

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

I waited up for Santa. All night without a wink of sleep. I knew Santa wouldn't show but I had to be the good daughter Dad expected of me. He loved making up tales why Santa had skipped our house and I did not want to disappoint him. Even if they were kind of dumb. Like how Santa got caught in a sandstorm in the Sahara and ended up with camels to pull his sleigh. They refused to fly. Rudolph fell in love with a unicorn and ran off. The other reindeers sulked and ate too much chocolate and got too fat to fly. A reindeer's harness got snagged on a star, and even Santa could not cut him loose.

Dad might be a simple man, he could not read or write, and he never used words more than two syllables; but he was smarter than anyone I knew in other ways, and he worked harder than most Dads. He had been a baker for 23 years. He baked perfectly shaped sourdough rolls and loaves. If you asked, he'd tell you that God breathed into the sourdough starter and made it bubble and taste exquisitely sweet and sour.

Exquisite was a hard word for Dad. But he used that word whenever he remarked about Mom. How exquisitely she tossed a salad and how perfectly the cherry tomatoes landed. How gracefully, with laughter, whether in mud or water, she rounded up our ducks whenever a coyote or fox showed up. Or how she danced through the snow on her way to church, and wherever her footprints melted the snow, tomorrow, a crocus poked out and blossomed to our delight. Our townspeople never lost the chance to watch her—wherever she was, or what she did. No matter how deep a puddle in street or on sidewalk, mud or water never splashed beyond the soles of her shoes. They did not have to say it. I saw it in their faces. In the blush of a smile, a tear, or the rush to hug someone, or anyone, they wanted to share what they saw and felt.

Dad never forgot that word any more than how much he loved Mom. Sometimes he talked to a mirror as if she looked back—a special one Mom inherited from Grandma Lacy. Morning glories, as fragile as the ones Dad grew around our porch every summer, were carved out of the frame. So delicate, I always feared if I bumped the mirror, they'd snap off. Instead they shivered as if struck by the breath of my words like they must have now if I could get close. But Dad had locked me out, so I leaned against their bedroom door and listened.

"Our Christmas eve dance," he said. "When I had to choose. Your buttons on your dress buttoned wrongly. One without a hole. It took all night for me to find the courage to tell you. You kissed me on the forehead. I fell in love."

My belly pressed harder against the doorknob.

"But you left anyway," Dad quickly added. "Like last night."

"Is he done yet?" Kelvin asked—words muffled by fat chews of bread. In a puffy very blue down jacket, he sat in front of our Christmas tree. "He promised me that bike."

I whipped around.

"Kelvin, wait for him to tell his tale. Just this last time."

"What? Santa doesn't show up, and we get nothing for Christmas. But not this year. I see the bike."

"You love him, don't you?"

"Shit, Gracie. You know I do. But I'm too old for this crap. Let me just enjoy the bike."

I stomped forward.

"Just today. He needs this."

"I'll think about it," he blurted and spit out bits of bread. He never stopped eating the stale loaves and rolls Dad brought home. Plain, and the harder the better. I could never watch him eat. In the summer, he froze the loaves, and I left the house. For Christmas, I had lucked out. Dad baked bread at home. The loaf Kelvin squeezed between his knees was crusty but soft inside.

"Mom's gone and I want him to be loved. Know we care," I said. "Let Santa take credit for the bike. Like it's real. Like what he really needs."

Kelvin was thirteen, and sometimes as wise as an old priest who constantly forgot to tie his shoes. Why? Cause it didn't matter if he tied them or not. He was my brother and wiser than me. He was a chubby kid and

the best brother anyone could have. He never lied. In your face, he busted out what you needed to hear. But he was never cruel. Like other boys I knew, Kelvin never burned ants with a magnifying glass, or chased a cat up a tree with a bullhorn or rode his skateboard over a dead squirrel already flattened. He would rather read books I had never heard of. Like *The Invisible Man*, or *Native Son*, a hardboiled detective writer called Walter Mosley, and a tattered paperback, *Soul On Ice*, he hid from me if I ever walked by while he read. Or on his journal he hid inside a blood splattered book he knew I would never touch.

The fire in the woodstove crackled from pine with too much pitch. We had no other woods to cut but a few straggly pines on our land. Dad could not afford to buy any hardwoods like oak or fir. The pine had to do. It burned out quickly. I stayed a little cold this winter, but only in the early morning if I tossed off that extra blanket that stunk of horse.

“I want to ride before it snows,” Kelvin said and squirmed angrily to reposition the loaf.

I snuggled back into UGGs I had juggled off to be able to tiptoe to the door. Our bigger than normal Christmas tree blocked the picture window in the living room. I didn’t have to go outside to check if it had snowed. Through our skylight, a clear sky with no hint of it. I wouldn’t argue with Kelvin.

A gust against a crack in that window trembled the tree. Frost on needles melting dripped on my Ugg. I jumped back.

“Just knock on his door,” Kelvin said. “I’ll thank him from here.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. He’s talking to Mom.”

“You miss her too?” he asked.

“Not as much,” I replied.

“Her tales were better.”

“A black Santa.”

“With white dreads.”

“Who was once a wide receiver in the NFL.”

Dad wept. Words erupted loudly in a strange language as if uttered by a warrior of another world. Or someone drunk talking in tongues while in church. They frightened me.

“It’s worse than I thought,” I said.

“Shit,” Kelvin said.

He strolled over to the bike. He stared way too long at it. I was afraid he might cry. Dad couldn’t afford to buy him the bike he wanted. Hours had been spent with Dad. With steel wool, we scrubbed away the rust. Then we painted the used freestyle bike aqua—the color of the uniform of his favorite team—the Miami Dolphins.

A steadier wind snuck through the crack and twitched tinsel on the tree. Maybe snow was close. It smelled like it.

Kelvin grabbed the bike and swung it around.

“Nice color,” he said and grinned.

“Okay?”

“Of course, Gracie.”

He straddled the seat and guided it to the front door.

“If you wait, I’ll go with you. I got carrots for Jackaroo. It’s his Christmas too,” I said.

“That hag?”

“Yea, that hag. He’s family too.”

“A horse.”

Kelvin bounced a tire against the front door.

“Well?” I posed.

He gently lay the bike down. “Got to pee first. See ya outside.”

Dad’s voice rallied against the mirror as if to force Mom to reply. I rushed outside.

CHAPTER TWO

Jackaroo was our horse. He just showed up one day. All ragged, with gooey eyes, and his tail braided with fancy red bows that had faded to pink. It took me days before Jackaroo let me cut them out. He was exactly the kind of friend I needed. At moments, feisty, but with a final toss of his head, he'd snort like it was a sigh, and nibble my shoulder affectionately. We lived five miles from anywhere in the woods. When I was younger, I assumed the distance was why friends from school never visited me. By last year though, I was older, and I worried I cursed too often like Kelvin. But Kelvin made me understand what was important to me. I loved numbers and calculations and equations more than any friend. They were like text messages from my bestie to me. Some need to read the Bible, or *Twilight*, or a silly Facebook anecdote to feel normal. I devoured numbers. I was a damn science geek. If anyone ridiculed me after I claimed Mt. Shasta was an active volcano, I had learned to walk away. I was fourteen and pretty enough to have a boyfriend, but I didn't care about that either.

From our porch, I sighed and looked out. Like the black clouds that rumbled closer, Jackaroo busted out from under the canopy of our last ancient pines. He reared up, stomped, and galloped up to me. I jumped back to the second step of our porch. We had no fences to corral Jackaroo. He just never drifted off.

"Merry Christmas, Jack. Looks like a storm's coming."

He nudged the pocket of my heavy leather chamois jacket. Its inside quilted and stuffed like a down coat but with fur shed by the last wolf we saw three springs ago. Rain or wind could not penetrate it. Mom had stitched it for me. I hadn't outgrown it cause she made it much bigger for me. Like I was a turtle, I loved how I could duck down into his warmth. I stuffed my hand into the pocket not sewed shut. The other hand shoved back.

"Baby carrots, Jack. You'll have to be gentle."

He was a big roan and white stallion—about 17 hands. I never let him get the best of me. I eased out a couple carrots and held out my palm. Jack nursed them off. Carrot slobber dripped off his lip onto the sleeve. I wrestled off the jacket and dropped it. I rushed back up another step. I couldn't let any juice get on my *UGG*s either. They were Mom's. Sometimes I wore them to bed. I loved how the form of her foot in the sheepskin matched mine.

From behind me, Kelvin shouted.

"Dad's got a rifle!"

I whirled around. The front wheel of his freestyle bike butted open the screen door.

"It's loaded," he said.

"Again?"

Jack butted my back. I fell over—hands planted onto the porch.

"I'm outta here!" he cried.

He pedaled past me and off the porch. He landed with a squish in the mud.

"Kelvin don't go far!" I yelled.

I straightened up.

"To the edge of snow!" he yelled back.

I looked up. From behind the screen door, backlit by Christmas lights that flickered, Dad eased the muzzle up under his chin, and rubbed.

"Dad?"

"It itches," he said. "Who gets poison oak this time of year?"

"You do. Like always."

Dad barged out. The screen door slammed the house. As big and warm as a split in one of his loaves, he grinned.

"I thought it was about time," he said.

"Dad, the door. All that cold air."

"I fancied up the stock and polished what should be polished," he replied.

"I see that."

"Grandad's 22 should be yours—the way you shoot. Has history. Shot whatever he could to feed your great aunt Alice and Uncle Raven. Those were the Dustbowl years."

"I know, Dad. In Oklahoma."

With his shirt sleeve, he rubbed out a smudge on the muzzle.

"It's a beauty. Shoots straight and far," he said.

A snowflake from a distance fluttered onto my neck where I had torn the collar of my flannel shirt. I scrambled up onto my knees. I glanced around. It was a snowflake and not Jack's drool. Thank god for that. He trotted after Kelvin. I had to hurry and thank Dad for the rifle. A blizzard can quickly close in when propelled by gusts.

I turned back. Dad squatted before me. He leaned the rifle against my shoulder.

"I know, Dad. I miss her too."

"Remember?"

"I do."

"That rabid raccoon. Kelvin. He was two."

"14 months."

"Crawled right up and cornered that critter against our propane tank. Way out there. By the barn. Got within inches."

"Any other shot would have."

"Killed the boy. Blown up the tank."

"Right between the jaws."

"From here. Mom shot."

"Right out of shower."

"One hand gripped the towel."

"Clipped his head above the ear."

"Left a scar."

"Hair never grew back."

"He tells the tale to everyone he meets."

"Mom laughed," I whispered.

Dad stood up. Snowflakes splattered his face and melted as if tears.

"Kelvin?" he asked.

"He rode out."

"How far?"

"To the edge of snow."

I strapped the gun sling over my shoulder.

"There is no edge," Dad replied.

I whipped around. An icy breath struck me like words of terror. Our acres of dry pasture and withered cornstalks and drooping sunflowers sank under the pressure of black mushrooming clouds. Snow fell like a waterfall of soggy white petals. Even gusts could not alter their steady stream.

"I can't see him," Dad muttered.

I jumped up and rushed down the steps.

"I'll find him," I said.

"Your coat."

"Don't need it!" I shouted back.

"Gracie! It's like a damn hurricane!"

"I'll fire a shot!"

"I'll follow with the truck!"

Snowflakes splattered my face at every angle.

CHAPTER THREE

I tromped into deeper snow. It quickly iced up on the rim of the *UGGs*. I plunged around. All his tracks buried. Clouds, thick with snow, swelled with black, collapsed over me. I felt as if I had sunk into snow over my head. Wind battered the lid to our mailbox. Teeth chattered and reminded me I could freeze to death out here. So silly, that would be, I thought, being at the end of our driveway and close to home.

“Kelvin!” I screamed angrily.

Voice slammed back into my face. I choked on snowflakes accidentally swallowed. I wanted to do more than curse.

“Shit. The rifle.”

I had clutched it seconds ago. I trudged forward rather than back for no reason. Its barrel nudged the inside of my thigh. I grabbed it and yanked it out. I juggled it back to its stock. It rose as if in victory.

Our mailbox hurled towards me. It rattled. I ducked. Its metal red flag scratched my cheek. I dropped the rifle and fired to kill the box.

“Fuck you!”

Blood dribbled over chin and onto neck. It felt warm. I would not die here. Kelvin would not die here. He’d hear the gunshot and come to me. I plunged around and away from the house. Flurries battered my back. I searched. The blue tip of the handlebar poked out of the snow. Pulse quickened to shudder my body. Panic squeezed chest out of breath. A few feet further than the bike, Cross Crow Creek raged. Rapids churned up globs of snow. Our giant weeping willow tree, its limbs heavy with snow, dipped into the water. Maybe Kelvin had grabbed onto a limb to save himself.

I trudged forward. I ducked under sprawling limbs swayed over back like waves. I busted out and slipped on stones rippled by water. The barrel stabbed in the creek to stay upright. I stared at whiskers frosted with ice.

“Jack?”

He shook his head free of snow. Water splashed furiously against knees. Ice sealed his eyelashes shut. He stepped forward to sniff me. Yellowed teeth flecked with bits of carrots. I shivered. Snow slipped lower down my flannel shirt.

“Where’s Kelvin? Have you seen him?”

What a stupid fuckin’ question. I could have asked why hadn’t Einstein dreamt how to save the world. His hoof kicked the rifle. I fell into his shoulders. I clutched his neck and lifted myself close to an ear.

“We got to find Kelvin.”

A huge pumpkin Jack O’Lantern, dry and shriveled like a severed head, bobbed under him and bumped my leg. I watched. It was briefly stalled by the arm of Kelvin’s blue puffy down jacket flopped over a large boulder.

What Kelvin? You took it off to go for a swim? Are you crazy? Who’s the stupid one? How could the creek rip it from you? After you had fallen in? You must have. It must have. Swim Kelvin, you little bastard. Don’t drown. I’m coming.

“You ready?” I screamed.

I lunged up and grabbed his mane. Stiff fingers shattered off ice and snow from knuckles. I tugged and swung myself up onto his back. Legs slipped from belly and gripped his rump. I tugged even harder and rose upright. Jack stomped forward. Rifle cracked and splintered.

“Shit.”

Knees clamped through snow into Jack’s hide.

“Ride Jack! Ride!”

Body and hands heaved him around. Jack galloped along the shore towards the place where I prayed Kelvin found himself back on shore. Hoofs clomped across stones and never faltered. Neither would my faith that Kelvin would be fine.

CHAPTER FOUR

I felt stupid I could not guide Jack through the heavier snow that battered us as if one snowflake. I had no idea how far we were from Cross Crow Creek. Hooves no longer clopped against stones but were muffled by deeper snow. Even his snorts could not free his nostrils. We galloped deeper into a blizzard that closed off our world and abandoned us to struggle for breath and sight within tones of white and flickers of green. Frost chilled the air with the scent of ice. I was scared. I was never scared, dammit. If I turned Jack around, I'd tromped back as if I had jumped off a cliff with nowhere to land. I was lost.

Like a giant gargoyle about to gobble us up, a grand Douglas fir erupted out of the snow. I tried to leap off. But I had peed and frozen myself to Jack's back. The lunge forced Jack to rear to the left. We plowed into the outskirts of the tree. Multiple limbs pummeled me and knocked me off. On my back, I sank into snow. I strained a nose free. Jack sniffed my breath. A hand busted out and gripped his whiskers. He yanked me up. I could not let go. In anger, he dragged me all the way out.

Up to my hips, I waded around Jack. I would not die here. I was Gracie. In my dreams, I had fought off crows that pecked at eyes that woke me up. I had hopped around lightning strikes to reach Dad—too drunk to mourn any longer—who had flopped face down in the mud after Mom vanished. I had grabbed his boots and dragged him out. I had rushed into our living room to quell Kelvin's laughter over the hundredth time he watched Monty Python's *LIFE OF BRLAN* and saved him after he choked on a dry crust.

I slowed to grip my courage with all I had left. Jack butted my back. I stumbled. I punched the snowflakes to keep upright. The wind answered back with a gust that ripped my ears from my head. That scattered the snow like thousands of birds fluttered up from a field. I saw a wisp of blue sky. A touch of sun that breathed across skin like a scent. The God I had wanted to curse suddenly became the one I wanted to praise and worship. I would not die here. But I felt strangled. I clawed at the top button of my flannel shirt to free the collar frozen around my neck. Fingers shivered the button loose. I pulled back the collar. It crackled. Bits of ice against neck and back stung like bees. I shook it off and trudged forward.

Nowhere had to become somewhere.

Jack heaved himself next to me. I looked over. I greeted an eye no longer sealed by ice. A brown lovelier than the muslin pillowcase I craved. I had hope. We would get through this.

I clamped teeth, pinched lips, waited for the surge of blood to warm them. Snowflakes landing on Jack's head melted as quickly. I stretched out palm. Smaller snowflakes landed; came more slowly. Patches of blue grew wider. Knot on forehead swelled. Scratches on chin, cheek and nose bled. Jack's scent grew stronger. Hair dripped onto forehead. I could see. From the sprawling limb of our ancient pine, clogged with snow, a stellar jay leaped out and landed on a deflated birthday balloon trapped in the tree for years. It squawked and squawked. In the sunshine, the glorious face of Goofy, my favorite Disney character, on it flashed back at me.

I was home. I struggled further into the sunshine. Piles of snow littered with scraps of our life had drifted above the windows of the only stone wall left of our house. I stomped over to Mom's bedroom window. From its sill, I plucked out the hot pad with its edge boiled with strawberry jam after Mom accidentally lifted the pot by its rim. I rolled it up and stuffed it into the shirt pocket. I wanted more. The hairbrush with its wooden handle chewed by the Teddy Bear hamster Mom brought home after Dad refused to let us have a dog. The eyeglasses with the lenses painted black by Kelvin after he decided I spent too much time with books. All too much; too much of a struggle to find. I had to leave them. I turned to walk away. I noticed the morning glory poking out of the snow that walled up the window. I stretched to touch it. I didn't want it to be real. I didn't want it to be sculpted from Mom's mirror. It was too far away. I edged closer. It burst upon me as if the face of Mom. She had not abandoned us. It was a lie. I furiously brushed off snow. More morning glories burst from the frame. I reached out to attack the snow and free the mirror. Hand sank into snow. Arms punched deeper. Fuck, I needed the mirror to see myself as Mom. If the mirror was not here, I should not be here either. I wanted to step into it and disappeared into another world. I punched my head into the snow.

"What the fuck, Gracie?" Kelvin said.

He grabbed my shoulders and yanked me back. I angrily wrenched around and shoved him. Sunshine wetted my face with snow as if I stared out of a mirror.

"This is your fault!" I blurted.

“Mine?”

He had staggered back and collapsed on the ledge of our claw foot tub. Something inside flapped and scratched about noisily. It echoed louder than my anger. I stormed up to him. He plucked out a piece of mistletoe snagged in his hair. He examined it.

“Don’t,” I said.

“Don’t what?”

“Just don’t,” I said. “It won’t be funny.”

He dropped it. He lifted his boots and clapped them together. Mud glued with pine needles fell off and landed in a stream of melted snow passing by. He tried to shake off what was left. An unlaced boot slipped off.

“Dammit, Kelvin.”

I squatted and picked it up. I snuggled it back onto his foot and tied the shoelace. I looked up. He grinned. He was wrapped with a quilt—a patchwork of images—shacks, tin roofs, corrals with crooked rails, nearly dead cherry and apple trees; all painted exquisitely as if by a Japanese watercolorist.

“I don’t even know how I got here,” he said.

“I rode Jack.”

“I could have dropped out of the sky.”

I waited to see whether his tongue probed the gap between his teeth. He wouldn’t quit until he figured out a lie I might believe.

“I walked out of the blizzard, as if in a dream, and there she was,” he said.

I stood up. I reached out and pulled the quilt away from his neck. The birthmark on his neck, a lighter black than his skin, that resembled a bear paw, was there. His tongue was idle.

“Who?”

“Mom,” he replied and squirmed out of my grip.

“Your Mom?”

“Our Mom.”

Dammit, I was parked in the stream. Muddy water slopped over my *UGGs*. Mom would be furious. No, I was.

“Get up. Show me,” I exclaimed and stepped back rather than forward to force out his lie.

He tugged the quilt snug around his body.

“I can’t,” he replied.

“Cause it’s a lie.”

“It’s not.”

He slumped over. I was afraid he was about to weep. Kelvin never cried, and I needed him to be strong even if I didn’t believe him.

“Dammit, don’t cry. I believe you,” I lied.

His shoulders trembled violently and shook the quilt off his shoulders. From a necklace of stones like beads of sweat glowed by the sun, a crystal vial, the shape of a wolf fang, curled into his bare chest. Its cap shaped like a rose bud tarnished green. In the vial, a liquid, bluer than the sky I stood under, glittered as if full of stars. I got dizzy the longer I stared.

“Don’t, Gracie, that’s how I got here. I need you now.”

I floated into the blue. Into a sky crisp and clear where if I entered as a wisp of a cloud, I would be welcomed. I was overcome by all this hope. All was possible.

“She’s not dead,” I mumbled. “Take me to her.”

“Gracie, look at me!” he shouted. “Not the vial.”