

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR  
*THE NEW WILDERNESS*

'*The New Wilderness* is a virtuosic debut, brutal and beautiful in equal measure.'

Emily St. John Mandel, author of *Station Eleven*

'An absolutely riveting and propulsive novel. Terrifying, and as real as can be. Epic in scale and story; granular and recognisable in people and place. *The New Wilderness* is surely an instant classic in our stories of survival, sovereignty and adaptation. Cook's writing is so sure-footed, prescient and trustworthy, it's all the reader can do to follow her. For fans of Ling Ma's *Severance* and Hernan Diaz's *In the Distance*, and many, many readers in between.'

Caoilinn Hughes, author of *The Wild Laughter*

'*The New Wilderness* left me as stunned as a deer in headlights. Gut-wrenching and heart-wrecking, this is a book that demands to be read, and urgently. With beauty and compassion, Diane Cook writes about the precariousness of life on this planet, about the things that make us human—foremost the love between mothers and daughters, at once complex and elemental. Cook observes humanity as a zoologist might—seeing us exactly as the strange animals we really are.'

Rachel Khong, author of *Goodbye, Vitamin*

'Diane Cook upends old tropes of autonomy, survival, and civilization to reveal startling new life teeming beneath, giving a glimpse into the ways the world we think we know could come unstuck and come to life in the care of the women and girls of the future. This is not just a thrilling, curious, vibrant book—but an essential one, a compass to guide us into the future.'

Alexandra Kleeman,  
author of *You Too Can Have A Body Like Mine*

‘A wry, speculative debut novel... Cook’s unsettling, darkly humorous tale explores maternal love and man’s disdain for nature with impressive results.’

*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

‘*The New Wilderness* strips us of our veneer of civilisation and exposes us for what we are: driven to survive, capable of shocking cruelty and profound, fierce love. This story of what a mother does to save her daughter is unflinching, horrifying, forgiving, deeply moving, and filled with truth that stayed with this mother long after the final page.’

Helen Sedgwick, author of *The Comet Seekers*  
and *When the Dead Come Calling*

‘The push-pull of ambivalent but powerful love between mother and daughter centers the novel... Cook also raises uncomfortable questions: How far will a person go to survive, and what sacrifices will she or won’t she make for those she loves? This ecological horror story (particularly horrifying now) explores painful regions of the human heart.’

*Kirkus*, starred review

‘The emotional core of the story is the relationship between Bea and Agnes, whose perspectives drive the narrative. It’s a damning piece of horror cli-fi, but it’s also a gripping and profound examination of love and sacrifice.’

*Buzzfeed*

‘An imaginative, dystopian look at what our world could become... I was gripped by how vivid the story was, how expertly Diane Cook got into the dynamics of a group of strangers surviving in the wild, and their relationship with those in power.’

*Hey Alma*, ‘Favourite Books for Summer’

‘The novel tackles the deepest of human emotions—as well as big ideas about the planet—in satisfying ways. Also, it’s a page-turner!’

*LitHub*

PRAISE FOR  
*MAN V. NATURE*

Shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award, 2015

Shortlisted for the *LA Times* Books Prize, 2015

‘Exhilarating... Cook’s is a fresh and vivid voice; it’s unsurprising the likes of Miranda July and Roxane Gay are fans.’

*Observer*

‘*Man V. Nature* is a knockout... Every single story could make a great movie.’

Miranda July, *New York Times Book Review*

‘Masterly.’

*New York Times*

‘A deeply original collection...deliciously unsettling...uncomfortably resonant.’

*Independent*

‘Makes for compulsive reading... These tales dizzy and trick.’

*New Statesman*

‘Astonishing... The stories are surreal, with the sharpest edge and in one way or another, each story reveals something raw and powerful about being human in a world where so little is in our control.’

Roxane Gay, author of *Bad Feminist*

‘Sharply written and imaginative... Cook is an accomplished writer with a darkly comic touch [with] echoes of Margaret Atwood.’

*Irish Times*

‘These are grimly funny stories; dark, but dizzyingly alive.’

*Sunday Express*

‘As close to experiencing a Picasso as literature can get.’

Téa Obreht, author of *The Tiger’s Wife*

‘*Man V. Nature* could also be called *Diane Cook V. The Challenges of Writing Fresh, Invigorating Fiction in Our Age*. In the latter contest, Cook crushes. Here is a bold debut.’

Sam Lipsyte, author of *Hark*

‘Impressively precocious—our favourite short-story collection of October.’

GQ

‘Here’s a good rule: If Diane Cook wrote it, read it... Safety is tenuous, if not an illusion, in her thoughtful, unsettling, and darkly funny collection.’

*Boston Globe*

‘Cook’s stories gleefully tip a familiar-seeming world into something dark, dangerous and funny.’

*Psychologies*

‘The capriciousness of the natural world in Cook’s stories colours them with a Romantic, almost surreal light that fans of Megan Mayhew Bergman are sure to appreciate.’

*Huffington Post*

‘When people ask me the desert island question, I usually say this is the book I’d bring.’

*San Francisco Weekly*

‘Diane Cook’s stories are like high-wattage bulbs strung across a sinister, dark land. *Man V. Nature* is equal parts dazzle and depth.’

Ramona Ausubel, author of *No One is Here Except All of Us*

# THE NEW WILDERNESS



# THE NEW WILDERNESS



DIANE COOK



A Oneworld Book

First published in Great Britain, Ireland and Australia  
by Oneworld Publications, 2020

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A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78607-821-6 (hardback)  
ISBN 978-1-78607-822-3 (eBook)

Title page illustration by Avychai Chinwan / Shutterstock, Inc.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Oneworld Publications  
10 Bloomsbury Street  
London WC1B 3SR  
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For my mother, Linda, and my daughter, Cazadora  
And for Jorge



. . . I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?

—ALDO LEOPOLD

Get me out of here, get me out of here  
I hate it here, get me out of here

—ALEX CHILTON



*Part I*

THE BALLAD OF BEATRICE





THE BABY EMERGED from Bea the color of a bruise. Bea burned the cord somewhere between them and uncoiled it from the girl's slight neck and, though she knew it was useless, swept her daughter up into her hands, tapped on her soft chest, and blew a few shallow breaths into her slimy mouth.

Around her, the singular song of crickets expanded. Bea's skin prickled from heat. Sweat dried on her back and face. The sun had crested and would, more quickly than seemed right, fall again. From where Bea knelt, she saw their Valley, its secret grasses and sage. In the distance were lonely buttes and, closer, mud mounds that looked like cairns marking the way somewhere. The Caldera stood sharp and white on the horizon.

Bea dug into the hard earth with a stick, then a stone, then hollowed and smoothed it with her hands. She scooped the placenta into it. Then the girl. The hole was shallow and her baby's belly jutted from it. Wet from birth, the little body held on to coarse sand and tiny golden buds brittle from their stems by the heat of the sun. She sprinkled more dust onto the baby's forehead, pulled from her deer-hide bag several wilted green leaves, and laid them over the girl. She broke off craggy branches from the surrounding sage, laid them over the distended belly, the absurdly small shoulders. The baby was a misshapen mound of plant green, rust-red blood, a dull violet map of veins under wet tissue skin.

Now, the animals, who had sensed it, were converging. In the sky,

a cyclone of buzzards lowered as if to check on the progress, then uplifted on a thermal. She heard the soft tread of coyotes. They wove through the bloomy sage. A mother and three skinny kits appeared under jaggedly thrown shade. Bea heard whines ease from their impassive yawns. They would wait.

A wind stirred and she breathed in the dusty heat. She missed the stagnant scent of the hospital room where she'd given birth to Agnes what must have been eight years ago now. The way the scratchy gown had stretched across her chest and gotten tangled up when she tried to roll to either side. How the cool air blew around her hips, between her legs, where her doctor and nurses stared, prodded, and pulled Agnes from her. She'd hated the feeling. So exposed, used, animal-like. But here, it was all dust and hot air. Here, she had needed to guide the small body—had she been five months pregnant? Six? Seven?—out with one hand while with the other she'd had to block a diving magpie. She had wanted to be alone for this. But what she wouldn't have given for a probing gloved hand, stale recirculated air, humming machines, fresh sheets under her rather than desert dust. Some sterile comfort.

What she wouldn't have given for her mother.

Bea hissed at the coyotes. "Scram," she said, pitching the dirt and pebbles she'd just dug at them. But they only slid their ears back, the mother sinking to her haunches and the kits nipping at her snout, irritating her. She probably snuck off from the rest of the pack to get her young something extra, or to let them practice scavenging, to practice surviving. It's what mothers did.

Bea shooed a fly from near the baby's eyes, which at first had looked startled over having not made it, but now seemed accusatory. The truth was Bea hadn't wanted the baby. Not here. It would have been wrong to bring her into this world. That's what she'd felt all along. But what if the girl had sensed Bea's dread and died from not being wanted?



Bea choked. "This is for the best," she told her. The girl's eyes clouded over with the clouds that rolled overhead.

During one nightwalk, back when she'd had a flashlight and still carried batteries to make it glow, she'd caught two eyes gleaming in her beam. She clapped her hands to scare the eyes, but they just dipped down. The animal was tall but crouching, sitting perhaps, and Bea feared it was stalking her. Her heart sped up and she waited for the cold dread that she'd felt a couple of times by then. Her inner sense of being in danger. But the feeling never came. She walked closer. Again the eyes dipped down, supplicant, like a dog obeying, but it was not a dog. She had to get closer before she could see that it was a deer with its sloped back, the peaked ears, the resigned flick of the tail. Then Bea saw another eye in the light, small, not looking at her, but quivering, unsteady. The deer heaved up and then the quivering eye wobbled up too. It was a small glistening fawn, on shaky, toothpick legs. Bea had unknowingly witnessed a birth. Quiet in the dark. Bea had come stealthily upon the mother like a predator. And the mother could do nothing in that moment but lower her head as though asking to be spared.

There were few things Bea let herself regret these days, these unpredictable days full of survival so plain and brute. But she wished she had walked another way that night, not found their eyes in her light, so that the doe could have had her birth, nuzzled and licked her baby clean, could have had the chance to give her baby a first unblemished night before the work of survival began. Instead the doe lumbered away, exhausted, the fawn stumbling after her, disoriented, and that was the beginning of their life together. It's why, days ago, when Bea no longer felt the kicks and hiccups and flutters and knew the baby had died, she knew she'd want to be alone for the birth. It was the only moment they would have together. She did not want to share that. She did not want someone watching her own complicated version of grief.

Bea peered at the coyote mother. "You understand, don't you?"

The coyote pranced impatiently and licked her yellow teeth.

From a far low ridge, some foothills of foothills to come, she heard a joyless howl; some watching wolf had seen the carrion birds, was signaling prey.

She had to leave. The sun was going. And now the wolves knew. She'd tracked her shadow becoming long and thin, a sight that always made her sad, as though she were seeing her own death by starvation. She stood, stretched out her sand-pocked knees, wiped the desert off her skin and ragged tunic. She felt foolish that she'd tried to resuscitate what she knew to be dead. She thought the Wilderness had cast all sentimentality from her. She would not tell anyone about that moment. Not Glen, who she thought wanted a child of his own more than he would ever admit. She wouldn't tell Agnes, even though she thought Agnes would want to know about this sister who never materialized, would want to understand the secret particulars of her mother. No, she would stick to the simple story. The baby did not survive. So many others hadn't. So we move on.

She turned without another look at this girl she had wanted to name Madeline. She gave that mother coyote a sharp kick, landing it against her visible ribs. The dog yelped, slunk, then snarled, but she had more pressing concerns than engaging a human insult.

Bea heard the scuffle and yips behind her. And though the dogs' rising excitement resembled a newborn's cry, Bea knew it was just the sound of hunger.

\* \* \*

AN UNMISTAKABLE SHADOW of a path led toward the camp. It was hard to know if it was from the Community's own impact, animals making their own animal trails, or a remnant of all the things the land had been before it became the Wilderness State. Maybe it was Bea alone who had blazed the trail. She visited that place as often as she could, whenever they migrated through the Valley. It was the

reason she'd chosen it for Madeline. There was something subtle in that view. It seemed like a hidden valley. The depression of verdant grasses and coarse bushes lay slightly lower than the land around it so that it had a secret view toward the horizon and the inky hump of mountains there. All the land in view formed a mosaic of blurred, muted colors. It was pretty and quiet and private, she thought. A place someone wouldn't want to leave. Again, Bea felt a fleeting relief to have Madeline poised there, instead of facing an unknowable landscape with her, a mother who felt incapable of maneuvering it with grace.

Bea could hear the voices of the others in camp. They carried across the even, empty land and dropped at her feet. But she did not want to return to them and their questions or, possibly worse, their silence. She shifted away and scrambled up boulders toward the shallow cave where her family liked to spend time. Their secret perch. She saw her husband, Glen, and daughter, Agnes, above her, kneeling in the dirt, waiting for her.

Bea saw Glen's brow furrowing in concentration as he spun a leaf by its stem, peering at it from every vantage, pointing to something on its green spine so Agnes could see, asking her to notice some remarkable detail in its common shape. They both leaned closer to the leaf, as though it were telling them its secret, their faces breaking into delight.

When Glen saw her approaching, he waved her toward them. Agnes did the same, a generous and awkward sweep of her arm, smiling with her newly jagged tooth, chipped against a boulder. *Why couldn't it have been a baby tooth?* Bea had thought, her daughter's head in her hands, inspecting the damage under her bright, bloody lip. Agnes had held still and quiet, one tear squeezing from her eye and trailing through the dirt on her face. It was the only way Bea knew the accident had fazed her. Like an animal, Agnes froze when fearful and bolted when endangered. Bea imagined that as Agnes grew up this would change. She might feel less like prey and more like a predator.

It was something in her daughter's smile, some unnameable knowledge. It was the smile of a girl biding her time.

"This one is alder," Glen was saying when Bea reached them. He took her hand, kissed it gently, lingering until she pulled it back to her side. She saw him glance at her stomach and wince.

He had prepared hot water in the brutish wood bowl, but now it was the temperature of the air. She squatted next to them, lifted her tunic, spread her knees. She scooped water under her skirt and gently washed between her legs, her stretched, worn folds, her splattered thighs. She felt raw, but she could tell she had not torn.

Agnes assumed the same position, her slight and toady legs splayed, splashing imaginary water on herself, eyeing Bea carefully. She seemed intent on not looking at where the baby had been.

Agnes was in some kind of mimicry stage. Bea saw it in animals. She'd seen it in other children. But in Agnes something about it disarmed her. She'd understood Agnes up until recently. Around the time the leaves last turned color, Agnes had become strange to her. She didn't know if this fissure was just something parents went through with their children, or mothers went through with daughters, or if it was just some special hardship she and Agnes would have to endure. Out here, it was hard for Bea to dismiss things as simply normal because every aspect of their lives here was anything but normal. Was Agnes behaving normally for her age, or was it possible she believed she was a wolf?

Agnes had just turned eight but didn't know it. They no longer marked birthdays because they no longer marked days. But Bea had taken notice of certain blooms when they'd first arrived. Then, Agnes had just turned five years old. It was April on the calendar. Bea had noted a field of violets during their first several days of walking. When she saw violets again, it seemed likely a year had passed—they'd felt the heat of summer, they'd seen leaves turn color, and they'd shivered in the snowy mountains. The snow had gone. She'd

seen violets four times. Four birthdays. She knew Agnes's eighth birthday had happened sometime since the last full moon, when she had seen violets in a patch of grass near their last camp. When they'd first arrived, Agnes had been so gravely ill, Bea hadn't been sure she would see violets again with her daughter. But there they were, Agnes bounding through them.

Bea crept toward the back of the shallow cave. From behind a boulder, in a divot she'd hollowed out on their first time making camp here, she pulled a throw pillow and a design and architecture magazine that had featured one of her decorating remodels. It was a national magazine and the spread had been a turning point in her career, though not long after it published, she left for the Wilderness. These were her secret treasures she'd smuggled in from the City, and rather than carry them place to place, facing scorn from the others and damage from the elements, she hid them, blatantly disregarding the rules laid out in the Manual. When they passed through the Valley, which they had a few times each year, she dug out her treasures so she could feel a little more like herself.

She sat next to Glen and hugged her pillow. Then she thumbed through the pages of her spread, remembering the choices she'd made and why. Remembering what it felt like to have a home.

"If the Rangers find those, we'll get in trouble," Glen said, as he always said when she dug out her treasures, always so concerned with the rules.

She scowled. "What are they going to do? Kick us out for a pillow?"

"Maybe." Glen shrugged.

"Relax," she said. "They'll never find them. And I need them. I need to remember what pillows are like."

"Aren't I a good enough pillow?" He said this so sweetly.

Bea looked at him. He was all bones. They both were. Even her belly, which had barely jutted with the baby, seemed to have immediately sunken. When she looked up at him, he was offering a small

broken smile. She nodded. He nodded back. Then he staged a long, loud, languid yawn, eyeing Agnes. Agnes's yawn followed with a big, fisted stretch.

"Big day tomorrow," he said. "We start our trip to Middle Post. And we get to cross your favorite river on the way."

"Can we swim?" Agnes asked.

"We've got to get in it to cross it, so you bet."

"When?"

"Probably be there in a few days."

"How much is a few?"

Glen shrugged. "Five? Ten? Several?"

Agnes huffed. "That's not an answer!"

Glen poked her and laughed. "We'll get there when we get there." Agnes's scowl was just like Bea's scowl.

"Is everything packed?" Bea asked.

"Mostly. You don't have to worry."

Bea gave the pillow in her lap a tight squeeze. It was moist and smelled bitter, but she didn't care. She buried her face in it, imagining she could transfer love to her small baby. She sighed and looked up.

Agnes was watching her, hugging the air, pretending to have her own pillow, or perhaps her own baby, and smiling the same sad smile Bea had no doubt just displayed.

The bustling and hoot-filled evening quieted as they passed through it.

At camp, a few of the other Community members were still at the fire, but most were breathing lightly in the circle where everyone slept. Bea and Glen eased down under the elk pelt they used as bedding. Agnes arranged herself, as she always did, at their feet. Her hand curled around Bea's ankle like a vine.

"Maybe there will be some good packages at Post," Glen murmured. "Maybe some good chocolate or something like that."

Bea *hmm*ed, but really she couldn't eat things like that anymore

without becoming ill, her body overwhelmed by what it used to crave in their old life.

Instead of chocolate, she wished instead Glen would mention the child she'd just buried. Or she thought she wished for that. What would she say? What could she say that he didn't already know? And did she really want to talk about it? No, she didn't. And he knew that too.

She looked at Glen, and in the firelight saw a look of hope play on his face. He knew chocolate couldn't soothe such bewilderment, but maybe the suggestion could do what the chocolate was supposed to. She fit herself into his arms. "Yes, some chocolate would be nice," she lied.

All around them, Bea heard the sounds of the wild world bedding down. Ground owls cooed, and something else screeched; shadows of night fliers skimmed between the sky and the stars. As the campfire hissed itself to sleep, she heard the last of the Community walking cautious and blind from the fire to the beds and nestling down. Someone said, "Good night, everyone."

Against her ankle, Bea could feel Agnes's blood pulsing through her hot clutching hand. She breathed in and out to its rhythm, and it focused her. *I have a daughter*, she thought, *and no time for brooding*. She was needed here, and now, by someone. She vowed to move on quickly. She wanted to. She had to. It was how they lived now.

RIVER 9 MOVED fast and swelled against its banks, and to the Community it looked like a wholly different river from the one they were familiar with. So different that they had consulted the map again, trying to match the symbols with what was now there and what their memory insisted ought to be there. They had crossed the river many times since they first arrived in the Wilderness State. From their encounters with it elsewhere, they had even considered it a lazy river, the way it turned tightly back and forth through rocks and dirt from the foothills down across the sagebrush plain. They had a usual crossing spot that they considered safe, or as safe as a river crossing could be. But it looked as though a storm had altered the bank and submerged the patch of island where they used to regroup before attempting the far bank. It was a very helpful little island. But it was gone now and they could no longer be sure where that fording spot was. Perhaps the same storm that had kept them on the other side of the mountains since last summer had also remade this river.

They lowered themselves and then the children down a small ledge to the almost nonexistent bank where greens grew, a color found almost exclusively next to rivers. The grasses, mosses, the striving trees, so thin they could be snapped between two fingers, their new spring leaves quivers of creamy green. They handed down their bedding rolls, the pouches of smoked meat, jerky, pemmican, the harvested pine nuts, precious acorns, wild rice, einkorn, a handful of wild



onions, the disassembled smoking tent, their personal satchels, the hunting bows and arrows, the bag of hollowed wooden meal bowls and the chips of wood and stone they used as utensils, the precious box of precious knives, the Book Bag, the Cast Iron, the Manual, and the bags of their garbage they carried with them to be weighed and disposed of by the Rangers at Post.

In the water, a loose log, stripped naked of its bark and limbs, bobbed and rolled past even though the nearby landscape was treeless. The log must have traveled from the foothills, the unusual torrent of water ushering it through. On a lazier river, or even a lazier part of this river, a log might have gathered farther upstream in an eddy or been nudged onto a bank. Here, it rolled in the rapids. Rapids they'd never even noticed in previous crossings, when the water was low and any whitewater was just a skimming thin hat the river rocks wore. They watched another log vault head over tail, after which Caroline took her first tentative step out into the water.

Caroline was their river-crossing scout. She was the most sure-footed. Had the lowest center of gravity. Her toes could grip like fingers. Beautiful toes wasted for years crammed into shoes in the City. She had learned the most about how water behaved. She was good at making sense of things that seemed erratic.

"Okay," Caroline yelled over the rumble, her feet firm in the first foot of water, testing its pull, deciding whether to continue. "Rope."

Carl and Juan handed her one end of the rope, which she secured around herself and they looped once around each of their waists, Carl behind Juan, and then held the rope in front of them. The children and the other adults stood as far back as they could.

They had already tried to ford two other spots, but Caroline, either feet out from the bank or waist deep in water, returned to the shore each time. "It's too deep," or "It's too fast," or "See that lip? There's a pock somewhere under the water that will take us down."

On this, the third spot, Caroline waded out halfway. From the bank, things looked promising. She paused, her head cocked slightly,

like a coyote listening for the calls of the Wilderness—*friend or foe, friend or foe*. Her hands hovered over the whitewater, and it broke around her body and came together again behind her. Caroline turned her head toward them, her shoulders following, a hand turned palm up, about to signal something. She opened her mouth to speak just as the tip of a log surfaced where she stood, and with a terrible thwack and splash, Caroline was gone.

Then the river, like an awakened bear, yanked the rope and Juan went down too. He tried to dig his heels in. He bellowed as the rope wrung his waist. Carl tried to pull on his rope section, not to help Juan but to slacken the rope to avoid the excruciating thing that was happening to Juan.

Bea stood back with the others, her hands crimped on Agnes's shoulders. She thought about how, long ago, they always had someone stand by the rope holders with a knife to cut the rope in case something like this happened. But nothing like this ever happened, and Carl and Juan decided they were strong enough for a catastrophe like this. Besides, no one really wanted to be the one to cut the rope anyway. Still, at each river, they would have a lengthy discussion about whether to require a rope cutter or not. When they inevitably decided they needed one, no one would volunteer, so they would have to draw for it and the person who lost would shit themselves the whole time. And when nothing ever went wrong, they begrudged all that worry and work for nothing. So finally, they had decided, not that long ago, in fact, to stop mandating there be a rope cutter.

Clearly that had been the wrong decision.

In a move, Bea grabbed Carl's personal knife from his belt, lunged, and cut the rope in front of Juan, releasing him to the bank, where he crumpled and howled in relief. Carl, cursing, catapulted back into the others, and then everyone was tumbled over and tangled in weeds. Caroline, presumably still on the rope and most certainly dead, rushed downriver.

Carl clambered to his feet. "Why did you do that?" he screamed.

"I had to," Bea said, replacing his knife in the holder tied to his belt.

"But I had it. I fucking had it."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did."

"No, you didn't."

Carl sputtered, "But it was our best rope."

"We have others."

"Not like that one. It was our river rope!"

"We can get another one."

"Where?" Carl cried. He grabbed his hair in theatrical frustration, looking around at the empty Wilderness. But the feeling was real. He seethed.

Bea didn't answer. Maybe she could talk a Ranger into giving them something as good, as long and thick. But she wasn't going to promise that. She noted that while no one had sided with Carl, no one had defended her either. Everyone had busied themselves with some small task—inspecting their pouches, picking something out of another's hair, eating an ant—until the moment passed. Except Agnes, who watched with unnerving neutrality.

Bea helped Juan to his feet, and Dr. Harold hurried forward to put a salve on the rope cuts around Juan's waist and hands. It wouldn't do much. None of Dr. Harold's salves did much.

Debra and Val ran along the bank to see if Caroline resurfaced. She had, a few hundred feet downriver, her hair tangled in the branches of another log, her face submerged, her body limp. Her body and the log were snagged on something for a moment, and then were freed, speeding again down the river. There was no way to retrieve the rope. And not much to do for Caroline.

They took a moment to regroup, drink water, pass a pouch of jerky. Debra said a nice thing about Caroline and how being their river scout had been essential to their survival here and that she would be missed. "She taught me so much about water," Debra said, looking quite shook. She and Caroline had been close. Bea looked around at

the faces of the group, working their feelings out. Personally, Bea thought Caroline had been aloof, though she kept that feeling to herself. She chewed on a knuckle impatiently while she waited for the ritualized silent moment to end.

After all that, they argued about Caroline's last intention. She'd turned and opened her mouth to tell them something about the crossing. But tell them what? Had her hand begun to signal a thumbs-up or thumbs-down before the log smacked her? What had her facial expression been before she'd grimaced in painful surprise? In the end they decided the spot was still the most promising place to cross, despite Caroline's demise. Juan took over as the river scout and ventured in without a rope. Close to the middle, he turned and gave a thumbs-up. Single file they carefully shuffled out, children clinging to the backs of adults. It turned out to be quite a good spot to cross, and if it hadn't been for that log, they all would have gotten to the opposite bank easily. Poor Caroline. She had bad luck, Bea decided.

With the children across, the adults formed a chain over the river and passed the heavy and cumbersome items across, the Manual, the Cast Iron, the Book Bag, the garbage, the bedding, the disassembled smoker, the food pouches, the wooden bowls and slabs of utensils, then all the individual packs, one item after the other, bank to bank. And once they'd hoisted and tied and strapped back on all their gear, they started walking again. The sun dried them instantly. They spit out the silty earth kicked up by their feet. Their skin became dusted and slippery with it. Covering one nostril, they rocketed snot out their noses into the dust and trudged through the sagebrush plain that unfurled around them like a sea.

\* \* \*

WHEN THEIR WAY became lit by moonlight they stopped for the night. A small fire was built, and they lay on the ground around it. No skins were unrolled, no pelts unbundled. The sleep wouldn't be

worth the effort. They would be moving with the dawn. When they wanted to move fast, this is how they went.

On the horizon Bea saw the pinprick glow from an outdoor light that burned at Middle Post. They were close.

Juan said, "Just a quick story or two," and, yawning, began one of his favorites from the *Book of Fables*, which they used to carry in the Book Bag but which had been lost to a flash flood some time ago. All stories had been told so often now, they came from memory.

The children were asleep in little mounds at the foot of the fire. Except for Agnes, who insisted that as the eldest child of the Community she ought to stay up with the adults and report on decisions made that might affect the youngest ones. There were never any such decisions made at night around the fire. She just liked staying up. Bea didn't argue. She reveled in Agnes's restlessness. She couldn't forget when Agnes had been a frail, failing little girl too sick to hold her eyes open.

Bea squatted next to Glen, who grunted up from his task.

"How are those arrows coming along?" she asked, jostling his shoulder.

"Arrowheads," he mumbled. "Good." He was distracted, trying so hard to make a good point. She peered over his shoulder. They would be useless. He'd overflaked them. Bea smiled encouragingly. Glen was a terrible hunter. He knew it. She knew it disappointed him. Carl was the true hunter of the Community and provided much of their meat. So Glen was trying to master making tools, wanting to be of use in a way he had always dreamed of being. Of course, Carl was also a master arrow flaker and they were rich in perfect arrowheads already. But she wasn't going to point that out to him.

Bea watched Glen's brow furrowing in desperate concentration. Despite his shortcomings, he was having the time of his life here. All he read, as a boy, were tales of primitive life. The caveman stories of his youth were all he'd ever really been interested in. Now he was a

professor, expert in how people evolved from the first upright steps to the first wheel. He knew the most basic nature of humanity, and he knew the how and why behind the onslaught of civilization. But when it came to living primitively, he was surprisingly hapless.

They had met in the City. Bea had been hired to decorate the University apartment Glen moved into after his first marriage ended. It was shockingly large as apartments went, and she understood that he must be an important person there. As she showed him samples and talked about the placement of pieces, he told her the origin of every object she'd chosen for his home. It made her work feel important, like she was a steward of history, of usefulness. They married. He was fatherly toward Agnes, whose real father had been a worker on a weekend furlough from the vast Manufacturing Zone outside the City. Bea had liked the men on leave because they had good hands and they didn't stick around, and she liked her life and her job as they were. And she loved Agnes fiercely, though motherhood felt like a heavy coat she was compelled to put on each day no matter the weather.

Glen had been a nice change. She was ready for him at the time he came along. She had hoped he would change her life in surprising ways, but she never could have imagined just how much of it he could change.

Glen was the one who knew about the study, putting people in the Wilderness State. When things worsened in the City and Agnes's health cratered, like so many children's had, Glen was the one who offered his help to the researchers in exchange for three spots—for him, Bea, and Agnes. Bea's hunch had been right—Glen was important at the University, and the researchers agreed without hesitation.

It still took almost a year of working and waiting to get the permission to place humans into what was essentially a refuge for wildlife, the last wilderness area left, to gather the funding needed, and to find other participants. They had wanted twenty skilled volunteers with knowledge of flora and fauna and biology and meteorology. A

real doctor or nurse, not just an amateur herbalist. Even a chef would have been nice, but they eventually had to pad out the group with people who were simply willing to go. It sounded risky, people said. It was risky. It was uncomfortably unknown. It was an extreme idea and an even more extreme reality. More extreme than suicide, Bea remembered a mother from her building arguing. It had been a hard sell. Meanwhile, Agnes got sicker.

During that time, when Bea cradled her sleeping daughter, she'd sometimes wonder what she would do if Glen's plan didn't work, or worked too late. She could think of no other options for how to save Agnes. The medicines weren't strong enough anymore. Each cough was pink with blood. "What this child needs," the doctor had said ruefully, "is different air." Since there was no other air, she recommended palliative care, and Bea found herself wholly dependent on Glen and his stupid idea. Toward the end of the wait, right before they got permission—she hadn't and wouldn't ever tell anyone this—she had started to think ahead, to a life after Agnes. She'd begun to say goodbye. There was a terrible comfort in reaching that point. And then, with very little time to prepare, the study and the group of twenty were approved, and trying on army-issue gear, seeing doctors, providing urine samples, doing intake interviews, packing up their belongings, tying up loose ends, and then, without fanfare, leaving. Bea was stunned by the turnaround and the change, unsure whether this all was real, even as the first cold nights in the Wilderness descended on them and she found herself scrambling to protect Agnes in a new way.

It had seemed like such a game, even on that first evening when the sun set on them before they had a fire. Even as their stomachs knotted from coarse food or, soon, not enough food. Even when their camp was first ransacked by a hungry bear. Then the first person perished, from hypothermia. Another after misidentifying a mushroom. And another from wounds sustained from a cougar. And then a climbing accident. It felt as though they'd escaped one monster by

hiding in a closet, only to find another there among the hangers, claws unsheathed. They couldn't possibly stay here, could they? It felt unreal. Some kind of terrible trick.

At any moment she imagined Glen taking her by the wrist, turning her around, and marching her and Agnes back to the border fence, back to civilization. But that never happened. Eventually it dawned on Bea that the ground they trudged wearily upon day after day would be endless. And if they found an end, a border, a fence, a granite wall, she realized, they would just turn around. How could they ever return to the City? Agnes was like a colt, bounding, curious. And healthy for the first time in her short life. For the first time, Bea let herself believe Agnes *would* be long for this earth. And Bea was surviving when others had perished, others stronger than herself. It soothed her anxiety, stroked her ego. She might actually be good at this survival thing. *Maybe this was the right decision. Maybe this will all be fine. Maybe we aren't insane.* It was her mantra. She thought it almost daily. She thought it now.

Bea looked around the circle at the faces deranged by the dancing firelight. She thought there was a heaviness to the group since River 9. Since the rope. Since Caroline. No one would look at her. The jerky bag had been passed to her without comment, and taken from her too quickly. The heaviness seemed directed at her. Which she thought was absurd. People had certainly lost important things before and they weren't shunned for it.

There was the teacup they'd used during ceremonial moments for rituals they had made up early on for the different milestones of their new life.

The teacup had belonged to Caroline, passed to her through a line of family members who were early settlers in the New World. It was a ridiculous thing to bring into the Wilderness, but it was fine and pretty with a chipped gold rim and a colorful coat of arms from the place those relatives had fled. It had its own carrying box of wood, lined with old crumbling velvet, where it sat snug until needed. Ri-



diculous, but they cherished it. In it, they might pour a tea of blossoms, or roots, or bone, depending on the ritual or the season, and they'd pass it around the fire. It felt lovely in their hands and though there were many things in the Wilderness that looked delicate, really, nothing was. Hollow bird bones? Gossamer spiderwebs? Filigree-like lichen? They're tough, hardy. The teacup, though, was truly a delicate thing, and it would make each of them delicate when it passed into their possession. And that feeling is a kind of gift when they had to otherwise be hard.

It had been lost in the climbing accident. They were heading into the mountains for the winter because winter in the lowlands was too harsh and empty of food, while the caves and mounds of mountain snow made for good dwellings that in spring melted away any sign of them, which was like disappearing without a trace. Thomas was carrying the teacup in his pouch. As they climbed, he lost his footing and fell backwards off a ledge that everyone else had managed just fine. He tumbled down, and the bag's contents scattered across the rocks below. When they saw the box fly and open against a rock, they had gasped, though no one had gasped when Thomas had begun falling, or as he continued to fall. No one was that close to him, except Caroline, his wife. He'd never taken to the group. He wasn't a joiner, he'd explained pleasantly when they all first met.

The teacup flew out into the air from its safe velvet bed, the gold rim glinting in the sun, and some of them who were close enough tried to reach out to catch it. Even Thomas reached for it mid-tumble rather than reaching for a handhold that might stop his fall.

The cup came to rest in pieces, the porcelain dust settling like bone ash across the rock. Some gathered small shards and put them in a skin pouch as a new keepsake. But those shards cut them when they rummaged for anything, and eventually they were deposited discreetly across the landscape they walked, the shards small enough to disappear in the dirt.

Of course, poor Thomas had continued to fall, and presumably

he had died. A couple of people climbed down partway, but they couldn't see him and he didn't respond to their shouts. So the Community took a moment to say some nice things about him and console Caroline, and then they walked on. They didn't perform many rituals anymore, in large part because the teacup was gone. It was true that rituals took time and effort, and the more time they spent in the Wilderness, the less they wanted to celebrate. At first, every river crossing had been notable, but now they barely wanted to mark the first of the year. Regardless, Bea knew that without the teacup there was simply no ceremonial feeling. They were just drinking tea. But still, no one spoke ill of Thomas afterward. If he'd survived, they wouldn't have given him the silent treatment around the fire. No one blamed him for losing the cup, at least not out loud. Bea wished they'd remember that now.

Across the fire she tried to catch Debra's eye, but Debra would not look at her. Her mouth was set, her gaze stern. She had Caroline's bag next to her and was fingering the soft hide strap. All at once Bea realized they must have been more than close. Debra had arrived with a much younger wife, and Caroline with a much older husband. Both of their spouses were gone now—one deserted, the other dead. The pairing made sense, Bea supposed. It had to have been something new. They slept next to each other in the sleep circle, but not together. Whatever had happened they'd kept private. No easy task in the Community.

Dr. Harold busied himself packing a new salve into a hollowed-out chunk of wood. Bea could see his cheeks blaze red even in the firelight as she stared at him, trying to be acknowledged. Carl couldn't help but look at her simply to snarl and show he was still sore about the rope. She didn't bother looking at Val, who she hated and who hated her. The surprising one was Juan, who looked at each person around the fire as he told the story, held their gaze a beat, and then moved to the next. But his eyes jumped anxiously, perhaps angrily, over Bea. *But I saved your life*, she wanted to yell.

The only person paying attention to her was Agnes, who watched her actions and irritatingly imitated each one. When Bea scratched her ankle, Agnes scratched her ankle. Bea mouthed *stop*, and Agnes mouthed *stop*. Bea shook her head and rolled her eyes. And so did Agnes, dramatically, as if to mock her. Then, as Bea's anger sparked, Agnes put a hand on Bea's knee as though an adult consoling another, and grinned with that broken tooth. Bea melted from her daughter's goofy smile and the warmth of her hand. Bea wanted someone to be kind to her. She wanted some unconditional love. She reached to embrace her, but skittish Agnes slipped through her arms. She tried a new tactic. Bea yawned so that Agnes would yawn. She stretched her arms so that Agnes would stretch her arms out. She leaned back, trying to pull Agnes down with her to sleep. But Agnes wouldn't be tricked. She didn't want to sleep. She pulled her arms into her chest, stifled a real yawn, and scooted to Glen, pressing a curious fingertip into the flint shavings at his feet. Bea, dejected, stood up, shivering to be even that far from the fire. She did not want to sleep in the same circle as these people. Far off, behind some butte, coyotes yodeled to one another, *friend, friend, friend*, and Bea felt bereft at the sound of such communion.

What she could see was from starlight and from smell. She sniffed and found Glen's bag with their bedding. Their scent was all over it. She laid it out on the ground some distance from the fire. She heard a crunch behind her and tensed for a moment before she felt Glen's hands on her shoulders, kneading them.

"Tough day," he murmured near her neck. She could tell he felt bad about ignoring her at the fire.

"You would have cut the rope, right?"

"Of course." She felt his cheeks lift to a smile as he put a small kiss to her temple.

"But . . . ?"

"I might have waited just a tad longer."

"Well, fuck, Glen. Did I just murder Caroline?"

“Oh no, no, no,” he said patiently, pulling her down to their bedding. “Caroline was dead the second that log attacked her.”

“Then what does the timing matter?”

Glen shrugged. “I guess it doesn’t. But if she was already dead, then what was the rush?”

“But Juan.”

Glen waved his hand. “Juan was always going to be fine.”

She stamped her foot, and Glen put his hands back on her shoulders. “Look, Juan was fine. Caroline was lost. But that rope wasn’t. Not until you cut it. People just need a minute.” He paused, then shrugged. “It was a really good rope.”

Agnes slunk up at that moment as Bea and Glen went silent naturally at the end of their conversation. But Agnes took it personally. “You don’t have to stop talking,” she lisped angrily. “I know a lot. I’m mature.”

Glen grabbed Agnes around the waist and flipped her. “We were already done talking,” he sang, dangling her an inch above the ground until her huffs and puffs became reluctant laughs, then shrieks of glee. Glen eased her down to the bed, and she arranged herself, as she always did, at their feet.

Glen and Bea nestled down, and in the ensuing silence Bea’s mind drifted to the sky that had shone white-hot above her when she had Madeline and she was grateful for the distraction when Agnes, from the bottom of the bed, cooed, “I’m sad about Caroline.”

“You are?” Bea couldn’t keep her surprise in, and she could tell from Agnes’s sharp breath that she was surprised by her mother’s surprise.

“Yeah,” Agnes said, though now she phrased it more as a question.

“Well,” Bea said, “Caroline was always nice to you.” If Bea were being completely honest, she thought Caroline was more aloof than Thomas and really hadn’t liked her at all. It wasn’t that she was glad she was dead. She just wasn’t that bothered to have lost her and felt uncomfortable about the level of mourning happening. It was bad

enough to be blamed about the rope without everyone moping about Caroline too. She rolled her eyes in the dark. She was never sure what was better parenting—modeling compassion or just being honest. Agnes was so nice to everyone, even if she wasn't always very nice to her mother. So she kept her feelings about Caroline, once again, to herself. "She was a lot of fun," she said with a nod into the darkness.

"It's just," Agnes ventured, "I really wish we could have saved her."

Even her daughter thought she'd cut the rope too fast. "You too?" Bea barked. "I suppose you really miss the rope as well?"

"Okay, okay," Glen said, putting an arm around Bea and ruffling Agnes's hair. "We need to get to sleep." Bea saw Agnes's teeth in the dim dark smiling up at Glen and Bea, realized she was being toyed with. Of course Agnes had heard enough of their conversation to know, or want to know, how that comment would sound to Bea. It was something Agnes was playing with lately—pointed comments, knowing looks. Testing boundaries like she had as a toddler, but now with a sharpness, a tartness to her. Agnes was playing at a lot of things lately, and Bea felt she could hardly keep up.

Agnes scrunched down under the skins, and her hand clasped around Bea's ankle like it did every night. Bea fought the urge to pull it away. Bea tried to fit herself into Glen's arms, but her blood was revving and she felt tied by them instead of embraced.

Agnes fell immediately into an unworried sleep, her breaths sounding like heavy drapes shuffling against the floor. Of course she had heard, Bea thought. Agnes was always listening. And she was right. She did seem to know everything. And she did seem older, more mature, than she was. Bea had fully lost sight of the baby Agnes had been. Found it hard to believe she'd ever been anything but this complicated person at her feet. She was short but she was solid, as though already fully formed. Much more solid than the other children. Glen always gave her more meat than he gave himself. As if on cue, Glen joined Agnes with his own sleep sounds. Bea stared wide-eyed into the dark night.

\* \* \*

IN THE MORNING, a truck raced toward them, spewing dust. Far behind it the sun glinted against the roof of Middle Post. As the truck pulled to a stop, they saw it was Ranger Gabe. He was the son of someone very high up in the Administration, he had told them once, as though it were a threat. He was not well liked.

Some Rangers enjoyed being outdoors and conversing with the Community. But not Ranger Gabe. He seemed skeptical of them and of the dirt he walked upon. His uniform was always crisp and spotless, and he moved carefully, as though he hated to get it dirty.

He shut off his truck, sat a moment, then leaned long on the horn. The birds previously hidden in bushes dispersed in a cloud. The horn's bleat echoed back to them from a faraway butte.

The Community, packed and ready to leave, gathered around his truck.

"You've got new Manual pages at Lower Post."

"But we've almost reached Middle Post," Bea explained. "That's where we were told there were pages."

"And mail," Debra said. She'd been very vocal about not having received a letter from her aged mother for a long while. She was unsure what it meant that she'd heard nothing.

"Well," he drawled, his heel pumping the sideboard, "I don't know what to tell you. All I know is there's nothing for you at Middle. Nothing. You've got to go to Lower." He squinted at the horizon like an explorer.

"But Middle Post is right there," Bea said, pointing to the roof roasting under the sun.

"There's nothing there for you."

"But—"

"You've got to head to Lower. And you know where I mean, right? Even though it's Lower, it's not just lower."

They looked at him blankly.

He scowled and pulled out a roughly drawn map of all the Post locations. Pointed to where he meant, an X at the very bottom of the map.

Carl growled, “Lower Middle? Why all the way down there?”

“Not Lower Middle. Lower.”

“But it’s right in the middle here”—Carl pointed—“*and it’s lower.*”

“Look, this one’s called Lower Post. And you’ve got to go there. That’s all that matters.”

“But why?”

“Why?” Ranger Gabe mockingly scratched his head. “*Why?* Because you left your last camp a total shithole, that’s why.”

“No, we didn’t,” said Bea. They did their micro trash sweeps. They’d found as much micro trash as they found after any time they spent anywhere.

“It looked like you’d been there forever. The vegetation was destroyed. It’ll take years, maybe even a lifetime for it to bounce back. If it bounces back at all.” Spittle had collected in Ranger Gabe’s beard.

Bea saw Carl getting vexed. She smiled ingratiatingly. “I’m so surprised to hear this. I feel like we barely unpacked we were there such a short time.” This was a lie. They’d been there much longer than they should have. Everyone knew it. Ranger Gabe knew it. This was a common dance between the Rangers and the Community. Bea figured they’d been there about half a season—an obscene amount of time to stay in one place—and the only reason they’d begun moving was because she’d wanted some distraction from thinking of Madeline. And people wanted their mail. They were supposed to stop only when they needed to hunt, gather, and then process what they had. They were limited to seven days in one place as stated in the Manual. But they almost never followed this. It was hard to start moving once they’d stopped. To pack everything up in such a way that would be relatively easy to carry for the foreseeable future. That smoker was delicate and

tricky, and right after a hunt they were weighed down with meat. A good thing overall, but a lot more weight to drag around.

“Oh, please,” Ranger Gabe said. “Even around here is a mess. How long have you been here?”

“One night.”

He shook his head. “Incredible,” he said. “Well, maybe it’s just not possible to avoid impact when you’re a group this large. I’ve always felt that way. I’ve always said there is no reason for this. For a group to be here. I said they shouldn’t let you in. Have I ever mentioned that?”

“You have,” said Bea.

“Well, I’m not the only one who feels that way.” He spoke through a crooked, satisfied smile.

“If it’s any consolation, we’re about half the size we used to be,” Bea said feigning graciousness, thinking of the dead.

He glared.

She mostly liked the Rangers, even the mean ones. They were fun to banter with which is why she had volunteered to be the Community’s liaison. She found that a small smile easily disarmed them. They were young and always seemed new no matter how long they’d been there. To her they would always be soft-eared cubs. Except Ranger Bob at Middle Post, who was older, gray filling in the temples and his mustache. He was a peer. She would go so far as to call him a friend. A good one, even. But these boys were fun for her.

“Let me also add that you’ve been at that camp too many times,” Ranger Gabe said flatly. He could not let it go. Carl was pacing, panting. He would break soon.

“I thought the rules only covered duration of time,” Bea said coyly.

“No. It’s a whole presence thing. You’re impeding wildlife opportunities by repeatedly returning and overstaying. No animal wants to call this home while you’re stomping around.”

“It’s not about presence,” Carl exploded, and rummaged furiously for the Manual to prove his point.



The Ranger smiled and Bea sighed. She felt she'd been winning their unspecified game, but now Carl had ruined it.

Ranger Gabe laid a heavy hand on Carl's shoulder. "Don't bother, sir. I saw all I needed to see. What matters is impact. And yours is severe. I've already catalogued it extensively in my report and I will send it up the chain, stamped *URGENT*. Infractions like this can get you kicked out." His eyes were as stern as his unwavering voice. There was no generosity here. "What you need to do is start walking in the direction of Lower Post." He pointed somewhere in the distance, in a direction they'd never been. "As ordered."

They'd been rerouted before, twice to be exact. Once due to a controlled burn (if it had been a natural fire, the Ranger made sure to point out, they would not have been rerouted, as per the Manual). Another time it was due to a septic tank overflow at Upper Post. They were moved to the next most convenient Post to tend to business. But this felt unnecessary, a task meant to endanger them. They looked at the map. Lower Post was farther away than anywhere they'd ever been. It was meant as punishment. An invitation to a forced march.

Glen eased Carl back, away from Ranger Gabe's hand and out of reach in case Carl decided to throw a punch.

"You know," Glen said, "we thought we'd done a good job with micro trash and re-wilding, but we will be certain to give it more attention next time."

"If there's a next time," the Ranger snapped. Then he slumped slightly. He knew the encounter was wrapping up and seemed regretful. Perhaps Bea had misjudged. Having the Community here might give the Rangers something to do.

"Well, duly noted," Glen said. "Now, it's Lower Post, you say?"

"Yeah."

"Great. We'll repack today—you have to pack right for a trek like that—but then we'll head there first thing."

The Community sighed.

Glen smiled. "Gang, I personally cannot wait. Who knows what wonders we'll see?"

Only Agnes cheered.

"That's my girl," Glen said, beaming at her gratefully.

Agnes beamed back.

Ranger Gabe got back into his truck and drove, squinting at them in his rearview. Glen smiled and smiled until the truck crested a mellow hill and disappeared. Then Glen's face slackened. He massaged his cheeks.

"Well," said Debra, hoisting her pack, "I'm not turning around. Not when we're this close to Middle Post." She took a few steps toward the glinting roof.

Glen put his hand up. "Wait."

"Don't tell me we have to discuss this," said Juan.

"Of course we have to discuss it. We need consensus," said Glen.

Everyone groaned.

"We're barely a mile away," said Debra, her feet dancing toward Post.

"Well, some of us don't like to go to Post and would prefer to avoid it whenever possible," said Val. She was only saying that to please Carl, who hated having to go to Post.

"But our mail," cried Debra.

"Debra, our mail won't even be there," snapped Carl.

Debra flapped her arm in the direction of Post. "But it's right there."

"First, Debra, consensus is your dumb thing, so don't complain," said Carl.

Debra scowled. She loved consensus usually. She was the one who'd brought the idea to the Community.

"Second, you realize they're doing this so we will disobey and they can write another report and then maybe they can get us kicked out," Carl warned.

"Since when are you so concerned with the rules?" spat Debra.

Carl blushed angrily. He hated the rules, especially when his desires aligned with them.

“Listen, gang, they’re doing it to get us to go somewhere else. They’re saying we’ve been lazy,” said Glen. “I think it’s a valid criticism.”

The allure of following the same route each year they’d been in the Wilderness State was great. If they knew the route, they knew what to expect. These plants grew at this time and they grew here. Those berries come in beyond that ridge, there. They had learned to read the land and decide where a ptarmigan had moved its burrow after they found the first one. They learned how animals thought and so they made better hunters. They’d learned how to survive in this quadrant of the map. Would what they learned allow them to survive elsewhere? Anywhere? They’d already passed through all the hardship of learning in the early days and come out on the other side, alive. They did not want to go through it all again.

“But what if we’re not meant to return?” Dr. Harold had broken away from the group and was pacing. He was so far away that his question was almost inaudible. A whisper, a secret only to himself.

“Don’t get paranoid, Doc,” Glen said kindly, and Dr. Harold seemed startled to be the focus of attention.

“I’m not. But look.” He pulled out the map and pointed. “Lower Post isn’t even the next Post. It’s just a place, a place very far from here, over a new range of mountains. These are dunes. These are dry lakes. And here”—he trailed his finger along—“is the only river I see.”

“Oh no,” Debra said.

“I don’t mean there aren’t *any*,” he said quickly, “but we don’t know. We don’t know what will make sense when we get there. Maybe where we end up, it won’t make sense to ever come back.”

They sobered at the thought of not returning.

Val said tentatively, “Well, maybe we should check in at Middle Post just to be sure.”

A few more murmured agreements rose.

“Maybe we should check with Ranger Bob.”

“Maybe Ranger Gabe is wrong.”

Dr. Harold from outside the circle suddenly cried, “Who is this Ranger Gabe anyway?”

“Okay, okay,” Glen interrupted. “We’re getting worked up about something as silly as the unknown. Don’t forget, it’s all just land.”

Carl interrupted. “And we’re people who live on the land. We travel land. We *know* land. We go where we want, when we want. And we can come back here whenever it suits us. There’s nothing to be worried about. So, I say let’s head somewhere new. Let’s go to Lower Post.”

“But this is where we first arrived,” said Juan. “Who knows when we’ll be back?”

Carl slapped his forehead. “We’ll be back when we want to be back. Didn’t you just hear me say that? We are sovereign over our experience. So let’s turn around.”

It hadn’t occurred to Bea that they might never return here. It didn’t seem possible. She didn’t know how to live in the Wilderness without their lovely hidden Valley and trips to Middle Post. It was one thing not to know what animal might stalk them tomorrow. It was another not to know which cave to hide in when it did. A fear crept up her throat so that she croaked when she said, “I’d like to say goodbye to Bob.”

Carl threw his hands up. “No one is listening to me.” Val tried to pat his shoulder, but he jerked away.

Glen smiled at Bea and nodded. “Then let’s go to Middle Post.” He nodded around the circle until each of the adults nodded back. Carl, the last, stared angrily at him before giving a curt nod. “Good work, everyone.” Glen looked to the horizon again to see that Ranger Gabe was truly gone, and the dust from his tires settled. Then he whistled and twirled his finger and they started to walk.

THEY ARRIVED AT Middle Post just as the sun began to drop. The pink light glanced off the roof, the numerous windows, and Ranger Bob's pickup truck, which Ranger Bob was just climbing into.

He jumped back out when he saw them. "Well, all right," he said, grinning. "You are not supposed to be here, but I'm sure glad to see you."

Some of them smiled. Bea beamed. Agnes waved shyly from behind her mother. Carl sauntered to the small, neat building and pissed high against the wall.

Ranger Bob pivoted toward Bea, his arms outstretched as though to embrace her. Then he brought them together in a loud clap, his smile wide under his bushy mustache. He was a kind of cowboy, but not a wild one. More like one who'd be hired for a child's party.

"You know the drill," he said. "Weigh your trash, and get your stories straight. I'll wait for ya inside."

Ranger Bob turned and high-fived Glen, who seemed startled by the instinctual high five he returned, and Ranger Bob jogged inside. As he flicked light switches, Bea could hear the new fluorescent hum over the lower hum of desert crickets.

Val, and two of the children, Sister and Brother, weighed the garbage, and then others sorted. The Cast Iron and other vessels were rinsed in the spigot, which jutted from the little beige building. Debra slipped out of her busted moccasins and luxuriated in the patchy grass that formed a green perimeter around the building. She scrunched her toes in and out of the blades.

The fluorescents blinded Bea momentarily as she walked in. She covered her eyes with her hands and slowly spread her fingers apart until she could handle looking at Ranger Bob behind his gleaming counter.

"We missed you this spring," he said.

"We got caught on the other side of the mountains by that storm. It just made more sense to work those foothills. On that side it was so calm."

“Yeah, freak early storm. Getting earlier.”

“Yeah. Then, you know, it’s spring, the game is good, the bulbs are hard to pass up.”

“Of course.” He smoothed his mustache thoughtfully. “But I don’t need to tell you how important it is for you to get to Post when you’re supposed to.”

“I know. I’m sorry. We just couldn’t.”

Ranger Bob smiled. “Well, hopefully next time you will.”

He never threatened them. It was one of the many things Bea liked about him. Still, there was a seriousness to his words that she was cautioned by. “We will,” she said. “I promise.”

Ranger Bob cleared his throat. “You know you were supposed to get along to Lower Post, right?”

Her heart skipped. She felt like they were doing everything wrong. “We heard. But we were so close. It didn’t make sense to turn around. And we worried it might have been a mistake . . .” She trailed off.

“It’s not a mistake,” he said, again with a sternness that surprised her. “Granted, Ranger Gabe should have caught up with you earlier. But there were some unexpected events that needed handling.”

“Like what?”

“Well. Hmm.” He screwed his mouth. “That’s classified.”

“Really?” Bea didn’t know why, but she felt incredulous to think there were things she couldn’t know about this place where they ate, drank, slept, and shat.

“It’s a big place. You’re not going to know about everything that goes on.” He winked. His lightness returned. “Anyway, really important to set out for Lower Post first thing in the morning. But we might as well take care of whatever business we can since you’re here. How many in the group?”

“Eleven. Lost four, gained one.”

He opened a binder labeled *Wilderness State Study Subject Log*. “Okay, gains. Name?”

“Pinecone.”

"That's an interesting one. Season of birth?"

"Last spring."

"So maybe last year, right about now?"

Bea shrugged.

He jotted some notes. "Okay. Mother?"

"Becky."

"Father?"

"Dan."

"That's nice. Just the one addition, right?"

Bea nodded, thinking of Madeline.

"Okay, now for the part I hate. Losses. Names and causes?"

"Becky. Cougar maul."

Ranger Bob *tsked* as he scribbled into the ledger. "That's too bad," he said. "Next?"

"Dan. Rock slide."

"And he died?"

"His pelvis was crushed."

"And he died."

"We assume." Bea paused. "I mean, we had to leave him behind."

She saw Ranger Bob raise his eyebrows as he stared intently at the paper before him. He didn't say anything. But she could see how hard he pressed his pen into the log. She hoped it was just to capture the information in triplicate. Ranger Bob was one of the more sympathetic of the Rangers they dealt with. She didn't know what she would do if he started to judge them too. They had seen a lot of death. They had become hardened to it. Not just the Community members who had perished in grisly or mundane ways. But around them everything died openly. Dying was as common as living. They worried about one another, of course, but when one of them ceased surviving for whatever reason, they closed ranks and put their energy into what remained alive. This was an unanticipated outcome of living in the Wilderness, but it had happened quickly and cleanly. There used to be a cultural belief, in an era before she was born, that having

close ties to nature made one a better person. And when they first arrived in the Wilderness, they imagined living there might make them more sympathetic, better, more attuned people. But they came to understand there'd been a great misunderstanding about what *better* meant. It's possible it simply meant better at being human, and left the definition of the word *human* up for interpretation. It might have only meant better at surviving, anywhere, by any means. Bea thought living in the Wilderness wasn't all that different than living in the City in that respect.

Ranger Bob coughed and said, "Well, jeez. That's too bad for"—he looked back over his form—"Pinecone. Who's taking care of him?"

"We are," Bea said, snapping a bit. Heat rose to her cheeks. She couldn't tell if it was shame or anger.

Ranger Bob looked up. "Well, of course you are." He smiled. "Who else?"

"Caroline. We lost her in River 9."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

His pen stopped. "Now you're sure? Because she could just be zip-ping along not far from here."

"We're sure."

"Because River 9's fast right now but not too cold. And below here it gets slow again."

"It was a log. She's definitely gone."

"Ah, that's too bad. I liked her."

Bea couldn't believe she had to hear about Caroline again. She hit the counter angrily. "Seriously?"

Ranger Bob took a step back, startled. "What?"

"I'm so sick of hearing about Caroline," she grunted.

Ranger Bob's jaw dropped.

"I mean, why are we still talking about her?" She chewed on a finger distractedly. She shook her head in disgust. *Caroline?* Honestly, fuck Caroline.



Ranger Bob regarded her like a wild animal. He said cautiously, "Well, she just died . . . yesterday, you said?" He might as well have been saying, *Hey, bear, hey, bear* to calm a beast.

Bea blinked and tried to swallow her rage. "Yes, of course." She straightened. "She did just die yesterday." She exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry for losing my temper." The heat rose back into her cheeks.

"Well, I hope you'll forgive me, but I liked Caroline and I'll miss her," he said, smirking.

She hid her face. She didn't want to see how she blushed. "I'm sorry."

He held up a hand as though he understood. He was so good at seeming to understand everything. She thought again about Lower Post and felt truly sad. What would she do without Ranger Bob? Would he miss her too?

Ranger Bob leaned in. "I guess I won't be ruining her secret anymore, but I used to let her use the commode back here. My wife puts a little bowl of potpourri in there. Caroline said she liked the smell." He chuckled. "It's the little things. Okay, moving on from Caroline, may she rest in peace. How much garbage?"

"Wait," Bea croaked. "One more. Madeline. Stillborn." Her face blazed. She stammered, "I didn't know if it counted."

Ranger Bob gazed at her for a moment, then looked at his form, flipping it over and back. "Well, seems like it doesn't count. Good to know. So let's just call it three, shall we?" He scratched out the 4 in the column for *Total Deaths*, smiling a mayor's smile, tight, all lip.

Bea sputtered in agreement so she wouldn't whimper. Her little unfinished girl was not quite finished enough to count. Was there some kind of comfort there, or did it make the loss more devastating? All at once she felt nothing.

"How much garbage?" he asked again.

"Twenty pounds," she whispered.

Ranger Bob whistled. "Wowsers. That much?"

Bea wanted to crumple to the floor. How monstrous they must sound. A dead baby and now too much trash.

She said, "On account of our missed trip to Post."

"Ah, ah," he said, nodding. "Makes sense. How many bags is that now?"

"Three of those bags we picked up here last time."

"Oh, those bags are awful."

"Just awful. I can't believe they didn't bust open."

"Well, because you made those ingenious covers for them."

"Debra made those."

"She's quite a seamstress."

"Quite."

He perused a checklist. "Well, I can give you the new Manual pages, but I can't promise I have the newest versions. And we might as well fill out questionnaires since you're all here. They might appreciate having some new data. Since it's been a while."

"Blood and urine too?"

"No, we sent the equipment to the Lower Post." He peered at her again. "Because you were supposed to go there."

"We're going."

"Of course you are. You'll want to— I already sent all your mail down there," he said, winking again. But again, his tone turned weary. "But also, you *have* to go."

Bea leaned in. "Bob, I get it," she cooed and thrilled when a blush rose to the apples of his cheeks.

"Okay, okay," he said, sheepishly.

"We've never been to Lower Post." She tried to sound excited, but she heard her dread.

"Well, I'd be surprised if you had. It's not easy to get to," he said, counting out questionnaires. A look of concern passed over his face, but he erased it with a small toss of his head. "So, think of it as an adventure." He handed the papers over. "I've got to be on my way so the missus won't get mad. So just drop these in the mail slot when they're done."

She nodded, took them, and then he boyishly thrust his hand out.

“So? Good luck to you then!”

She shook it. “I hope we see you again soon.”

Their hands lingered, as though they might not.

Bea turned toward the door and tried to memorize what she could. The particular stale chemical smell of the place, the light buzzing at a high pitch, the quiet whir of some machine that was always on here but never at Upper Middle Post, where they sometimes stopped midwinter. Ranger Bob wore a women’s deodorant—she was sure of it. Or perhaps he put baby powder in his socks so he wouldn’t get blisters. Her mother had done that sometimes, when she put on her nice shoes, which pinched her feet. But Ranger Bob wore regulation sturdy sensible shoes. What was his excuse? She imagined it kept his feet soft, and that he and his wife would rub feet in bed, under clean white sheets, nudging the warm and loyal dog that lay at the foot. She felt a yearning to be in that bed, that domesticity. She looked at Ranger Bob’s wedding band glinting under the fluorescents and briefly hated Mrs. Ranger Bob, whoever she was.

She stopped short. “Oh, hey, I almost forgot. Do you have any good thick rope you could give us?”

Ranger Bob frowned. “Bea, you know I can’t supply things like that.”

Bea nodded, embarrassed and irritated that she’d asked at all. Fuck everyone and their rope.

“But,” Ranger Bob continued, “I shouldn’t, but—” He brandished a vibrant green lollipop. “Give this to your darling girl,” he said. “I know how much she loves them. But don’t tell.” Then he cocked his head, brandished another sucker with a sly smile. “This one’s for you. You look like you could use it,” he said, his smile disappearing.

\* \* \*

THE ROUTE THEY chose to Lower Post purposefully swung back through the Valley they’d just been told never to return to. They’d hoped Ranger Bob would tell them this was all a mistake and to walk

the route they wished to walk, wherever that took them. Now that they were sure they must head to Lower Post, they wanted to say goodbye to the place. Just in case.

They found their old camp cordoned off with yellow tape and sticks. *Re-vegetation in Progress* signs were posted all around the perimeter.

"Who is this sign for?" Carl said, kicking uselessly at some of the tape. It gaped and hung.

"Us," said Bea.

"The only impact here is by Rangers," he complained.

"Say your goodbyes, everyone," Glen said with a hint of melancholy.

"And hey," Carl said, "if you left anything behind, you better retrieve it." Carl looked right at Bea when he said it, his lip curling.

Bea looked around, trying to feign ignorance, as if to say, *Who is he talking about?* She caught Dr. Harold's eye and nodded sympathetically. He looked down in shame. She'd meant to deflect, but perhaps she'd uncovered a secret. The doc hid things too! She looked around, and a number of them stared at their feet, or off into the distance at a stand of trees or other small outcroppings, perfect places to tuck secret belongings. Carl stood haughty, his arms crossed. Of course Carl wouldn't have hidden anything. But she saw Val alternate between indignant and sheepish looks, and when they scattered, Bea saw her slink off. Carl could fume at the Community's tenacious hold on the past, on its secrets, but Bea was enlivened by the idea that each of these people who she'd shat, pissed, and nearly starved with, who she'd heard fucking, who she'd had endless Community meetings with, might still have managed to keep something private. The Wilderness, and the people in it, seemed interesting again.

Bea returned to her cave and chomped through both lollipops. The last thing Agnes needed was to remember what sugar was. Bea watched the others secret off to their own favorite spots. How stupid to think she had been the only one attached to the past.

Bea's blood revved from the green sugar. Her heart flitted. She felt like she could run for miles. She giddily skipped back to her hiding spot and discovered her pillow and magazine were gone, replaced with yellow re-vegetation tape. The delight from the sugar was instantly replaced by a headache. The yellow tape felt like a slap. How could they have found her stash? She felt watched. She squatted tightly at the mouth of the cave and held her knees hard, trying to quiet herself so that she could match the landscape. It was a form of protection to be like the land and animals that hid there. Were the others quietly mourning their losses? Were they feeling as trapped as she felt?

From her stoop in the cave entrance, she watched Glen swiftly moving toward the place where Madeline had lain. In camp, she spotted Agnes circling Carl with a length of the re-vegetation tape, torn from the stakes. They stood in the middle of the cordoned-off patch. Agnes stomped and shrieked, and Carl pretended to be tied to a pole, death by execution a certain future for him. His pleas for his life lilted up to Bea, small whispers in her ear, and she turned again to Glen.

He stood gazing down, toed something, knelt to inspect. Then stayed squat, running his hands over bushes, over the dirt, looking out at the view Bea had chosen for Madeline. She hadn't thought the spot was visible from the cave. She wondered if he was in the wrong place, hadn't gone far enough. Or, she thought, perhaps she *herself* had not gone far enough to be out of view. Maybe Glen had watched her bury their daughter, while she thought that it had been a private act.

Bea looked back toward camp, searching for Agnes. Her little survivor. Her strange, vibrant daughter. She was lunging at Carl with a stick. He groaned, clutched his stomach, pretending to be stabbed. With her last lunge, he fell to his knees.

"I'm dying," he cried, overacting, his voice a ghost's moan, his hands raising, swaying.

Agnes tilted her head at this eager, jolly, dying man. She became still before yelling, "Then die!" She spit on the ground in front of him.

Carl roared, fell over, and died.

Agnes giggled with delight as she pantomimed slicing his abdomen open and pulling out his entrails.

Bea's eyes darted back to the horizon, looking for Glen, but she couldn't find him. He didn't have anything hidden, she was sure.

Bea noticed she was anxiously digging fingernails into the dirt, and now the tips were raw, slippery with fine dust. She sucked them clean and then spit brown. Before she knew it, they were right back scraping the dirt.

The Community had been on long walks before, walks they thought would never be matched. One walk in their first year had prompted someone to leave. But even though they walked almost every day, day after day, they'd never strayed into other quadrants. They'd only visited three Posts, the three that lined the map's eastern border.

They were given their first map just after Orientation had ended, when they were packing up for their official entry into the Wilderness. Ranger Corey had driven up and tossed it from his truck window. It was a strange document that seemed to lack any sense of scale. It was covered in symbols that made it look like a child had dreamed it up.

"What are these black circles?" they'd asked him.

"Places not to go," Ranger Corey had said with a smirk. His affect was steely and amused, but his face was young and inexperienced.

They pointed to a flat-topped mountain and an orange flag, messy and colored out of the lines. It was a Post. "How far is this?" they asked.

Ranger Corey smiled. "Dunno, haven't figured that out yet." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a silver disk the size of his palm. "Who's the leader here?"

"Well, we're not going to have a leader," Glen had said proudly.

Ranger Corey's eyes rolled skyward. Then he surveyed their faces. "You," he said, holding the disk out to Carl.

Carl took it and stood taller, alert, happy to be identified as a leader.

“What do I get to do with this?” Carl asked, turning it around in his hand. He pressed a button along the side and it clicked. He pushed again. *Click*. Push. *Click*.

“Tell us how many paces from here to Post,” Ranger Corey said. “One click per step.”

Carl’s face instantly raged. “Are you fucking serious?”

Ranger Corey acted surprised, but he wasn’t. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “I’m fucking serious. Do you have a problem with that? Because you could also tell me how many paces to the nearest exit.”

Carl squeezed the clicker, trying to crush it, and lunged at the Ranger. But Ranger Corey ducked his head back into his truck and rolled the window up till it was open just a crack. “A click a step,” he cried, revving the engine and peeling away.

No doubt the Rangers had far better ways to determine distances. This was busywork, a way to turn a nice walk into a slog. To make their lives slightly less free than the Ranger assumed they wanted.

They picked a direction and walked, and within days found themselves in vast grasslands full of antelope, sitting with their legs daintily tucked beneath them or wrapped back. Some places the grass got so deep Bea could only see their ears pricked up and pivoting above the undulating expanse. There were a few hawks in trees, not riding the nice breeze on what was an unusually warm and sunny day. A few energized antelope rose up to run in frantic circles, as though chased by regret. The Community just kept walking. They were new enough then that they hadn’t understood: These were warnings. Something was about to happen. Had they turned around they would have seen the grasses flatten and reach forward, as though each blade was trying to run for its life. Once they were exposed in the middle of the parched plain, the hail and wind hit them suddenly, as though the weather had been straining behind a door that had just been opened.

They hunkered in place, flung their packs over their heads and clung to one another and to the ground, mimicking the flattened

grass. Spiderwebs glistened in front of their noses, lightly wafting as though in a gentle breeze because these human bodies blocked the worst of the wind.

Around them they heard the pathetic whines of the antelope signaling to one another above the roar, until they were drowned out by the storm. And they heard the crack and crash of some reedy cottonwoods nearby splitting.

The hail was brief, but the wind lingered. The sun had begun its descent. They knew the worst was over when the hawks took flight again, whipping across the sky, their flat wings straining in the gusts. It was a game. They were showing off for a future mate or daring a rival. They flew shakily against the strong wind, then caught it and zipped away. Then they'd stop and hover as though painted there, while on the ground, Bea could barely stand up against the wind.

It was their first big storm. Spooked, they stayed put for so long a Ranger drone eventually arrived to coax them out. They trudged, disoriented and bleary-eyed, scared of putting one foot in front of the other. At their destination, Carl stomped on the clicker in front of the desk Ranger, shattering it, but not before reporting the steps, which he had begrudgingly collected.

This had happened in the first year, when many of them still had shoes, sleeping bags, when to some it still felt like one of those camping trips they'd heard grandparents talk about, something they would soon return home from, something they could shower off. It was their first storm but also their first long walk in the Wilderness. They talked about it in epic terms around the fire for seasons afterward. It was their origin story, how they'd finally come to be a part of this land. It had felt like they'd accomplished something impossible. Like they had discovered a new world. Bea remembered looking at her family, at her blisters, the toenail she'd lost, and feeling proud. In total, the journey had taken almost eight weeks. Some of them still



had watches that told the time and date. Back then they felt awed that they could head in one direction for that long and not run into a dead end. They didn't understand yet just how much land there was to roam.

Now, hunched in the cave, Bea pictured the map in her head. This walk would be much, much longer than that walk. There were three lines of upside-down Ws to cross. Three mountain ranges. A feeling of dread turned her toes and fingers prickly cold. She scratched at the back of her neck, trying to dispel the anxiety.

She saw that most of the Community had come back together. They mingled among the yellow tape. They would want to leave soon. She heard a foot slide against loose rock, and then she heard a grunt and saw the top of Glen's head appear below her, then his face, half smiling, and then his hands and arms scrambling the rocks to reach her.

"Where have you been, stranger?" she asked even though she knew.

"Had a look around, saying goodbye to this place. In case we don't come back."

She smiled. "You know, we can always just head back to Middle Post."

"We can?" Glen sank beside her, slightly perplexed, thinking she was serious.

"Of course! Ranger Bob has a guest room. He invited us to stay there whenever."

"He did?" He scratched his head.

"No." Bea sighed. She was pretending. It was one of the ways she got through a day under the relentless sky. "Not really," she said. She expected that would end her game—Glen shooting her a quizzical look—but surprisingly, he laughed.

"Oh, okay, sure, I get it," he said. "Hey, Ranger Bob! Mrs. Ranger Bob!"

Bea sat up straight. “Hey, do you think we could use your shower?”

“We’d need some towels. Oh, and soap. Oh, and I’d love a shave. Hey, Bob—can I call you Bob?—have you got an extra razor?”

“Hey there, Mrs. Bob, what’s good on the Screen?”

“Oooh, are those pretzels?”

They were giggling, their shoulders shaking together. Glen never fantasized about, or even seemed to miss, the coziness of their old life, of any kind of civilization. She was grateful not to have to be alone with the sour, lonely ache she now felt for it all.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” she said, “maybe we should have gone to the Private Lands instead.” She was trying to keep the joke going, but her voice fell and she could not laugh at the suggestion like she’d meant to. It was a good joke because the Private Lands were a make-believe place as far as Bea was concerned. A fantastical place that people had talked about for as long as she could remember. A place where the living was better, easy and nice, as it had supposedly been in the past. A secret place for the wealthy and powerful, where they could have their own land and do as they wished. The Private Lands were the opposite of the City and had all the freedoms the City could no longer offer, and you either believed in it or you didn’t. It had always seemed to Bea that the number of people who believed was proportional to how bad the City was becoming. One of her aunts believed now, and still sometimes mailed her newspaper clippings about its existence, secret maps of where it could be found. Her mother had always told Bea to toss such things. “You cannot just believe what someone tells you,” her mother said. “Not without a good reason.” Her aunt’s husband had convinced her to believe and now she was dour and anxious. Before that she’d been sweet and fun. Very close with Bea’s mother. “Oh, she was a laugh before,” her mother would sigh.

Glen hooked his arm around her neck and pulled her close. “Now, now,” he murmured. “This will be fun.”