a cluster of maples blanketed in scaly green lichen, stood a fir tree blackened by lightning. If I turned right on the deer trail next to that tree and followed a line of ferns, I'd find myself amid rows of shriveled grapevines in the shut-down vineyard belonging to my closest friend, Fleur, her older brother, Laurence, and their war-widowed mama.

But I didn't turn.

I kept trekking toward the little white shed that hid the murderer Joe Adder.

Fleur's whispers from church that morning ran through my head, nearly tipping me off balance during my clamber across moss-slick rocks in the creek. "Reverend Adder doesn't even want his bones around anymore," she had told me before the sermon, her face bent close to mine, fine blond hair brushing across her cheeks. "He won't let Joe back in the house with the rest of the kids. Laurence is hiding him in our old shed. And Joe wants to talk to you. He's got something to say about the night his car hit your father."

I broke away from the creek and hiked up a short embankment covered in sedges and rushes that tickled my bare shins. At the top of the bank, about twenty-five feet away, sat a little white structure built of plaster and wood. Before he left for the Great War, Fleur's father used to store his fishing gear and liquor in the place, and he sometimes invited my father over for a glass of whiskey, even after Oregon went bone-dry in 1916. Bigleaf maples hugged the rain-beaten shingles with arms covered in leaves as bright green as under-ripe apples. A stovepipe poked out from the roof, and I smelled the sharp scent of leftover ashes—the ghost of a fire Joe must have lit the night before, when the temperature dropped into the fifties.

I came to a stop in front of the shed, my pulse pounding in the side of my throat. My scalp sweltered beneath my knitted blue hat, along with the long brown curls I'd stuffed and pinned inside. I leaned over and drew the hem of my skirt above my right knee, exposing the worn leather of the holster. I took another deep breath and wiggled the little derringer out of its hiding place.

With my legs spread apart, I stood up straight and pointed the pistol at the shed's closed door. "Are you in there, Joe?"

A hawk screeched from high above the trees, and some sort of animal splashed in the pond that lay beyond the shed and the foliage. But I didn't hear one single peep out of Joe Adder.

"Joe?" I asked again, this time in as loud and deep a voice as I could muster. Tree-trunk strong, sounded. Sticky sweat rolled down my cheeks, and my legs refused to stop rocking back and forth. "Are you in there?"

"Who's there?"

I gripped the pistol with both my hands. The voice I heard was a husky growl that couldn't have belonged to clean-cut, preacher's-boy Joe, from what I remembered of him. It and a splashing sound seemed to come from the pond, not the shed.

"Who's there?" he asked again. I heard another splash.

I lowered the pistol to my side and crept around to the back of the shed, feeling my tongue dry from panting. I pushed past a tangle of blackberry bushes, pricking a thumb on a thorn, and came to stop on the edge of the bank. My feet teetered on the gnarled white root of a birch.

In the pond, submerged up to his navel in the murky green water, stood a tanned and naked Joe Adder, arms akimbo, a lock of dark brown hair hanging over his right eye. His shoulders were broad and sturdy, his biceps surprisingly muscular, as though prison had worked that scrawny little white boy hard.

My mouth fell open, and my stomach gave an odd jump. The last time I'd seen Joe, back in February 1921, seventeen months earlier, he'd been a slick-haired, sixteen-year-old kid in a fancy black suit, blubbing on a courthouse bench between his mama and daddy.

This new version of my father's killer—now just a few months shy of his eighteenth birthday, almost brawny, his hair tousled and wild—peered at me without blinking. Drops of water plunked on the pond's surface from his elbows.

"You don't want to shoot me, Hanalee," he said in that husky voice of his. "I don't recommend prison to anyone but the devils who threw me in there."

I pointed the pistol at his bare chest, my right fingers wrapped around the grip. "If you had run over and killed a white man with your daddy's Model T," I said, "you'd still be behind bars, serving your full two years . . . and more."

"I didn't kill anyone."

"I bet you don't know this"—I shifted my weight from one leg to the other—"but people tell ghost stories about my father wandering the road where you ran him down, and I hate those tales with a powerful passion."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"But those stories don't make me half as sick as you standing there, saying you didn't kill anyone. If you didn't kill him, you no-good liar, then why didn't you defend yourself at your trial?"

Joe sank down into the water and let his chin graze the surface. Long, thick lashes framed his brown eyes, and he seemed to know precisely how to tilt his head and peek up at a girl to use those lashes to his advantage. "They never gave me a chance to speak on the witness stand," he said. "They hurried me into that trial, and then they rushed me off to prison by the first week of February. And I didn't get to say a goddamn word."

I pulled the hammer into a half-cocked position with a click that echoed across the pond. Joe's eyes widened, and he sucked in his breath.

"You lied to your family about delivering food to the poor that Christmas Eve," I said, "and you crashed into my father because you were drunk on booze from some damn party. My new stepfather witnessed him die from injuries caused by *you*, so don't you dare fib to me."

“Don’t you dare shoot me before I talk to you about that stepdaddy of yours.”

“I don’t want to hear what you have to say about Uncle Clyde. I’m not happy he married my mama but he’s a decent man.”

“Stop pointing that gun at me and let me talk.”

“Give me one good reason why I should listen to you.” I aimed the pistol at the skin between Joe’s eyebrows. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t squeeze this trigger and sh—”

“You should listen to me, Hanalee, because you’re living with your father’s murderer.”

A shallow breath fluttered through my lips. All the doubts and fears I’d harbored about Dr. Koning since he married my grieving mama last winter squirmed around in my gut. I stared Joe down, and he stared me down, and the gun quaked in my hand until the metal blurred before my eyes.

“For Christ’s sake, Hanalee, stop pointing that gun at me and let me talk to you.”

“Clyde Koning did not kill my father.”

“Your father was alive when I helped him into my house. He even joked with me—he said he thought he’d been hit by Santa’s sleigh as punishment for misbehaving on Christmas Eve.”

I shook my head. “My father wouldn’t have said any such thing. The only thing he did wrong that night was to walk down the dark highway to try to join us at church. He wasn’t feeling well, and—”

“His leg was bleeding and maybe broken,” continued Joe, ignoring me, rattling off words as if he had them memorized from a script. “So I let him lean his weight against me while I helped him inside. My family was running the Christmas Eve service, so I laid your father on my bed and telephoned Dr. Koning.”

“I don’t—”

“The last thing your father said to me before I opened the door for the doctor was ‘The doc’s going to be the death of me. I just know it.’”

I stepped off the gnarled root, landing so hard I jarred my neck. “That’s a lie.”

“And when I asked, ‘Do you want me to send Dr. Koning away?’ he told me, ‘No, just make sure no one ever hurts my Hanalee.’”

My eyes itched and moistened. I blinked and rocked back and forth. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“When Dr. Koning arrived, he shut my bedroom door behind him and left me to wait in the living room.” Joe rose back up to a standing position. Water rained off his body and splattered into the pond, and a wave lapped at his stomach, just above his hip bones. “The next time that bedroom door opened your father was dead. He wasn’t hardly even bleeding before that point—he seemed to have only suffered a busted leg and a sore arm from the crash. But suddenly he was dead, as if someone had just shot a poisonous dose of morphine through his veins.”

I shook my head. “That’s not true.”

“People shut me up at my trial. No one, not even my own lawyer, let me speak, as if they’d already gotten paid to keep me quiet, and I suffered for it.” His voice cracked. “I can’t . . . do you know . . .” He pushed his hair out of his eyes and exposed a C-shaped scar above his right eyebrow. “Do you know how badly I fared as a sixteen-year-old kid in that godforsaken prison, Hanalee?”

My hand sweated against the gun. “I don’t feel a shred of pity for you.”

“Just one week before the accident, someone—my father wouldn’t say who—came by the church and tried to recruit him into the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, which I’m certain had something to do with—”

“No!” I marched right into the pond’s shallow edge with the pistol still aimed at Joe’s head, and I pulled the hammer into the full-cock position. “I know full well there’s a Klan church up the highway

in Bentley. I know they host baseball games and print anti-Catholic pamphlets, but they never once gave a damn that my black Christian father lived in this measly spit stain of a town.”

“I’m not the one you should be shooting, Hanalee.” Joe backed away in the water. “I’m not the one who deserves to die.”

“I’ve never even heard about a single Klan-provoked killing in this state, Joe. You can try to scare me all you want, but I know you’re just switching your guilt onto other people because you—”

“No, I’m not. Look in your stepfather’s bedroom.” He stopped backing up. “I bet you’ll find a robe and a hood stashed among his clothing somewhere. I bet he married your white mother just to piss off the memory of your father. And I bet the Klan promoted him to a powerful position for killing the last full-blooded Negro in Elston, Ore—”

I squeezed the trigger with an explosion of gunpowder and fired a bullet straight past Joe’s ear—nearly close enough to hit him, but enough to make his face go as white as those hooded robes he talked about. I staggered backward from the kick, and my ears rang with a horrendous screeching that sounded like a crowd of keening mourners wailing inside my head.

Beyond the cloud of dissipating smoke, Joe thrashed his arms about in the water and struggled to stay upright, but I didn’t wait to see if he’d recover from the shock. Instead, I tucked that gun back into my holster and hightailed it out of the woods.

CHAPTER 2

LESS THAN KIND



“HANALEE?” CALLED MAMA FROM our backyard, beyond the Douglas firs that shot up to the clear July sky on the edge of our property.

I stopped in my tracks. My black-and-white Keds sloshed and squeaked with pond water.

“Hanalee?”

I shoved the derringer—still tucked inside the holster, still holding one remaining bullet—into the depths of a hollow log ten feet from the opening in the woods. I wrapped the leather in an oilcloth that I kept hidden in that spot specifically for times when I couldn’t sneak the pistol back into the house, and I scattered leaves over the lump. Dirt clogged my fingernails; mold from the leaves tickled my nose. I sneezed so hard, my ribs hurt.

“Hanalee?” called Mama again, her voice high and panicky.

“I’m coming,” I called back, and I kicked off my wet shoes and moseyed out of the woods with my best attempt at a casual strut. Mama hated guns. She didn’t know that my former friend Laurence—once my staunchest protector—had given me a pistol when I was just fourteen.

My mother relaxed her shoulders when she saw me coming her way, but her face looked paler than usual.

“I heard a gunshot,” she said.

I shrugged. “It was probably just Laurence, shooting squirrels again.”

“Where were you? I thought you said you were going to pick raspberries for our Sunday dinner.”

“I remembered something I forgot to tell Fleur at church this morning.” I picked up the wicker basket I was supposed to be using for berrying. “I’m sorry if I scared you.”

She put her hands on her hips and scowled at the woods. Loose strands of honey-blond hair fluttered around her eyes, which she narrowed into slits. “I don’t want you going over there if Laurence is shooting his father’s guns again,” she said. “I don’t know why his mother allows him to do that.”

“It’s his way of grieving for his father.”

“That war killed Mr. Paulissen five years ago.”

“Sometimes it takes a while to recover from a father’s death, Mama.”

She swallowed and averted her gaze, her lips squeezed together. People told me that she and I had the same mouth, especially when we looked as vexed as she did at that moment. “A white girl’s lips,” the older ladies in church would say when sizing me up like a county-fair squash, debating the degree of my whiteness. I’d also inherited my mother’s hazel eyes and long, slender neck, but my nose, my brown curls, and the shape of my eyes “derived from that Negro father,” the ladies often added in their bored-old-biddy evaluations. My skin—a medium shade of golden brown—was a few shades lighter than my father’s had been, but it caused all my troubles.

“Did you hear that the prison let Joe Adder out early?” I asked Mama.

“Yes.” She fussed with a lock of hair that had fallen out of its pin and coiled down the nape of her neck. “I overheard all the whispered rumors at church.”

“His parents won’t let him live with them anymore.”

“I heard that, too. I understand they’re ashamed of what he did, but I hope to God they can learn to forgive him.”

“Forgive him?”

“Yes.” Her eyes met mine. “That accident that killed your father was just a stupid mistake made by an intoxicated sixteen-year-old boy. He served seventeen months in the state penitentiary. That’s a lot for a person that young.”

“But—”

“You’ve got to learn to forgive Joe, too, Hanalee. Otherwise, that hatred will eat you up.”

I dug my teeth into my lower lip. “Does Uncle Clyde know he’s out?”

“I don’t know.” She tightened her apron strings behind her back. “He’s been at the Everses’ house since church, checking on the children’s measles. Mrs. Evers planned to serve him a little lunch to thank him.”

“Hmm.” I tapped the basket against the side of my right leg where the holster had so recently hung. Joe’s tale snaked around inside my brain, unsettling regions of my mind already perturbed, churning up a hundred different questions. I pressed a hand to my stomach to curb a queasy feeling.

“What’s the matter?” Mama cocked her head. “Are you worried about seeing Joe?”

“No.” I hooked the handle of the basket in the crook of my arm. “He’s the one who should be terrified of seeing me.”

Mama tensed. “Go pick those raspberries for me.” She nodded toward the bushes. “Go on. I need to prepare dinner.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I sauntered away.

“And watch that harsh tone of yours,” she added. “It’s not like you.”

I sighed and wandered to the rows of ripe red berries on the eastern side of the twenty acres of farmland Mama had inherited from her father. Over my shoulder, I saw Mama heading to the back door of our yellow farmhouse with her hands on her hips—her tired walk, her *Don’t bother me anymore, Hanalee* walk. My ears still rang from shooting the bullet next to Joe Adder’s skull, and I wondered if I’d been talking louder than usual over the commotion in my head. I wondered if Mama suspected that the gunshot had something to do with me.

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, MY MOTHER AND STEPFATHER took their seats at opposite ends of our dining room table, across Uncle Clyde’s late mother’s tablecloth, which was embroidered in cobalt-blue tulips. I sat down between the two of them without a word or a smile. The spices in my stepfather’s shaving soap clogged up my sinuses so badly, I had to squeeze the bridge of my nose to keep my head from erupting. Joe’s tale of murder was also boring a hole through my brain. The sickening combination made the food look and smell unpalatable.

Uncle Clyde, a six-foot-tall white man with trim brown hair and Dutch-blue eyes, spread his napkin across his lap and licked his pale pink lips. He wasn’t an actual blood uncle, just an old family friend I’d called “uncle” all my life.

“The ham smells delicious, Greta,” he said.

“Thank you, darling.” Mama smiled and waited for him to take his first bite before lifting a forkful

of potatoes to her mouth.

I just sat there without touching my silverware, facing the dining room window and the stretch of woods that hid Joe deep within. The curtains billowed on a hot July breeze that dried out the skin on the backs of my fingers and elbows. The dreamlike dance of the lace—the shimmying of fabric possessed by an unseen force—turned my thoughts toward all those disquieting rumors of my father's spirit wandering the main highway late at night.

“Did you hear the news, Uncle Clyde?” I asked, still massaging the bridge of my nose.

My stepfather regarded me through the wide lenses of his spectacles, those large blue eyes of his betraying nothing but curiosity. “What news might that be?”

My mother shook her head. “No, Hanalee. Let's not discuss that subject at the dinner table.”

“The state pen let Joe Adder out early on good behavior,” I said.

Uncle Clyde switched his attention to his plate and used his fork to poke at a fatty piece of ham—morsel shaped like the state of California, with brown sugar encrusted on the ends.

I sat up straight and dropped my hands to my lap. “Did you hear what I—?”

“I heard the rumors this morning,” he said in his calm, physician's voice that used to assure me he could mend anybody's woes and take care of everyone's troubles, including mine.

“What do you think of his release?” I asked.

“*Hanalee*,” said Mama. “What does it matter? Joe's out, and there's nothing we can do about it.”

“I worry a little bit about—” Uncle Clyde stopped himself from speaking by slipping the fatty sliver into his mouth. He chewed like a gentleman—lips closed, jaw moving up and down with delicate little movements, not a tooth or a crumb exposed—and his clean-shaven tidiness and upper-middle-class politeness irked me no end that afternoon. I wanted to shake him by the lapels of his gray coat and scream at him to tell me whether Joe had lied to me.

“What do you worry about?” I asked, my stomach tightening.

He dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin. “I don't mean to offend either of you by saying this, but I have to wonder how Joe is doing—physically. I'd like to be able to examine him. Prison isn't known for its hygiene or freedom from diseases.” He spread the ivory cloth back across his lap. “Do you know where he's staying, Hanalee?”

My heart stopped. “Why would I know that?”

“I just wondered, since you brought him up.”

Mama took a sip of water without a sound.

“He might be armed,” I said, just to see how Uncle Clyde would react.

He gave a start, and I'd swear, his pupils swelled.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“He's a jailbird. A wayward youth prone to drinking and recklessness in this noble age of Prohibition.” I kept an eye on his every blink and facial twitch. “It just seems like he might be armed. And angry.”

Uncle Clyde shifted in his seat and made something pop in his back. “Well . . . let's”—he downed a gulp of water, then dabbed at his face again—“let's end the subject of Joe Adder for the rest of the meal, if you don't mind. I'd like to enjoy this delicious ham.”

I did mind, but I kept my mouth shut.

AROUND SEVEN O'CLOCK THAT SAME EVENING, WITH Mama and Uncle Clyde's somewhat hesitant permission, I packed the old brown canvas valise Mama had purchased when she worked as

telephone operator in downtown Portland and Daddy served food at the swanky Portland Hotel. My father had lived near the hotel with other Negroes, and my mother resided in a Salmon Street boardinghouse for young, unmarried white women. They met while crossing paths to their respective places of employment, even though everyone around them told them that the paths of a black man and a white woman should never, *ever* cross.

With the valise swinging by my side and my feet squelching inside my damp Keds, which I fetched from the edge of the woods after dinner, I walked up the highway to Fleur's house. I puckered my lips and whistled "Toot, Toot, Tootsie, Goo'Bye" in a desperate attempt to forget Uncle Clyde's squirmy dinnertime behavior. The sun wouldn't set until close to ten o'clock, but I opted not to travel by forest trail.

Up ahead, Mildred Marks, a girl my age—just turned sixteen—with thick red hair shoved beneath a gray fedora, pedaled toward me on a squeaky green bicycle. She rode at such a snail's pace, I could have ducked into the trees to avoid her if I had wanted to. She and her eight younger siblings, along with their widowed mama, lived in a farmhouse less than a mile west of mine. They were known for pumping out large batches of moonshine and reaping quite a profit, while the sheriff looked the other way.

"Hanalee! I've been wanting to talk to you all day," called Mildred, bicycling closer, her vehicle chirping and groaning with each labored pedal. "How serendipitous that I decided to take a ride this evening." Mildred used words like *serendipitous* to show off the brain sitting inside that big old head of hers, even though she'd had to quit school after the seventh grade to help her mama.

I clutched the handle of my valise. "Hello, Mildred."

She slowed to a stop and planted the soles of her brown boots on the road. "I saw your father in our house last night."

My stomach dropped. I nearly bent over and threw up on the road, right in front of her.

"He walked through the front door," she continued, her pale brown eyes expanding, "and just stared at me, as clearly as I'm looking at you."

"You . . ." I swallowed down a foul taste that reminded me of coffee grounds. "You must be talking about my stepfather, Dr. Koning."

"I'm talking about your real father—Hank Denney." She leaned her freckled face forward. "He seemed confused and upset, as if he were trying to reach you but couldn't find his way. I saw urgency in those big dark eyes of his."

I shrank back, my skin cold.

She rolled her bicycle closer, crunching stones beneath her wheels. "I think he's trying to find you. I've seen his spirit roaming the road before, but I—"

"No, you haven't seen my father." I inched backward. "It's bad enough I hear little kids telling ghost tales about him, but a girl my own age . . ."

"He wouldn't speak to me, but if he's got something on his mind, I'm sure he'd say it to his own child, especially if she was equipped with a tonic that would allow for spirit communication."

"I need to go." I turned and continued up the road.

"'Necromancer's Nectar' is what we call the concoction. Our patented elixir would allow you to talk to him this very night."

"'Screwy Ladies' Moonshine' is more like it." I trekked onward, toward Fleur's. "I'm not buying any of your whiskey water and giving Sheriff Rink another reason to ask me what I'm up to. It's bad enough I tried your disgusting hair-straightening tonic that turned my curls carrot-orange."

"I wouldn't even charge you for the elixir. You can have it for free."

I stopped and swung my face toward her.

Mildred never offered anything for free.

“If you don’t speak with him,” she said, “he’ll just keep searching for you, every single night. wonder if . . .” She closed her mouth and squeezed her fingers around the bicycle’s black handle grip.

“Go on,” I said. “What do you wonder?”

“If his frantic state . . . has anything to do with . . .” She averted her eyes from mine. “With . . . J-Joe. Joe Adder.”

I stared at her and tried not to appear fazed, but gooseflesh rose across my arms. “My father isn’t a ghost, Mildred. Please don’t ever make such a claim again.” I turned and broke into a trot.

“If I see him again, Hanalee,” she called after me, “I’m coming to your house and forcing that elixir upon you. I’d normally charge three dollars for it, but I don’t want him haunting me.”

“Good-bye, Mildred.”

“Hanalee . . .”

“Good-bye!”

In the distance behind me, Mildred’s bicycle slowly squeaked away.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.



POLICE OFFICER WITH WRECKED CAR AND CASES OF ILLEGAL LIQUOR, 1922.

DESPERATE WITH IMAGINATION



MR. PAULISSEN'S FORD TRUCK SAT IN the gravel drive in front of Fleur's house, pretty white structure with forest-green shutters and geraniums blasting bright fireworks of color from boxes in front of each window. Laurence Paulissen—almost eighteen years old, close to two years older than his sister and I—stood next to the hood of the truck, raking his hand through his short blond hair. He nudged the toe of his shoe against a front tire and spat as though he hadn't noticed a female wandering into his company. Behind him, the Witten twins, Robbie and Gil, took

off their coats and slung them over the slats of the truck's wooden siding.

I walked through the shade of an apple tree that Fleur, Laurence, and I used to call "Jackbeanstalk" when we climbed into its branches as little kids. I slowed my pace the closer I got to the boys, for I didn't completely trust those twins, with their slick, tawny hair, their teasing green eyes, and the comfortable way they chatted with me, as though we were old chums who'd shared years of laughs, even though we hadn't. Their faces were identical, with broad foreheads and square chins—really rugged sort of appearance. Their father had come to Elston to fill our pharmacist vacancy in 1921, and they dressed a little nicer than the rest of us.

"Hanalee!" said Robbie, the louder of the twins, with a clap of his hands. He removed his cap and swaggered my way with a grin that stretched to his ears. "I see you have a bag all packed, darling. Are we eloping tonight?"

His brother, Gil, brayed a laugh that made his chewing gum fall out of his mouth and splat against his left shoe. Laurence frowned and turned his attention back to the truck's tires, testing out a back one with a solid kick of his foot.

I stepped past Robbie, smelling cigarette smoke from his clothing. "I'm just here to visit Fleur."

"Here"—Robbie grabbed the valise from my hands—"I'll carry that for you."

"All right. Thank you." I proceeded up to the porch with Robbie close to my side.

At the top of the steps, he shot me a sidelong glance and said, "You seem tense tonight, Hanalee. What's wrong?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Come on, we need to get going, Robbie," said Laurence. He bent down in front of the truck's grill and turned the starter crank. The congested old vehicle coughed and shuddered to life, and Laurence circled around to the driver's side of the cab. "Quit chatting with Hanalee."

"Quit flirting with her is more like it," said Gil with a laugh that carried a bite, and he climbed over the back slats of the rumbling truck.

Robbie set my bag on the steps by my feet. "Is it Joe's return that's bothering you?"

I picked up the valise without answering.

“Joe Adder’s not right in the head, Hanalee.” Robbie leaned his left hand against the wall beside the Paulissens’ screen door, above the brass doorbell. “He’s dangerous.”

“H-h-how . . .” I swallowed. “How do you mean, ‘not right in the head’?”

“He’s immoral. Depraved. Disgusting.” Robbie sniffed and wrinkled his nose. “If you see him, call telephone Sheriff Rink immediately.”

“Come on, Robbie,” called Laurence from behind the steering wheel. “You’re gonna make us late.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Robbie fitted his cap back over his hair and galloped down the steps. “Just protecting our womenfolk, unlike you two useless boobs.”

“She’s not our womenfolk,” said Laurence, the boy who used to race me into the woods on hot summer days—the first boy I’d ever kissed. With his face tipped toward the steering wheel, Laurence peeked up at me from the tops of his sky-blue eyes, and, without a trace of feeling in his voice, he added, “It’s just Hanalee. You know what I mean.”

I shifted my bag to my other hand and lifted my chin, as though his words hadn’t hurled a dagger into my chest.

Robbie climbed into the passenger side. Laurence broke his gaze from mine and backed the truck down the driveway. In the truck bed behind them, Gil gripped the wooden slats and whooped with the cry of a coyote embarking upon a hunt.

I swung open the screen door and ducked inside the Paulissens’ front room, a modest-size space filled with doilies and potted plants and butterscotch-colored furniture. The house always smelled like cinnamon and Christmas, no matter the time of year, and it immediately made me feel better.

“Fleur?” I called across the empty room.

From the kitchen, in the back of the house, came muffled adult voices and laughter. To my right, a clock made of blue and white delft ticked away the seconds on the mantel above the brick fireplace.

“Are you here, Fleur?” I asked, strengthening my grip on the suitcase.

“I’m upstairs,” she called. Her footsteps hurried across the floorboards above. “Hello!”

She emerged at the top of the stairs and scampered down the steps with a copy of *Motion Picture* magazine tucked beneath her left arm, the white lace of her hem swishing against the curves of her legs, a smile brightening her eyes, which were as blue as her brother’s. She was one of those blondes so fair that even her eyebrows and lashes looked as yellow as morning sunshine, and she was prettier than all the motion-picture stars in the magazine she carried—all of them combined.

“Hanalee . . .” Her smile faded, and she slowed to a stop on the last step. “Why do you look so upset? Did the boys say something to you out there?”

“Would your mother mind if I stayed here tonight?”

“What did they say?”

I peeked over my shoulder at the empty driveway. “Are we able to talk privately without anyone overhearing?”

“Mama’s in the dining room with Deputy Fortaine.”

“She is? Why?”

“He ate Sunday dinner with us. She invited him. Come here.” Fleur backed down the hallway next to the stairs and beckoned with a wiggle of her right index finger. “I’ll show you, so you can see what you think of this little tête-à-tête.”

I lowered my valise to the floor, and we tiptoed past Mrs. Paulissen’s framed needlepoint of meadowlarks and chickadees, which were hung on flowery red and yellow wallpaper that also reminded me of Christmas. At the far end of the hall hung a photograph of my family and their

picnicking in the woods, back when we children hadn't yet grown old enough to start at the schoolhouse on the edge of town. My father held us girls on his lap, and Laurence sat between our mothers, wearing a crown of leaves I'd made for him. Mr. Paulissen had taken the picture with his Kodak camera.

Fleur nudged open the dining room door with the tips of her fingers. "Hanalee's here," she called inside.

I poked my head around the corner and saw Deputy Fortaine, dressed in his Sunday-best suit and smart striped tie, sitting at the oval table with Mrs. Paulissen. He was the most handsome law enforcement we had around—Hollywood handsome, to be honest. Yet his dark eyes and wavy coal-black hair made everyone whisper that he hid a secret life as a Jew or an Italian Catholic. Some people claimed his real last name was Fishstein.

"Hello, Hanalee," said Mrs. Paulissen, tucking a golden-blond curl behind her ear. She crossed her legs beneath the lace tablecloth, swinging the right one over the left. "How are your mother and De Koning?"

"They're well, thank you."

"We're planning to listen to some records, if that's all right," said Fleur.

"That sounds fine, darling." Mrs. Paulissen caressed the stem of her water goblet with a flirty little finger, as though she imagined the crystal to be Deputy Fortaine's neck.

"You two girls have a swell time," said the deputy with his motion-picture-star smile.

I bit my bottom lip to avoid laughing. Fleur shut the door, and we skedaddled back down the hallway to the living room.

"You see? Those two lovebirds won't pay any attention to us." Fleur slipped a shiny black record out of a paper sleeve that crinkled in her hands. "And the music will muffle our conversation." She placed the record on the Victrola and wound the crank on the side of the machine until Henry Burr's sentimental "Faded Love Letters" drifted out of the horn-shaped speaker.

I glanced at the window behind me, half expecting to find Joe Adder standing on the other side of the glass.

"Come down here." On the braided blue rug, Fleur laid open her copy of *Motion Picture* and flipped the pages to an article titled "The Vogue of Valentino."

"Look"—she turned another page—"an eminent psychologist claims that women have fallen passionately in love with Rudolph Valentino because American businessmen aren't meeting their needs as lovers. Isn't that a hoot?" She giggled in her rich, Fleur way that always quelled the worries inside my brain.

I crouched down beside her, my knees digging into the braided rug, and I leveled my head next to hers. Henry Burr's voice filled the room with music, and Valentino's suave Italian face and figure arrested our eyes. I couldn't even watch motion pictures. The next town over had a nickelodeon theater, but the manager had posted a sign on the door that said, NO NEGROES, JEWS, CATHOLICS, CHINESE OR JAPANESE.

"I saw Joe," I said.

Fleur's face sobered. "And . . . ? Is everything all right?"

"Well, I didn't kill him, if that's what you're wondering." My glance flitted toward the hallway. "Are you sure Deputy Fortaine can't hear us? Uncle Clyde is chummy with him . . ."

"The music is loud, and he and Mama are too busy holding hands under the table. I think she's worried that Deputy Fortaine will find out what Laurie is doing for money. He doesn't look the other way as much as Sheriff Rinky-Dink does."

“You sure Laurence is a bootlegger?”

“Shh.” Fleur held a finger to her lips. “Don’t say that word. But, yes. Have you seen the night sky? It positively glows with the fire of all the moonshine distilleries in these woods. Local restaurants—the Dry Dock and Ginger’s—and Portland establishments, they’re all paying good money for home-brewed hooch, and Laurence has Daddy’s truck to deliver it to them.”

“I thought the Dry Dock was genuinely dry.”

Fleur rolled her eyes. “They claim to be, so the good people of Elston will dine there, but the owners keep bottles on hand for certain patrons with money.”

“Is that where Laurence was going with those Witten boys just now? Out delivering?”

Fleur nodded with loose locks of her hair swaying against her face.

“And Joe Adder?” I pushed myself up higher on my elbows. “Is he going with them, too?”

“I don’t think so. He can’t risk jail again. He’s just hiding out until he figures out what to do with his life.”

“Fleur . . .”

“Hmm?”

I scratched my left arm. “Robbie just told me Joe’s not right in the head. Do you know anything about that?”

She shrugged. “I’m sure prison doesn’t make a person very sane. It’s certainly not going to make people believe you’re upright and sweet.”

“Why is Laurence letting him hide in the shed, then? I didn’t even know they were friends. Didn’t they once get into a fistfight when they were younger?”

She shrugged again. “Laurence doesn’t talk to me about much of anything anymore. He just mutters about taking the ‘moral high road in life’ all the time.” She stroked a photograph of Valentino dressed in some sort of exotic costume with a vest and long white pants. “Maybe Laurie sees Joe as a charitable opportunity. A chance to repent for his sin of bootlegging. Church has become important to him.”

“Hmm . . .” I readjusted my weight on my knees, unconvinced that God would forgive Laurence anything just because he snuck a few slices of bread out to the likes of Joe Adder. “Why’d you go see Joe in the shed in the first place?”

“I’m sorry.” She nestled her shoulder against mine. “I knew it would upset you, but Laurence told me Joe cut up his legs pretty badly when he hopped a fence to steal eggs. I made him a poultice and brewed him some tea. But I wasn’t nice to him at all—I swear.”

I leaned away so that her shoulder no longer touched mine.

She lowered her head. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told you about him, but there was something in his eyes that made me feel his message was important. I thought he might want to make peace with you.”

I pressed a hand over my forehead and drew a long breath through my nose. “He didn’t make peace with me at all, Fleur.”

“Then what did he say?”

“He told me Uncle Clyde killed my father.”

The record stopped. Fleur jumped up, the scent of lilacs breezing away with her, and set the phonograph needle back to the beginning of the song. The fanfare of trumpets recommenced, and Henry Burr again warbled “Faded Love Letters.” Fleur crouched back down beside me, hanging her head next to mine over a new article, one that explored the shape of ten film stars’ noses in relationship to their personalities. *Good Lord*, I thought, *I sure hope my nose doesn’t reveal what’s going on inside me.*

“He didn’t really say that, did he?” asked Fleur.

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