

Chapter One

Nellie is fidgeting, toe bouncing in the hay. The smell of the cows thick in her nostrils, rhythmic squirts of milk zinging into the metal pail with her every squeeze of Lucy's tender udders when pounding footsteps approach. She looks over her shoulder as Beck careens into the open mouth of the barn.

Gasping for breath, red in the face, the older girl throws a hand out and braces herself on the weather-worn wood. She must've run all the way from the edge of the horse pasture. The girls trade chores every morning: cows, horses, or fowl.

Beck swoons, almost keels over, but manages to wheeze out, "Dan is back."

And Nellie feels her heart skip a beat. She lurches to her feet, takes a few steps, and stops only a second to stow the half-full bucket of milk. The two girls each get one foot out of the barn, then they freeze when they see Lizzie coming with the hens' eggs of the morning in a basket hung from her arm.

She blinks in confusion, then her hands lift up to sign the question that her lips silently form: *What's wrong?*

Nellie -the youngest sister- doesn't answer, she just takes off sprinting.

Beck's chest is still heaving. She signs three letters in explanation: *D-A-N*.

Then she lopes off, too. She leaves Lizzie -the oldest living sister- furiously signing at first and then shouting when she realizes nobody is watching. Her voice lacks just a bit of care on consonants; she went deaf at four years old, after a vicious fever. "Chores!"

Nellie runs up the path from the small, wooden house. In the dry, summer morning, her crown prickles with sweat. A strand of red hair gets stuck on her lip. She spits it out as she skids to a stop. Dust stirs.

Dan is riding a contraption that resembles a bicycle, but it grinds and whirs, not unlike the train did, the time that the Marlow girls were allowed to go with their father on the overnight trip to Channing with the season's surplus. The thing looks cobbled together, a white tank, probably plastic, holds an amber liquid and the metal is mostly silver but has a rusted yellow hub over the rear wheel. Dan probably built it; he builds and fixes things.

The slender, tan man is dismounting the little mechanical bike. He removes a black helmet and shakes out shaggy black hair. He spots Nellie, her figure just a little less girlish than he

remembers, her pale complexion still spotted, her ginger hair, and his eyes go round, his mouth presses into a tight, sad smile.

“Nellie, look at you...”

She throws her arms around him, toes lifting off of the ground as he hugs her. For a moment, as they are locked together, both shut their eyes and feel the pounding of each other’s hearts; his is frantic. Hers is the slow, steady throb of someone completely safe. She is smiling as he sets her down. Then she crouches to examine the bike. “This is incredible, did you build this?”

“Uh- rebuilt it, more like, made some adjustments... This is its maiden voyage, actually. Gasoline is hard to come by-.”

“Dan.”

Beck has caught up, she gives him a hug and a kiss on the cheek, even as she is still catching her breath.

“Beck, all grown up.” Beck is seventeen, a brunette. She doesn’t shock Dan’s system the way that Nellie does.

“Not quite...”

Both younger Marlow girls have womanhood hanging over their heads like a sword. They exchange a glance and Dan realizes he has made a mistake. He redirects.

“I brought presents!”

Nellie claps and bounces. The girls crowd around Dan as he rifles through the saddlebag attached to the back of the bike, then he holds his hands behind his back, dangles a pouch over Nellie’s head, lets her snatch it on her second jump, while Beck has chased her own present around him in a circle.

“Chocolate!”

“Is this real silver?”

“Yes, and amethyst. Is purple still your favorite color?”

“Yes, thank you!”

“Thank you, Dan!”

They each hug him again.

“Now, you might need to hide those from your parents. They won’t approve of sweets or any jewelry that isn’t a crucifix.”

“We know.”

“We will.”

Beck lifts her hair up and Nellie secures the pendant around her neck, luckily it hangs low enough, and the hem of her navy-blue dress is high enough that she can tuck its gem away. The whole time they are rattling off more questions.

“What brought you back up here?”

“Are you just passing through?”

“Will you stay the night?”

“I’m heading into Elk Mountain, indefinitely. I’ll stay the night if your father will let me, but only one night.”

“He will, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, the clock needs fixing.”

Nellie elbows Beck. “And to be charitable.”

“Right.” The older girl’s next question almost gets stuck in her throat. “Are you alone?”

It makes a few steps, with Dan pushing his bike, seem like a mile. “I brought a friend, actually. But he’s on a horse, and he’ll camp in the woods, tonight. You might get to meet him, eventually...”

And Beck, the more discerning girl, can tell from his shifting eyes that there is something he is not saying. At least Dan’s friend is a man. At least he isn’t passing through with a wife and new baby; it would be too much to bear with the coming sowing season already looming, meaning that the bride hunt is only months away. She thinks, then, that it’s unfair of her to expect him to stay unmarried. Has it really been five years already since Julia’s death?

Nellie says, “Father’s not here, he went to Elk Mountain this morning. We aren’t expecting him until the afternoon.”

“Mom will be happy to see you.”

“What’s your father doing in town?”

“Trading, and speaking to the council...”

The older girl had answered, and the two of them look at each other, and look down.

Dan understands. He had heard, even in Channing, that the list was going to be posted this week. And if the girls’ father hasn’t left the homestead for a few days, it will be the first time they know who is on the list. “Oh. You’re only- you’re fourteen, you’re still fourteen, right?”

“Yes, until winter.”

“They won’t make you participate. You’re so young. There’s no way.”

He doesn’t sound sure, because nobody can be, but it helps a little. Nellie puts on a smile, she nods graciously.

“You’re right.”

As they reach the house again, Lizzie and the girls’ mother step out. Melinda looks sadly at Dan, the same way that he looked at Nellie. Nonetheless, she is smiling, and steps down off the porch to meet them. She touches his shoulders, looks him over, and then stands on her toes to give him a kiss on each cheek.

“Hello, Dan. Welcome.”

“Hello, Melinda.”

“It’s good to see you. Will you stay the night?”

“Yes, if it’s not too much of a burden...”

“Of course. You girls finish your chores, though. Dan, you can come on inside.”

“Actually, I’d love to help with chores. Good for the soul.”

“Alright. Take it easy on him, girls.”

“We will,” the younger girls chorus.

“Dan, help me with the cows,” Nellie pleads, grabbing his hand and trying to lead him to the barn. “Beck is tending the horses, and you hate horses.”

“I don’t hate horses... I respect and fear them. Let’s go see the cows.”

Beck sulks back off to the horse field. Nellie and Dan go into the barn, and while she finishes milking Lucy and then Peach, he hauls water from the well and fills their trough. When the milking is done, the ladies have drunk their fill, they each lead one of the heifers out to graze in the field. Beck lopes over with three tart, yellow apples from the apple tree, and they sit on the fence, munching.

The pregnant mare, Emma, trots over. Dan almost falls as he scrambles back over the other side of the fence; her big face follows him; each of the girls grabs one of his skinny arms and they do not let him retreat. They laugh hysterically and nearly tumble off of the fence as his face pinches, smiling but stiff as a board as Emma’s huge nostrils breathe and stir up his black hair, she nuzzles his cheek. Emma always liked Dan, probably it’s the sweet cologne he wears. He holds up the rest of his apple and shudders as her huge mouth closes around it, lips tickling his palm and rough tongue snaking out to make sure she gets every morsel.

Nellie gives her a rub on her snout and then she trots away. “What have you been up to, Dan?”

“How is life in the city?” Beck’s eyes are searching, her tone is hopeful. More than any of the other Marlow children, she craves experience, is eager to hear stories of any traveler passing through, always wants to go with their father to Channing but has not been allowed, except for the one time, five years ago with everybody else. Her parents don’t want to encourage the unnatural malcontent.

“Life in the city is good,” Dan reports. “I have a little house, now, just outside Channing. It’s rented for the next few months while I’m going to be away, a nice couple with a new baby... Not much has changed, in five years, if I’m being honest. I’ve been just puttering around, fixing things, like always... I’m sorry I haven’t been back to see you all. It’s quite a ways up the mountain, you know, and it was just too hard. Seeing your father, your mother, and all of you.”

“It’s okay,” Nellie says.

“Yeah... We have to tend the garden, still. Want to help?”

“Of course. What are we picking?”

“Squash and beans and weeds.”

“Squash and beans and weeds. Alright.”

On their knees in the dirt, they lift chicken wire that keeps the crows off of the plants, and go up and down the rows of green beans, filling a bucket around the one, fat, yellow squash already picked. The beans have a kind of texture to them like microscopic barbs, and they’ll stick to cotton, no problem. The girls are on one side of the plants, with Dan across, and when Beck turns to shuffle further up, he reaches his long arm over and hangs one of the beans as gently as he can off of her shoulder.

Nellie covers her mouth to hide her snort. Beck whips around, squinting; she doesn’t miss a thing and knows something is up, but Dan looks up and smiles, a perfect saint. Nellie bows her head and keeps working. Soon they are all focused on the beans again. Nellie and Dan look at each other. He points toward the house.

“What’s that?”

“What?”

With Beck’s back turned again, each of them reaches out and sticks another bean on her. They hold firm even as she whips around again. Her arm twists and she gropes blindly, but she doesn’t reach any of them, and Dan covers expertly.

“Thought I saw a cat, did you get a cat? -Oh, sorry, there was a bumblebee on you. It’s gone, now.”

“...Yes, there’s a barn cat. He’s grey, we call him Samson.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to meet him.”

But as soon as he glances at Nellie, her laughter peels out of her and she flops over into the dirt, cackling and snorting, unladylike. Beck becomes indignant, she hates to be the butt of a joke, but Dan reaches out and pulls one of the beans off of her and his boyish smile is enough to get her chuckling, too. He would never leave anyone out, makes her a valuable part of the joke.

“One, two, three. Here, these can go in your bucket. They’re yours, now.”

“Thank you.”

Nobody noticed Lizzie approach; the deaf girl can be so sneaky, you’d never guess. Her steps are always graceful. She crosses her arms where she stands at the end of the rows.

“Nellie!” she speaks to get the younger girl’s attention, then signs the rest: *You’re rolling in the dirt! Your dress!* And her shrillness is apparent, she has always been able to yell with her hands.

Nellie signs back: *Sorry.*

She dusts off her cream-colored dress.

Lizzie signs: *Hurry up. Lunch is ready.*

They do shuffle through the last of the row. Then Dan carries the larger bucket, and Beck the smaller, and they head up to the house. It’s swelteringly warm inside, and Dan pauses in the doorway, overwhelmed with memories.

Julia, eating at that table, laughing at something he said.

Julia kneading dough for biscuits with flour in her hair.

Julia plucking a dead chicken.

Dan missed the hustle of the city, thought that farm life was a bit sad when he first came to stay with the Marlows, five years ago. He would make trips to all the neighboring farms, and further north up the Appalachian Mountain range than he had ever gone, but the Marlow farm was his home, all of that summer and autumn. He pitied the girls at first, couldn’t help it. They were born on this farm and would have happily died there, if not for the bride hunt they were doomed to once they reached maturity. And even that, they took in stride, afraid but pliable, obedient. Only once he and Julia fell in love did he begin to see the strength in them all; how strong a person must be to honor their religion, their town, their families at the expense of their own personhood, their

own bodies. It should not exist, of course, but to move through life with grace, even as the world is against you, of course all four girls were magnificent to him. Even Nellie, who was only nine years old when they first knew each other, and Beck twelve, and Lizzie was fifteen.

Julia was twenty, and he was twenty-five, then.

Melinda is setting the table with bowls of vegetable soup, carving a loaf of fresh baked bread. A boy, the only one of the Marlow children with her blonde hair, sits beside her, swinging his little legs, and with buttered bread clutched in his pudgy fist. He stares at Dan.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Daniel.” He holds out his hand. They shake.

“I’m Eli. Nice to meet you.”

“We’ve met before, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, except you were this big, the last time I saw you.” Dan holds two hands up, only a few inches apart.

“This big?” Eli mimics him.

“Yeah.”

“Here, Dan.”

“Thank you.” He sits at the table and Beck and Nellie each sit on one side of him.

Lizzie sits across, her shoulders are high and tense, she keeps her eyes down as she sips her soup. When she does look up -she can feel Dan’s eyes on her- she heaves out a sigh and the silence at the table cut only by the clinking of spoons on bowls becomes thick.

Melinda says, “Dan, if you only want to spend time with the girls, relax after your trip, I understand, but that old clock is running fast again, and you were so good with it, last time.”

“Of course. I’ll take a look.”

“We appreciate that. I’m sure I can speak for Daryl, too.”

Mr. Marlow is a man of few words and strong convictions. Physically large but never violent, except, perhaps, in the bride hunt of his youth, where he claimed the hand of the loveliest girl in town. Melinda was the prize of her own bride hunt, just as Julia was, just as all three of the younger girls are now shaping up to be. Dan isn’t exactly afraid of Mr. Marlow, but he is afraid of seeing him again, of feeling the weight of his disappointment. Probably the only thing that ever went

wrong in Daryl Marlow's life was Julia's death, and therefore, by extension, Dan Lightman showing up.

"The soup is nice."

"Thank you."

Lizzie signs a reluctant thank you, too. She reads lips very well and helped make lunch.

Dan sits back and starts to sign with hands that betray his usual stutters, fits and starts; his mind works fast, faster than lips or hands, and is always redirecting, frantic, contained energy. *I've been practicing. I brought you all gifts. Yours is a-* He doesn't know if there is a sign for it, can't think of one, and so he spells it. *S-H-A-W-L*.

Lizzie thanks him again, and her mother smiles, then stands from the table. And only once her mother's back is turned, does Lizzie sign and say, with her mouth forming the words but no breath carrying them out of her throat: *That makes up for killing my sister.*

He sighs, nods, accepting the characterization, although both younger sisters have started to furiously sign in his defense.

Dan didn't kill anybody-

Julia wouldn't want this.

-He's practically our brother.

But all signing stops when their mother returns with a pitcher of fresh milk and glasses. Dan abstains, drinks only water. As soon as they are finished with lunch, he pulls up a footstool and sits in front of the grandfather clock. It's a beautiful, old machine. The wood is polished mahogany, carved with swirls and flowers up each side, and the inner mechanisms, cogs and a pendulum, are all visible through the glass, a splendid display of craftsmanship and horology, or the study of time, as Dan explains.

The girls are done with their chores, and Nellie and Beck both sit nearby and watch as Dan tinkers with the machine. Lizzie watches the girls watching Dan, while their mother and Eli have gone into the tiny house's second bedroom where the children sleep, for schoolwork.

Dan disappears when he works on things. Nothing else matters around him, nothing distracts him. All that exists is the machine that needs fixing, and the tool -Dan- that will fix it.

Lizzie snaps her fingers to get her sisters' attention. She signs: *You two are ridiculous.*

Beck purses her lips, then brandishes her middle finger, and Lizzie gasps, reaching out to swat her hand away and then to slap the side of her head. Beck swats back, and they trade a few blows with weak hands while Nellie giggles.

After an hour of Dan tinkering with the clock using Daryl Marlow's tools, and the two younger girls whispering bets on how long it will take him to find the problem and fix it, their mother comes out of the kids' room.

"Your father is back. Let's go and meet him."

Only when the stampede of feet crash toward the door does Dan look up from the clock, blinking. He realizes what must be happening and pushes himself to his feet. Taking a few deep breaths, he holds his head high and goes to the door.

Daryl Marlow drives a small wagon pulled by the farm's two stallions. Loaded up on it are a bag of flour, a barrel of salt, a few bolts of fabric, a few dozen ears of corn -the Marlow crop of corn failed this year- and also a live goat. Beck and Lizzie go to pet the goat, but Nellie hangs onto her father's arm.

"How was your meeting? Did you talk about me?"

"Not now, Eleanor."

Daryl kisses his wife, and in the same moment that she tells him they have a visitor, he notices Dan lingering on the porch. The younger man steps down, holding out his hand.

"Sir."

"Hello, Daniel."

They shake amicably enough, and then Daryl starts to unload the wagon. The family helps. Dan carries two sacks of corn. Melinda directs him to the cellar, and he goes, knowing the way. With the light from the door only reaching the bottom of the stairs, he looks around. It's much the same as he remembers it, with shelves of dozens of jars of fruit preserves and vegetables, and on the lower ones, sacks of grain and onions.

Julia hated onions. He remembers her picking them out of her dinner, placing them on the side of her plate. It brings more fondness than it does pain, and he smiles in the dark. He can't really let her go, or ever really risk losing her, not with all of his memories, good and bad. Dan leaves the corn where the critters will have trouble getting it, then trudges back up to ground level.

Daryl is unhitching the horses, and Beck and Lizzie are helping rub them down and put them out in the pasture with water. Nellie brings the goat and follows.

“What should we name her?”

“You pick,” her father calls over his shoulder.

“I think... Laurel.”

“Laurel it is.”

“It was my turn to name the next animal,” Beck whines.

“Hush.”

And the father’s word silences the girls. When the animals are all put away, the family troop up to the house, where Dan has begun working on the clock again, he has removed a few cogs, inspects them with a tiny magnifying glass held up to his eye by a leather strap around his head. Nellie cackles when she sees it, but he doesn’t notice, he is wrist deep in the heart of the machine. And giving the gears still connected a tiny shift, he pulls a piece loose.

“Here we are. This is the problem. It’s become warped, over time, and it doesn’t allow for a full return of the pendulum...”

He holds the small, metal disk up and Daryl takes it, examines it in the natural light coming in from open windows on three sides of the main room. In the kitchen, Beck and Nellie stop shucking corn for dinner to come and have a look.

“Really, that little thing?”

“Can you fix it?”

“We can try to straighten it.”

“Yep. Let’s head out to the barn, see what we can do.”

Dan, blinking in shock at being invited to go with, jumps to his feet and hurries after the Marlow family patriarch. The girls smile and go back to shucking corn. Lizzie is up on a chair dusting the tops of the kitchen cabinets. Melinda and Eli are back to school work. A strong breeze comes in through the window, carrying the tiniest bit of relief, it stirs Lizzie’s skirts and reminds the two younger girls that summer is almost over, autumn is approaching.

With corn shucked, they start to snap the stems off of a bowl of green beans.

The front door opens, and their father leads Dan back inside, explaining before he is asked, “Broke it.”

Dan says, “I’m going into town, tomorrow. I can have a replacement forged and bring it by the next day.”

“Kind of you...”

“It’s no trouble.”

“Alright. I’m going to wash up, read from the good book. Let’s have a chicken for supper.”

The two younger girls both stop their snapping of the stems of the green beans. Dan notices but doesn’t understand at first. Then, when Beck nudges Lizzie’s calf and the older girl climbs down, Beck signs to her: *Chicken*.

And the two older girls do three rounds of rock, paper scissors.

First throw is a tie, both girls choose rock.

The next two both go to Beck, who chooses paper, while Lizzie sticks with rock. The oldest girl sighs, rolls up the sleeves of her white dress, and heads outside. When she returns, she holds a chicken with its head cut off, expertly so, with hardly any blood on its white feathers. With both younger sisters staring at the body, probably imagining themselves on the chopping block, the air in the room is almost unbearable. And Dan, although it should not be possible, swears that the smell of blood is thick in his nose, he feels the color drain from his face and remembers Julia’s body the day of the bride hunt, five years ago. She was laid out on the grass with blood staining her white dress between her thighs, and dripping down from her crown into her orange hair where her skull was caved in. Her once laughing eyes were just empty. He rubs his own wrists as he remembers how hideously bruised hers were, black and purple rings on her pale skin, and her fingernails were caked with dirt...

Her life robbed of her; her dignity robbed of her. Julia would never be caught dead, dirty, bloody, disheveled. The image staying with Dan all these years is a testament to the indignity of it. It makes his fists clench, makes his heart race, but the anger goes nowhere. In the end, he just has to take a deep breath, count to five, and let it go.

Nellie notices his distress. “Alright, Dan?”

“Fine. I’m going to get some fresh air.” He snatches a green bean out of their bowl, and as he heads toward the door, he sticks it to Lizzie’s back where she sits at the table, plucking a chicken. Both younger girls are laughing as soon as their eyes meet, and *at least*, Dan thinks, as he steps out into the warm afternoon, *the two of them are feeling better*.