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The Dead Man's Son

A THESIS
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Michael Hallows
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

University of Central Oklahoma

Edmond, OK

NAME: Michael Hallows
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DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Constance Squires
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ABSTRACT:

The Dead Man's Son is a short novel about Abel Saracen, a twenty-something male who attends the funeral of his father whom he has never met. Strange events begin to move the story after Abel inherits a mysterious antique revolver.

The novel draws on many genre elements from the Western to Supernatural fantasy and is set in the Oklahoma panhandle over the course of one day, the day of Abel's absent father's funeral.

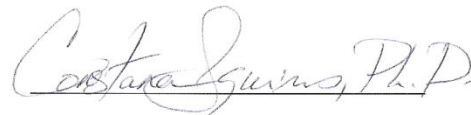
Though the plot moves quickly, the focus of the novel is on character and the father-son dynamic is the strongest element in the story. It is this element that readers will relate to and sympathize with the protagonist even despite his faults

The Dead Man's Son

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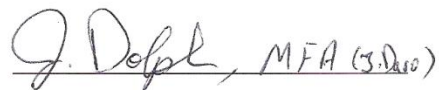


Constance Squires, Ph.D

Chair



Stephen Garrison, Ph.D



James Dolph, M.F.A

PROLOGUE

Look to the west.

The summergrass green and long; wind whistles through it. The prairie land is flat with small slopes like minor waves on the ocean. A man rides hard and fast from the west, into Indian territory, toward the mesa. The black horse hasn't much left to give. It stumbles and falls neighing its final cry to the heavens. The man leaps from his saddle. He hits the ground hard stirring the red dirt. The horse is on its side. Its body heaves with quick breaths until the man puts a bullet through its head. He did not want to waste the bullet; he now has three left. He watches blood pool from the head of the horse.

Another man travels in pursuit of him. The pursuer's horse is strong and determined. This horse is nowhere near its last breaths. A brown mustang of Spanish

descent, it has a noble air about it even though it is no longer wild and free. Its relationship with its rider is not one of master and slave. Instead they are partners working toward a common goal. Their final goal is ahead of them.

The man with the dead horse sees them and he runs toward the mesa and begins climbing. But the cliffs are not steep and though the man hopes against hope his pursuer will not be able to climb the mesa from atop his horse he knows this is not true. He is a small man and his short limbs are not helping him as he climbs. He only wishes to reach the top. From atop the mesa he believes his three bullets will be enough. His plan is solid. Shoot the pursuer as he climbs toward him. The high ground will be to his advantage. But first things first, climb harder and faster. The side of the mesa angles to the ground below. Jagged rocks protrude and the man's knees slam against them as he reaches for grip after grip to retain his balance. His knees bruise from the sharp jabs against the rocks. His breaths are steady; his nerves calm. He has been in desperate situations before though it has been many years. But his memories are absent now. All he thinks of is all he should think of: climbing harder and faster to the top. He is nearly there. There. He is there. He rolls onto the flat surface of the mesa and pants. The sun spies on him from above and it is unmerciful as it burns into his sweating body. His beard itches and he scratches it and he finds it strange that such a minor annoyance such as an itchy beard can still be felt this close to the end. He stands and rips his gun from where it was tucked into the front of his britches and scans the land below. All he sees are the plains and nothing else. Only the dancing grass moves.

His pursuer is not there. He searches the side where he has climbed up and pulls the hammer back on his revolver. But his pursuer is not there. He curses and knows the

pursuer has made for another side of the mesa. The mesa is too large for him to sprint from side to side in search of his pursuer. The small man must wait until he reaches the top and then take his shots. He studies the top of the mesa, barely able to see the far side knowing that his pursuer climbs from there where the land is the least steep and the mustang can ride without breaking its stride. Red dust billows around it into the air and the small man can see the dust rising farther and farther into the sky. He aims his revolver toward the edge of the mesa where he now knows his pursuer comes from. He watches the dust and wonders if the dust will rise and rise until it reaches heaven or if the wind will carry it back to the earth.

He knew this day would come for some time having heard news of his fellow former gang members being executed by a lone rider and yet he was still caught off guard. Still he could have made his stand back in Amarillo rather than run. The chase has taken its toll and he can hardly see straight as his head burns feverishly. But he was never a fighter like the other members of the Devil's Hand gang were. He was only there on the ride with them as their scribbler. There to take account and notes of their outlaw adventures so that he could write them down and keep their legacy. Not to say he did not take part in their collective sin. The small man allowed himself a memory. One that had been a recurring dream for him ever since the day it happened. It was his first kill and his only kill against an unarmed man. The gang had convinced him to put down his pen and pad and replaced his pen with a gun. Told him it was time to be a man not a scribbler. His victim was a peaceable sheriff in a small Wyoming town. Sky blue eyes that seemed to grow bigger as they stared down the barrel of the scribbler's gun. Power the likes of which the small man had never felt. But with the power there was fear. Terror even. He

shook with fear. The dream always ended just before he pulled the trigger but the memory did not. In his memory clear as the day it happened he saw the spray of blood vacating through the back of the sheriff's head. The scribbler's hand was so shaky that a shot which was meant to be right between the man's eyes ended up just below the man's left eye. His sky blue eye.

The pursuer comes over the side of the mesa. The scribbler sees him and takes aim. His hand is not shaky as it had been on his first execution. It is steady and true. But the distance is a concern. His aging eyesight is not what it used to be and his stuffy hot head blurs his eyes even further. He thinks of nothing focusing all his energy on his aim. The pursuer closes quickly. He takes his first shot. Off to the right. He waits.

The pursuer has not even taken his gun out. As if daring the small man to shoot him, he rides directly toward him. The small man takes his second shot. It is even further off; this time to the left. And low. He sees it streak the dirt in the distance. The pursuer stops and leaps down from his mustang. He is fifty feet from the small man. Close enough that the small man can see him somewhat clearly. His head pounds and he blinks to clear the blurriness from his eyes. One more shot and the pursuer is all but giving him an easy target. The pursuer brushes a hand through the mustang's mane, then turns toward the scribbler. His pursuer is a thin man, tall and lanky. He wears a long black duster and a black hat. The brim is low shadowing his eyes. The small man knows his time is now. At any moment his pursuer could decide to draw on him that legendary revolver he had heard much about over the past weeks. He takes his final shot. It grazes the other man's arm. The pursuer flinches from the contact but that is all.

The small man checks the cylinder but already knows he has no bullets left. He drops the revolver to the ground. His shoulders slump. He has accepted his fate. There is something strange and unnatural about it for men spend their entire lives searching for immortality, living in denial; unable to believe their fate will be the same as every man who has come before them. The small man had only seen it once. The sheriff with the sky blue eyes. Now it was almost poetic that his life would end with the same recognition.

The pursuer removes his hat. He is barely a man—maybe seventeen or eighteen—his face hairless and smooth. His eyes hold no mercy. The small man is reminded of the Devil's Hand gang. His blank stare is unnerving.

“Do you know who I am?” the pursuer says. He takes the revolver from its holster. There it is. The small man has wanted to see it. It shines silver like other revolvers but glows bright and he sees that it is as apathetic and unmerciful as the sun above.

“Yes,” the small man says. “I know who you are. Your tale has reached Amarillo. How you have travelled from far west. From Arizona to Utah to Wyoming. You have sought out each and every member of the Devil's Hand gang and killed them. Few of us remain alive. Perhaps I am the last and have not heard the latest news. You seek vengeance but not man's vengeance but God's vengeance. You wield the Almighty's weapon.”

The pursuer cracks a smile. “Are you so self-indulgent to think that God Himself would want you dead? I see now why you were the scribbler of the gang. You have

quite an imagination. You're right. I do seek vengeance. Not for God, but for my father. You murdered him six years ago right in front of my eyes." The pursuer aims his revolver at the scribbler who stares at it. It is too bright and is quickly blinding him but he cannot look away.

"That shooter is no ordinary piece."

"Tell yourself whatever you have to. I am here to kill you on behalf of my pa, Wade Marshall, not the Lord Almighty."

The scribbler sees red spots and nothing else. Red as the surrounding dirt. He is confused. "Wade Marshall?" he says. "You say we murdered Wade Marshall six years ago?"

"That's right. Right in front of my eyes."

The scribbler is confused. He means to say more but there is no time. The glowing revolver fires its bullet. Flames surround the bullet as it screeches toward its victim. The small man can only see a bright flash.

The blast of the revolver echoes up to the heavens. It roars with a loud pop but it is more. It screams words. It screams that this is a tale of Death and life. Of actions and consequences. It screams this is a tale of men and sons of men and of one particular man and perhaps another. It screams that this is the tale of a man. Of Abel Saracen.

ONE

Abel Saracen sits at a table for two in the middle of the café. Music plays overhead; a new female artist with a 60's pop sound. Abel loves the coffee smell but doesn't have a cup of joe in front of him. He assumes he probably appears strange with his gas station purchased Styrofoam cup with a red straw in front of him next to his blueberry scone. The café is half-full of hipsters and local college kids and one man in a cowboy hat—it is Dallas after all—but no one pays Abel any attention.

She enters the front door and locks eyes with Abel right away. He offers a smile. He was flattered when she called because he had assumed she was a one-night stand like so many others. It had been nearly a month since they had slept together. Though he had no interest in a serious relationship he was not opposed to sleeping with the same girl twice. His limit was perhaps three times. After that trouble would abound. He has not prepared well though. There is no way he will be able to take her back to his apartment after coffee because at this moment there is a naked girl asleep where he left her in his bed.

The girl Katherine waves at him and goes to the counter to order something. The barista is a cute blonde with messy-on-purpose hair with a single braid falling into her face. Katherine is looking good as well with skinny jeans and a t-shirt that show off her figure.

She approaches after ordering and Abel stands and hugs her and kisses her on the cheek.

“Hey,” she says. Her smile is weak and Abel is flustered. Not because of the smile but because she doesn’t seem like the same girl he met at the club and bedded. At that time she was lively and spontaneous. Now she wears her thin smile that quickly disappears as they sit and she is serious. He has to rethink his strategy. His plan had been to chat and make her laugh and eventually invite himself to her place or make plans for that night at his apartment after he got rid of the girl who is currently in his bed. But now he has been unnerved and realizes he will not be dictating this coffee date.

He takes a bite of his scone. She pushes her light brown hair out of her face.

“No coffee?” she asks.

“Mountain Dew,” he says and takes a sip of his drink. Ice sloshes around in his 32-ounce cup. Abel loves this sound and it is the major reason he prefers fountain drinks over bottled. “I’ve been meaning to call,” he says still attempting to push the conversation in his direction. “I had a lot of fun the last time.”

She smiles but it fades quickly. She is about to speak when the cute barista calls her name and she goes to the counter to get her drink. When she returns to the table she sits and takes a long sip with her eyes closed as if it is the best drink she’s ever had.

“What are you drinking?” he asks.

“White chocolate cappuccino.”

She takes another sip then says: “I called you because I wanted to talk to you about something.”

She looks around so Abel does too. No one sits near them and no one is looking at them.

“Please don’t freak out,” she says.

Abel freezes bracing for what she will say next.

“I think—no I know—I’m pregnant.”

The two syllables that make up the word *preg-nant* pound against Abel’s head like a headache that only throbs twice. His face flushes but he tries not to let his emotions show.

“Not mine?” he says.

She nods slowly. “You’re the only guy I’ve slept with in six months.”

He lifts his fork with his hand and takes a huge bite out of his scone. He continues to hold the fork and pokes at the scone as he chews. He stares at the plate unable to make eye contact with her. He swallows his food. “How?” he asks. “How is that possible?”

She sighs.

“You said you were on the pill.”

“I was.”

He drops his fork and looks at her face. “Obviously not,” he says.

She appears hurt and shakes her head. “I promise you I was.”

Abel scoffs. He is furious but she doesn't seem to have any interest in further defending herself so he takes a deep breath in order to calm down reminding himself they are in a public place and a freak-out would not look good.

Katherine takes a sip of her drink.

Abel reaches a hand out across the table. She hesitates and then takes his hand and looks at him and smiles lightly. "I'll take you if you want. When do you want to go?"

"Take me?"

"Yeah. To the clinic. To take care of it."

She pulls her hand away from his. "Why would you just assume I'm going to abort it?"

Abel laughs. "Come on Katherine. You told me you were a liberal college girl so I just assumed... You want to keep it?"

"I don't know," she says. "That doesn't matter. I can't believe you would just make an assumption like that. That you would be so bold as to tell me what I'm going to do."

Abel raises his hands. "Okay okay. I'm sorry." He knows she can see right through him but he doesn't care. He is fuming.

"You think this is my fault don't you?" she says.

“I said I didn’t have a condom and you said you were on the pill so yeah I think this might just be your fault.”

“I was on the pill, you jackass.” She is raising her voice and Abel notices the man in the cowboy hat glance in their direction. “How dare you try to pretend you are not in any way responsible for this.”

The cute barista looks over the counter at their table as she dries a mug with a hand towel.

“I’m not pretending that. I already told you I’d help you. Go with you, pay for the abortion, all that.”

“Screw you, Abel!” She practically screams it, drowning out the music and catches the eye of every hipster and college kid in the café. She stands—knocking over her chair in the process—and marches toward the front door without another look at Abel. She leaves her drink on the table. The knocked over chair bounces several times before settling and now Abel feels the eyes of every other patron staring at him. He remains seated and takes another bite of his scone. He glances up at everyone and raises a hand to them apologetically.

The barista comes around the counter and picks up the chair.

“Sorry about that,” he says. She offers him an awkward smile. Then hurries back behind the counter. He stuffs his final few bites in his mouth at once and takes up his Styrofoam cup and leaves with his mouth still full. As soon as he is outside the heat hits him and he feels overwhelmed by what just happened and the food is too much for him to

swallow. He rushes to a nearby trashcan and spits it up. He takes another sip of his drink and then trashes it as well.

Abel looks around wondering if Katherine is there waiting for him but she is gone. She'll come around, he thinks. She'll do the right thing. He tells himself everything will work out and he will be able to return to his normal life without any complications but he doesn't believe it.

As he walks to his apartment his mind dwells on her words. On that two-syllable word: *preg-nant*. The thoughts lead to another thought and Abel thinks of his father for the first time in a long time. He has always been apathetic about his absent father but now wonders if this was how his father thought. No he says to himself. He is nothing like his father. But he is not sure he believes this either. He walks quickly hoping he can escape his thoughts if he moves fast enough.

TWO

It is nearly noon but the girl is still asleep in his bed. Abel stands in the doorway to his bedroom. She is facedown sprawled out. The sheet is pulled down exposing her naked body. Abel stares at her but his mind is far from her. Far from his apartment in fact. He thinks of Katherine. He finds more and more ways to convince himself this is her fault. Why would she contact me? he thinks. She should have just taken care of it as soon as she found out.

Even as he thinks these things and tells himself he is not responsible he knows he is wrong. Deep down Abel knows he should call her and apologize and support her. But he can't do it. He barely knows the girl and he is scared because there is the possibility she will decide to keep the baby and this frightens him.

The girl in his bed rolls over and looks up at him. "Hey there," she says making no attempt to cover herself. She rubs the sleep from her eyes. "You look pale. Are you all right?"

He smiles. "Yeah I'm fine."

"You mind if I take a shower?"

"Not at all." He moves out of the doorway. As she passes him she kisses him fully on the lips. Her morning breath is hot but the kiss helps him escape his mind for a moment. He leans into her just as his phone begins buzzing in his pocket. She breaks their liplock.

“You better get that,” she says and falls out of his embrace and goes to his bathroom to take a shower.

He takes his phone from his pocket and looks down at the number. He doesn't recognize it and is relieved that it is not Katherine and answers the call.

“Hello,” he says.

“Abel Saracen?” the voice at the other end of the phone says. The voice is female.

“That's me,” he says with a bite of anger as he continues to think about Katherine.

There is a pause. “I hope this isn't a bad time?”

“No it's fine.”

“I'm Leslie Conrad,” she says.

The name is not familiar to him and he wonders if it is a neighbor complaining that he made too much noise the night before.

“I'm really sorry about the noise last night,” he says.

“What? No, I'm not calling—I mean—I'm calling because—.”

The girl pauses. He leans against the doorway and rubs his face. Hurry up, he thinks. All he wants to do is climb back into his bed.

“Abel, I'm your sister.”

He freezes. His first thought is that this is a joke. It angers him. He has too much to deal with and no time for his friends' twisted jokes. Then he realizes that he has never told any of his friends about how he has never met his father or anyone from his father's side of the family and knows that there is a very good possibility Leslie Conrad is not lying. He hears the shower turn on. He clears his throat but remains silent for a full minute. Leslie Conrad is still on the line and her patience impresses him.

At last he says "Sorry I'm just trying to—wow. That's something."

"I'm sorry to just blurt it out but I don't really know how to lead into something like that."

"It's all right. So...what's up?"

"Well I should start by saying that I don't want you thinking I've waited twenty-some-odd years to contact you. To be honest, I just found out about you two days ago."

Abel is quiet, speechless.

"My father—your biological father—just told me about you two days ago. I guess he felt like he needed to tell someone. He passed away yesterday."

Abel's face flushes. All this information is too much for him to handle. He sits down on the edge of his bed.

"Sorry for your loss," he says though it comes out more as a question than condolence.

"Thank you."

“He never told anyone else...about me?”

“That’s what he said.” He hears her sigh on the other end of the phone. “I wanted to contact you as soon as I heard. Believe me if I had known sooner I never would have—well, it wouldn’t have been like this the past twenty-some-odd years.”

“Twenty-*four* years. I’m twenty-four.”

“Good to know.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight.”

She is older than Abel. He wonders why a man already raising a daughter would abandon his second child and feels a tinge of jealousy and he is angry at himself for it.

“I know you’re busy so I won’t make this conversation any longer or awkward than it has to be.” She laughs nervously. “I would love it if we could meet in person sometime.” She pauses. Abel offers no answer. She says “You—you could come to the funeral if you want. Its two days from now in the Oklahoma panhandle. I can get you directions if you want.”

Again he has no answer. He knows he should say something but he can’t think of a proper answer. He wishes for his life to return to what it was when he woke up—an easy going uncomplicated life with no serious commitments or intrusions.

“Just think about it,” Leslie Conrad says. “You can call me back if you want to come. If not I’ll understand.”

“All right,” he says. A sudden thought comes to him. “How did you get my number?”

“My father had it,” she says. “I don’t know how he got it.”

Abel considers it.

“One more thing,” Leslie Conrad says. He can tell she is hesitant. “He left you something. He told me to make sure you get it.”

Abel feels nauseous. The idea of his absent father having a conversation about him infuriates him. This is the first time Abel realizes that his opinion of his absent father is not as apathetic as he had always thought.

“Well I guess I’ll wait to hear from you. Goodbye, Abel.”

“Wait,” he says. There is a pause. “What is his name?”

He hears her sigh and tries to imagine it wondering what she looks like. She says “Raymond Lee Marshall. He went by Ray.”

When the girl returns from the bathroom Abel is lying back on the bed staring at his ceiling fan above him. The fan whirls wildly as if it might come unhinged at any moment and has been this way since he first moved into this apartment two years earlier.

“I’m nice and clean,” the girl says and Abel watches her remove the wet towel from her body. He smiles but knows any chance of having sex with her again has passed. There is too much clouding his mind now. He tells her something has come up and

politely asks her to leave. She is understanding and he goes through the motions, reciting as if from a well-used script that he had fun last night and would call her.

One midmorning has changed his life and he wonders what his mother would say. What advice she would give him. He considers calling her but can't bring himself to do it. He is afraid to tell anyone about this as if telling them will make it real. It's already real, he thinks but the phone remains on the nightstand. He wonders about the funeral. If he should go. If going would be the proper way to deal with this situation. He feels a strange connection between the two events of his morning and once again thinks about his father. Had his father recommended his mother get an abortion before leaving for Oklahoma?

He knows only a vague story with no details that his mother told him when he was thirteen. She was just out of high school and working as a cashier at Wal-Mart when Ray Marshall—whose name he had only just learned—walks in and flirts with her. He was on a business trip and they hit it off right away. Two weeks pass in bliss and then she is pregnant. Ray Marshall leaves and Abel's mother gives birth to him and raises him on her own.

It is a simple story. One that has been told many times to many people. And Abel accepted it for the past eleven years and never thought much of it. He had never longed for a father and in fact never liked the guys his mother dated over the years—his mother having given up on dating the past five years or so—but now things are different. There is something about his father's final confession to his daughter and—even more surprising—his decision to leave something to Abel that makes him question his mother's

story. He doesn't think she lied to him but only that there are more details to the story. He finds himself thinking about Ray Marshall—who before this morning that only been a stock character in his mother's brief story. He wrestles with the decision but knows what he will do. He tells himself the funeral is an escape from his situation with Katherine; a chance to clear his mind and for her to do the same. But a part of Abel is curious about his family he has never met and curious about Ray Marshall.

After lying in his bed the rest of the afternoon he finally sits up and flips open his laptop and searches the yellow pages website. He would have to buy a suit. He is going to a funeral for the first time.

THREE

The day before the funeral Abel leaves Dallas and drives north through Oklahoma. He passes through Oklahoma City and then heads northwest. He stops in Guymon for the evening.

He hasn't told anyone about the funeral though the only people he considered telling were his mother and grandparents. But Abel has not been close to his family since moving out of his mother's house his freshman year of college and only sees his grandparents on holidays despite the fact that they live in Arlington twenty minutes from Abel's apartment. There are times when he thinks about this and wonders what has happened. Growing up he spent many summers staying with his grandparents and talked to them regularly on the phone. His grandmother still calls him once a week but their conversations are relatively short. It isn't just his grandparents though. Abel is aware that he has become distant from everyone including his mother whom he had been very close to during his adolescence. An only child with a single mother it was hard not to grow close. But he felt he has changed when he went to college and began dating around never settling on a steady girlfriend. He tried having a steady girlfriend in high school and it ended horribly with the girl pushing him away until at last he had to break up with her. He wondered why girls did this. Why they didn't just break up with the guy when they lost interest. He felt his mother wouldn't approve of his lifestyle choices if she knew. He thinks of Katherine and the look his mother would give him if he told her he got a girl he hardly knew pregnant. She'll do the right thing, he thinks and then attempts to clear his mind of Katherine as he drives.

Guymon is quiet by the time Abel reaches it and it is a dark clouded evening. Not a big city but compared to the surrounding plains it looks like a booming metropolis. He finds a Motel 6—though the T, E, and L are busted out of the sign so it says MO 6. He gets a small room with a single full-size bed. The room smells like cigarette smoke even though it is supposed to be nonsmoking. It doesn't bother him. Though he hates cigarettes he likes the smell of them. The same with coffee. The strong smells of both cause him to stop and take it in for a moment but both tastes are unappealing. He lays out his suit on the bed and smooths it out with his hand.

He called Leslie Conrad back the evening before and she gave him directions to the church and asked him to get there early so they could meet. From what she said the funeral wasn't until the afternoon after lunch in the fellowship hall. She also told Abel that she hadn't told anyone about him yet and that perhaps they should keep his identity a secret until after the funeral. It made sense but Abel had reservations about it and felt angry. He convinced himself he should not be angry and agreed.

His drive to Guymon had been very long and he knew going through the panhandle in the morning would seem even longer. He did his best to keep from thinking too much, instead singing along with the radio most of the trip avoiding the silent moments when his mind would slip into thoughts about the funeral, his father, and Katherine. He hadn't talked to her since she stormed out of the café. Of course he hadn't tried to call and apologize either. During the silent moments on the drive he justified his reasons: he barely knew her and it was ridiculous for Katherine to expect a stranger to

raise a child with her especially when they lived in a time when a mistake like this could easily be dealt with it; she had no reason to be angry with him for pointing out the easiest and most logical solution to their problem.

These were the thoughts he wanted to avoid while on his trip to Ray Marshall's funeral. He lies on his bed flipping through the channels on the television and ends up watching a late night show until he dozes off with the TV still on.

The next morning, Abel leaves early before the sun is up. He stands in front of the mirror in his motel room knotting his tie and thinking of years before when his Grandpa Saracen showed him how to knot a tie properly. It was his high school graduation and his mother had insisted he rent a suit for the occasion. Instead Grandpa Saracen loaned him one—they were about the same build—and Abel stood in front of a mirror in a coffee brown suit looking like an old man. Grandpa Saracen thought it looked great on him and made him look grownup and his mother thought he looked cute both of which responses only made Abel more insecure. He grappled with the tie in front of the mirror until Grandpa Saracen came up and turned him toward him. *Let me see ya* he said. At first he began knotting the tie himself his hands moving with the grace of a pianist. He pulled the knot snugly against Abel's neck and Abel looked at it in the mirror impressed. *Now you try* Grandpa Saracen said and Abel pulled the tie loose straightened the fabric and followed his grandfather's instructions. After several tries he had it down.

Abel leaves the motel and drives west toward the edge of the panhandle. The town is Kenton, Oklahoma though Leslie Conrad told him the tiny Baptist church is not in town and in fact nowhere near the town of Kenton. He must rely on her directions to find it—another reason he has left so early.

He is nervous and already sweating beneath his suit. Not long after he begins his drive he steers with his knee while he removes his suit jacket realizing how foolish it had been to wear it while he drove in the first place. Even before sunup it is humid. The summer heat is not scorching yet but still stuffy. He stops once and urinates on the side of the highway. As soon as he steps out of his car he notices one major difference from when he was in Guymon. There are no crickets chirping like there had been when he left Guymon. It is eerily silent out here. He shivers as he stares out into an empty field of short grass as he urinates.

The sun rises in his rearview mirror as he continues his drive. His nerves have not let up and he decides to use his usual strategy of turning up the radio to distract himself from his thoughts. It doesn't work.

He has turned off the main highway a while ago and this smaller highway is two lanes with no shoulder. Grass and dirt creep over the cracked edges of the asphalt road. The yellow line dividing his lane from the other is faded.

Abel holds a crinkled yellow sheet of legal pad paper against the steering wheel and glances at it periodically. He squints as he tries to make out his scrawled handwriting.

He wonders who could possibly live way out here. Perhaps ranchers but Abel thinks even ranchers could find somewhere a little less remote. It reminds him of West Texas but not as flat. Tumbleweed floats across the highway on several occasions. There are very few trees—only scattered juniper trees and some cacti.

Eventually he is travelling on a gravel road with potholes and after several miles turns onto a dirt road. His car rattles and Abel turns his radio off because it is nothing but static and he listens to the rumbling of tires over dirt and rock.

The church is ahead of him over a hill. Black Mesa Baptist Church though Abel cannot see the historical Mesa anywhere in sight. Just more flat prairieland. The church is small and made of brick with a tin-roofed building behind it that he assumes is the fellowship hall. His heart races. He takes a deep breath.

He pulls into the gravel parking lot. There are only two vehicles in the lot: a pickup truck and an SUV. He checks his watch. Eight a.m. And parks between the two vehicles. The car faces away from the church and toward a wheat field. There is a tree line in the distance—a bushel of trees—he has not seen such a thing since reaching the panhandle. He looks in his rearview mirror and adjusts his tie and then exits his car and puts on his suit jacket. A woman walks toward him from the church. She appears to be in her late twenties—tall and skinny in a black skirt. Her long blonde hair is pulled back into a single thick braid. As she approaches he can't help but stare at her and though she doesn't look much like him, Abel knows this is his sister because when he looks in her eyes he sees his own staring back at him. Bright green eyes.

She smiles at him and he offers his own courteous smile. She nears and for a moment it looks like she might hug him before pulling back awkwardly and shaking his hand.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Abel,” Leslie says.

“You too.” And he means it. Immediately a sense of relief and inevitability hits him. As if all of a sudden meeting Leslie Conrad seems like it has always been his life goal. But Abel pushes back these emotions. He must keep a distance between himself and this situation because he doesn’t know if he will ever see Leslie—or any of the other family members he might meet—again after he leaves the funeral. They both stare at each other awkwardly.

“Sorry,” Leslie says shaking her head, “you—you look just like him.”

He pictures himself in his mind: light brown shaggy hair, medium build, average height. For the first time he wonders what Ray Marshall looks like. A desire to see the man fills him. “Will that be a problem?” he asks.

“I don’t think so. People around here believe in absolute truths. They know of my father as a certain man and would never consider something that might change that idea of him. Especially not at his funeral.”

Abel wonders what the people think of Ray Marshall. Apparently not as an irresponsible deadbeat dad. He considers asking but decides not to. He notices the ring on her finger.

“So you’re married?”

“Yep. Got two little ones too. They’ll be coming with my husband later. There’s no one here but us and the preacher but some of the old church ladies should be here soon. I’ll probably have to leave you on your own then while we get things ready for the lunch.”

“That’s fine.”

“I guess now’s as good a time as any.” She reaches toward the SUV and opens the backseat door. She pulls out a worn Justin’s Boots shoebox. The box is solid red but the color is wearing off at the corners. “This is what he left you.”

“Boots?”

Leslie offers a weak smile. She appears nervous. “Just open it up. I haven’t looked inside but I think I know what it is.”

She holds it out. For a long moment Abel stares at the box. He is nervous, unsure what to expect Ray Marshall—a father he’s never met—would leave him. At last he takes the shoebox. The weight is uneven, unbalanced. He removes the lid.

Inside wrapped in newspaper is the outline of a gun. Abel’s heart skips a beat. He glances at Leslie. She visibly sighs. A good or bad sigh? He cannot tell; her face is straight.

“A gun?” Abel says, confused. He reaches a hand toward it but then stops and looks around.

“Don’t worry,” Leslie says, “you can take it out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah everyone has a gun around here.”

Abel unwraps the newspaper and sees a revolver—a six-shooter like something right off the hip of an old western gunslinger. When he puts his hand around the hilt and lifts the revolver from the box, a faint sad feeling comes over him but Abel barely feels it and it disappears so quickly he thinks it was never there in the first place. He stares at the revolver confounded by what the implications might be of an inheritance such as this.

“Is this what you thought it was?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Why?” It is the only question he can think of.

“This gun is a kind of family heirloom, something my grandpa had given my father. Something his dad had given him and so on.”

“Just some kind of father-son thing?”

“It had always been given from a father to his son. Never a daughter or nephew or stepson or anything that I know of.”

Abel looks at the revolver a while longer. There is something funny about the revolver. Its barrel is bent and crooked and the hammer is halfcocked. “What’s that about?” he asks.

“It’s been that way ever since I’ve seen it. The trigger doesn’t move and neither does the hammer. My dad always said there was a bullet stuck in there and that the gun had rusted so much that it could never be fired again. That’s the legend anyway.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

She shrugs.

He replaces the revolver into the shoebox and closes the lid, pretending to show little interest in the gift. “Thanks,” he says, “but I can’t keep a gun. I don’t have a gun license.”

“It’s more of an antique, hardly a gun anymore.”

“I don’t believe in guns.”

She smirks but nods. “All right, well keep it in your car until after the funeral and if you still don’t want it I can take it back then.”

Abel agrees and tucks the shoebox under his driver’s side seat. He hesitates as he lifts his fingers away from the box brushing the cardboard against his fingertips. He wonders if he should be moved by this sentiment—his father leaving him something his father had left him—but it feels more like a copout to Abel. He expected a letter or note—some sort of apology. A letter may have satisfied him though he cannot be sure. His attempt at detaching any thoughts or emotions from this situation has added some level of ambiguity to his expectations.

Leslie touches his elbow lightly. “Are you ready?” she says.

Abel takes a deep breath and peers at the modest church. He knows Ray Marshall's body is in that church and again he wonders what the man looks like.

The sun shines down from the east as it continues his slow ascent into the sky and it gives the church an optimistic sheen. But it is a façade. Abel knows there is nothing optimistic inside the tiny church. "Let's go," he says and she leads him forward.

FOUR

As he steps through the double glass doors of the front entrance of the church Abel feels a shift from one world to another. A transition from his reality to some unreality. He steps out of his life. This is what he feels anyway.

The church smells freshly vacuumed. The doors open into a small dimly lit hallway that ends in a T. It is dark to the left and glows from the right. Leslie leads the way and Abel follows looking at his sister intently—her long braid perfectly linked and laying between her shoulder blades. Abel is still shocked that they share the same blood. He feels like he has stepped into someone else’s life, another world entirely.

They reach the end of the hall and Leslie goes to the right. Abel glances left but it is pitch black. He follows through the opening on the right to the sanctuary of the church. There are a dozen pews on each side of the center aisle evenly spaced behind each other. At the end of the aisle is the casket. He can see it clearly. Mahogany wood with a gleam from the light above it. It is closed.

An older man comes up the aisle toward them. He is short and stocky and wears a black suit with a white button up under his jacket not unlike Abel’s own suit. He has an unlit cigarette in his mouth but removes it and tucks it behind his ear when he sees Abel. He walks with a limp and moves slowly, the slow walk that is reserved for old men. Abel has seen it before. His grandfather walks the same way.

“Abel, this is Pastor Walt,” Leslie says. “Pastor Walt this is my friend from college, Abel Saracen.” Abel feels bad that they are lying to a preacher. Leslie does so smoothly. Convincingly. A thought crosses Abel’s mind. He wonders if Leslie has any

intentions of ever telling her family about him but he dismisses this thought. If she had wanted him kept secret, why would she invite him to the funeral?

Abel shakes hands with the preacher. The old man has a firm grip and squeezes just as Abel is letting go. “Nice to meet ya, Abel,” he says a gravelly voice. Abel studies the lines in his face, his wrinkles all seeming to go the same horizontal direction.

“You too,” Abel says.

“You’re a good friend for coming all this way for a funeral.”

Abel nods.

“You’re a Texan right?”

Abel nods again.

The preacher gives a wheezy laugh. “I can always tell when someone is from Texas. It’s harder to distinguish Kansanians and New Mexicans from Oklahomans, but not Texans.”

“Impressive,” Abel says. Leslie sits down in a nearby pew to the right and Pastor Walt leans against the edge of the pew to the left leaving Abel as the only one standing up straight. He feels awkward. On display. He can’t decide whether to cross his arms or leave them at his side. He stuffs his hands into his pockets.

“Did you ever meet Ray?” Pastor Walt says.

Abel glances at Leslie and then answers “Nope.” He pauses. “Leslie used to talk about him in college though.”

“He was a good man,” he says his soft blue eyes locked on Leslie. She nods. “Well I’m going out for a smoke before people start showing up.” The preacher brings himself upright with a grunt and pats Abel on the shoulder as he limps past. “Good meeting ya.”

“You too.”

Abel hears the double glass doors open and close as the preacher exits. He looks again down the aisle at the casket. There a large green wreath next to the casket with flowers poking through but no picture of Ray Marshall. Behind the casket is a stage with a pulpit in the middle and further behind that a row of seats—Abel assumes is for the choir—and at the far end of the sanctuary is the baptismal with a painting of Jesus standing in a lake with His long hair wet as He stares upward toward the heavens. A glowing light is shining down on Him.

“Pastor Walt is a good guy,” Leslie says. “He’s been pastor here for something like fifty years.”

“It’s hard to imagine anyone staying in one place for that long these days.”

“That’s the Oklahoma panhandle for you,” she says. “There aren’t many people here but those who are here are loyal.” Pride enhances her voice.

“Do you still live here?” Abel asks.

She shakes her head. “No I moved to Amarillo after college. This land is almost as hard on young people as it is on strangers.”

Leslie stands from her seat. “I need to go over to the fellowship hall and set up some tables with Pastor Walt. You can come if you want.”

“If it’s all right, I’d like to stay here for a minute.”

Leslie looks down the aisle and nods. She walks away and out of sight and Abel listens as the glass doors once again open and close. He sees the sunlight from outside shining on the wall at the end of the hallway. The hallway on the other side of the main entrance is still pitch black like an unlit tunnel.

He turns back toward the center aisle ahead of him and walks down toward the front of the sanctuary as if heading to the altar to pray at the end of a church service.

It reminds Abel of going to church with his mother when he was a preteen. That was the last time he walked down the aisle and accepted Jesus as his lord and savior which was followed the next Sunday by the obligatory baptismal as a member of a Baptist church. Abel had been very religious in the years following all through high school where he helped lead a bible study. But as he grew older and moved out of his mother’s house he stopped attending church. Even so he never felt like he stopped believing in God but just had a more shoulder-shrug approach to religion.

He stares at the casket as he approaches and his heartbeat pounds repeatedly like a fast-paced techno song. As he stands over the casket he runs the palm of his hand over the top. The smooth mahogany wood is perfectly polished. He imagines the face he will see if he opens the casket. He imagines the face of Ray Marshall mirroring his own as if he is staring at himself years later at his own funeral.

Before his imagination can completely take over his rational thought he reaches down and lifts the top half of the lid of the casket. He jumps back startled and the lid slams down hard. The sound echoes through the sanctuary like an explosion. He pulls it up once more to make sure he is not crazy. Empty.

The casket is empty.

The still moment lingers as the crashing sound of the closing lid still reverberates in his ear. He had not expected an empty casket but after the frozen moment passes he wonders why he freaked out. No one told him Ray Marshall would be in the casket and it also explains why the casket is closed. Perhaps he was cremated. This thought bothers Abel. He realizes just how much he wanted to see Ray Marshall's body. He decides to mention it to Leslie and make sure they know—although the absurd idea that someone has stolen Ray Marshall's body from the casket makes him think he would be foolish to even bring it up to her.

He exits through the glass doors. The air outside the church smells like cigarette smoke. He walks along the paved walkway leading from the church to the fellowship hall behind it. Halfway up the path he glances at his car in the gravel parking lot and then looks out toward the field beyond the lot and the treeline beyond that. He spots some movement and focuses his eyes and gazes at the spot. The blur of movement stops and he sees a figure in the field. His eye sight is far from perfect—though he refuses to wear contacts or glasses—and has trouble seeing the figure beyond the blurry outline of a feminine body. He chances a glance at the fellowship hall and then quickly looks back.

The figure remains standing still. It seems to be looking his direction and then an arm waves in the air. Abel is frightened by the acknowledgement of the person—for he is sure it is a person now—but can't be sure just why. It is most likely a local girl whose family owns the land next to the church. Why she is in the middle of the field he can't be sure but living so far out in the country what else is there to do? The fact she is waving should not frighten him either; good country people are very friendly no matter what state you live in. But the fear is there causing his heart to race.

He realizes he is sweating and glances one more time at the fellowship hall and then waves back reluctantly. The person waves him over. He admits this is unusual. Even a friendly neighbor would not normally wave over a stranger. The funeral, he thinks. Perhaps she wants to know whose funeral it is.

He leaves the walkway and walks through the short grass past the gravel lot into the field. A wind has picked up and blows back at his suit jacket. His tie waves backward over his shoulder. The wheat grass pricks his legs through the fabric of his pants.

As he nears the person she turns away from him. She wears a purple summer dress with flowers of assorted colors printed on it. He notices her curvy figure and tanned skin. Her light brown hair blows behind her against the wind. He wonders why she is walking away from him when she was the one who called him over.

“Hey,” he says. She begins jogging. Abel runs toward her now. Suddenly he is agitated that she is running from him. The wheat grass annoys him as it continues to prick against his legs. “Hey, stop,” he says.

She does but still stands with her back to him. As he approaches and she comes clearer in his view there is a specific familiarity to her attractiveness. Just as he reaches her he knows who she is and the fear he had felt earlier returns; this time making him lightheaded. He touches her bare shoulder, feels the strap of her dress between his middle and ring fingers. Her skin is red hot and burns his hand. Quickly he takes it away and holds his hand against his shirt. She turns toward him and she is who he thought she was though he tells himself it is not possible.

Katherine looks up at him.

FIVE

“Katherine,” Abel says softly. The name brings him right back to the café. This is her. She looks exactly as she did then except her face is softer not as worried. “What are you doing here?” Abel asks.

She gazes past him toward the church and then says “Come with me, Abel.” The sound of her voice seals it for him. This is not a lookalike. Nor is it her doppelganger for she knows his name. He insists that this cannot be real. He has fallen and busted his head. But it all feels real. Nothing like a dream. He is still in control of his body; all of his senses are intact.

He looks back at the church. Even if he is really lying back there somewhere passed out he has made his decision to follow her. “Where are we going?” he asks.

“It would be hard to explain,” she says. “It’ll be easier if we go.”

Before he can ask more questions she begins walking away toward the tree line. “Wait,” he shouts and follows her.

When he first saw the woods from the church parking lot he thought the bundle of trees seemed out of place the bundle compared to the barren prairieland of the panhandle and can’t help but think he is headed into some magical world. He doesn’t consider himself the most imaginative person but can still remember the books from his childhood: the magical worlds of Oz and Narnia. Has he ventured into such strange magic? Sure he has, he tells himself as he walks along behind Katherine staring at her backside, still turned on by her even in such unusual circumstances.

She walks at a brisk pace that Abel is not used to. When he is at last near enough to her he reaches out to grab her arm and hopefully slow her down but remembers her burning skin—his hands continue to sting—and pulls back. Once they reach the tree line she weaves among the large trees going in and out of Abel's sight as she disappears behind the round trunks before reappearing. He wonders why she doesn't walk a straight line. He notices the bounce in her step and she seems to be playing in the trees.

“Don't you love it?” she says.

“What?”

“The forest.”

“I'd hardly call this a forest.”

“But it is beautiful isn't it?”

He considers it. The trees are much bigger than he had thought from a distance. They rise high above and long branches with thick green leaves look like they fuse together from tree to tree and hide the sun's view. It is an awesome sight, he thinks and the shade is nice though it is still humid.

“Am I dreaming?” Abel says still looking upward at the top of the trees.

Katherine provides no answer. He shifts his gaze back in front of him. She is out of sight. He expects her to walk out from behind one of the trees but she doesn't.

“Katherine?” he says. It is quiet not even the chirp of birds. He keeps walking looking around the trees.

“I'm seeing things,” he says out loud. “I've got to get my head checked.”

There is a clearing ahead and Abel walks toward it. As he nears there is a sharp chill in the air and the humidity disappears suddenly. The sweat on his skin is freezing now but he continues to walk toward the clearing. Through the trees a small group of people are gathered together. Abel stops and hides behind one of the trees. The people have their heads bowed and they surround a casket. His first thought is that this is Ray Marshall's gravesite and he has missed the funeral service but he hasn't been walking that long and Leslie Conrad is not among these people. Abel can see his breath as he exhales. Shivering. He looks up. Snow is falling on his face. The ground is also covered in snow. His black dress shoes crunch against the soft snow. He hopes the noise doesn't draw attention to his hiding spot.

A handful of men stand around the casket holding cowboy hats in their hands. There is also a preacher speaking and a woman stands with her arms over a small boy. It takes Abel a minute to realize that these people are not dressed very modern. He wonders if maybe they are Amish. He remains hidden watching the service. His eyes are drawn to the boy who is the only child there. The mother looks in Abel's direction and he quickly ducks behind the tree.

"It's all right." Katherine's voice. It comes from behind him and he turns quickly and is startled by how closely she stands behind him. "They can't see you," she says. "You don't have to hide."

"Where did you go?"

"I'm sorry to worry you."

"Why's it so cold?"

“It’s the middle of winter.”

Katherine walks out into the clearing and sure enough no one from the gravesite looks at her. Reluctantly Abel steps out as well. He holds his arms tight across his chest. His face is numb but he can tell his nose is running.

They walk right up next to the mother and boy and stand as if attending the funeral themselves. Again Abel is surprised by their invisibility and frightened. The preacher speaks of the dead man in the casket who is the father to the small boy. The boy stares deadly straight ahead while the mother’s eyes wander frantically back and forth as if she searches for an answer she cannot see. At one point she looks directly at Abel and for a second he wonders if she can see him but she says nothing and the recognition he thought he had seen in her eyes is false.

“It all seems so real,” he says.

“It is real,” Katherine says. “You are seeing a funeral from a past time but that doesn’t mean this is a dream or an illusion.”

“So what? We’re time travelers.”

“Just watch.”

He is not bothered that Katherine doesn’t answer his questions. What answers could she provide that would make sense to him? There are none.

His curiosity keeps him from running away from this unreal situation despite the strong urges and fear he feels. As the preacher finishes his sermon he says the Lord’s Prayer.

“So what time are we in?”

“The late eighteen hundreds during a particularly harsh winter in Oklahoma territory.”

“Why?”

“Just wait.”

Every man says *Amen* aloud and then stands in line like soldiers and offer their condolences to the woman one at a time. They pat the boy on the head or ruffle his hair but he continues to be preoccupied, not speaking or even acknowledging the men who stand over him. After several minutes a man on a horse comes out of the trees from the opposite side of the clearing. He is young and dressed in a black duster. The brown horse strides with confidence across the clearing. The line of men has finished their condolences and are scattered around the grave again. They turn toward the young rider and nod but continue to stare at him skeptically as he passes. The rider tips his black hat to them but doesn't seem interested in these men. He rides straight to the boy and his mother and dismounts. Abel stands on the other side of his horse, a beautiful horse which holds its head high as if it knows how elegant of a creature it is. Abel reaches his hand out and brushes its mane; the thick hair is real. It can't be, he thinks. The horse whinnies and Abel jumps back alarmed.

“Did it feel that?” he asks.

Katherine shrugs.

“You don't know?”

“Not really.” She points. “But look.”

He looks to where she points. The young rider hugs the mother.

“It’s been a long time,” she says.

“Too long,” he says. He talks in a deep voice but Abel can tell it is forced, layering over the voice of a teenager. He removes his hat—revealing just how young he is—and kneels down in front of the boy.

“Hello there, Mister Lee Marshall,” he says. “I’m your uncle. You’re ma’s brother.”

“My name’s not Marshall,” the boy says. “It’s Robertson.”

“Is that right? Taking your pa’s name is all right but trust me, boy, you’re a Marshall.”

The boy looks up at him.

Abel has made the connection immediately upon hearing the name. Marshall. He knows this is Ray Marshall’s ancestry and suspects the boy grows up and goes by his mother’s maiden name. Before he can think any more about it the rider stands and steps around his horse and is nose to nose with Abel who holds his breath. The rider pauses and looks directly into his eyes. His eyes are bright green. Abel’s face flushes and he feels uneasy to have someone so close to him and peering directly at him yet unable to see him. He feels the rider’s hot breath in his face. The rider looks away and reaches toward his saddle bag and takes a bundle of thick cloth. Something is wrapped within. He takes the object to the boy and holds it out toward him.

“What’s this?” the mother says stepping between her son and his uncle.

“Don’t worry sister,” the rider says. “It don’t work no more.”

Abel knows what he holds. He recalls the faint sad feeling he felt when he first held the item himself and shudders. The rider unwraps the cloth and takes the revolver in his hand.

The rider says “The hammer’s stuck halfcocked and ain’t going nowhere. Believe me I’ve tried.”

“You expect me to give my little boy that killing machine before his pa is even in the dirt.”

Men begin to lower the coffin into the hole as other men watch the exchange between the rider and the mother from a distance but Abel is only vaguely aware of what’s happening around him. His gaze is drawn to the revolver. It is the same revolver only shinier with no rust.

“No shooter can kill a man on its own,” the rider says. “This is hardly more than a trophy anymore.”

The mother stares at the revolver silently.

“You know what this is, sister. He has to take it. I have no son of mine own.”

The rider has a desperate look in his eye. They study each other for a long moment before the mother moves aside and he kneels down and hands the revolver to the

silent boy who then stares wide-eyed. His hand drops slightly under the weight of the weapon. Snow continues to fall from the sky, heavier now.

“I have to go,” the rider says and stands. He looks over his shoulder at the men of the funeral. “I don’t belong here.”

Abel realizes the men have a menacing and somewhat judgmental look to their glares. Abel backs away from the majestic horse.

“What is all this?” Abel says expecting Katherine to answer him. No answer. He turns and Katherine is gone. The boy continues to stare at the revolver and rubs a finger along the barrel. The rider mounts his horse and returns his black hat to his head wearing it loosely, casually atop his head. He trots back through the trees from the way he came. Abel wonders where the rider is going. He also wonders why he is getting so many glares from the men as well as many other questions. But his guide—Katherine—has disappeared again. He makes a rash decision. To follow the rider on the horse. He runs across the clearing and into the trees. He weaves past trees like Katherine had done when they had first entered the woods. It seems like a long time ago but he has lost track of time because of the sudden dramatic shift in seasons. Confusion fills his mind as he searches for the brown horse among the white snow-covered trees. He looks down for hoof prints in the snow and finds them just ahead of him and then sees the horse cantering up ahead among the wide trees.

The snow is deep and Abel struggles to keep up his pace and pushes his hands against the trees to retain his balance. But soon he loses sight of the rider who even at the slow pace of the horse is moving much quicker than Abel. He continues following the

hoof prints though until suddenly the snow begins melting away taking the tracks with it. He is overwhelmed but doesn't turn around. Soon the snow is completely gone and the ground and trees are dry. There is no sign of winter. The sun returns to its bright destruction though the shade still shields Abel and the humidity has also returned. It is summer again.

The woods seem endless, which is impossible. This morning Abel saw only a small cluster of trees from the church parking lot. And yet they go on and on. After what seems like hours he leans against a tree and rests. His legs burn. He is out of shape, not having exercised since his high school days of playing basketball, only breaking a sweat during strenuous nights of sex with an excited lady.

He takes several deep breaths keeping his mind clear. Thoughts of worry and panic creep around the edges of his mind. He wonders for a moment if Leslie is worried about his whereabouts and if he has missed the funeral though he has no true sense of what time it is. His watch stopped as soon as he went back in time. Back in time. Abel laughs at the idea.

He hears something and stops laughing. Running water. He cannot tell from where it comes but guesses. The sound seems to get louder as he walks but he can't be sure. He continues in the same direction and now it is definitely getting louder. Then he sees it. A creek. He comes out of the trees. The sun spots him right away and bears down on him like a kid with a magnifying glass on ants.

The creek runs like miniature rapids over crooked rocks. The water is crystal clear. Katherine stands in the middle of the creek some distance to his right. She wears

the same summer dress and the water is at her knees. Her hair shines in the light waving in the wind. She is beautiful.

Abel is reminded of the night he met her at a local bar in Downtown Dallas. A smiling brunette with great rhythm dancing with her friends to a pop song. Confidently Abel stepped between her friends and danced with her. He isn't a great dancer but has developed a few moves because he knew he needed to be able to hold his own if he wanted to pick up girls at the club. She bought into it. Laughing and dancing with this complete stranger. She was just as confident as him, Abel could tell.

He imagines Katherine as the dancing girl from the bar as he rushes toward her. She stands still like a statue tilted downward with her hand in the water. Abel calls her name from the bank of the creek but she doesn't answer him. She continues to seem distant, much different than the Katherine he had first met and even different than the worried, angry, and pregnant Katherine from the café.

He hesitates and takes off his shoes and socks and rolls up his pant legs. Then steps into the running water. It is ice cold but not entirely unwelcomed because of how hot it is. He sashes through the water until he reaches Katherine.

"It's so hot out here, Abel," she says.

"It's cool in the water," he says.

She looks at him and smiles and again the image reminds him of the way she smiled while dancing across from him.

"Déjà vu," he says.

“No,” she says. “This is all new.” She puts her wet hand around his back. He can feel the heat through his shirt and jacket. Like a hot iron. His hand stings—his burn from touching her skin—and he dips it into the cool water and wonders how severe the burn might be. He takes it out of the water and looks at it. It doesn’t appear too horrible. Katherine lifts his hand with the tips of her fingers. Her hot fingertips are a lesser heat than where he touched her on the shoulder. She lifts his hand to her mouth and blows on the wound. Abel smiles at her.

“I don’t know what this is,” he says. “It-It can’t be real.”

“This is real,” she says. “All of it is real.”

Slowly she lifts his hand and brushes it along her cheek. It burns him. He flinches but doesn’t break his hand away. Instead he finishes his stroke. He leans in and kisses her on the lips and she returns the kiss. Unlike the rest of her body her lips are cool. He pulls back.

“You’re not Katherine, are you?” He is surprised by the thought. He had been convinced it was her this entire time but he knows the real Katherine would never embrace him like this. Not after the way he treated her at the café.

She smiles. “No I’m not.”

“Who are you?” Abel asks. “Why do you look like her?”

“I needed to appear familiar to you if you were going to let me help you.”

Abel’s eyes widen. “Help me do what?”

“You need to go back to the funeral and get the revolver.”

“This is crazy.” And he means it. The more he remains in this surreal place the more absurd and frustrating it becomes and frighteningly the more comfortable he gets.

“Just go back and get the revolver.”

“And then bring it back here?”

“No not here. Not the forest. You’ll know where to take it.”

Abel feels his face reddening. “You expect me to do this and you haven’t told me anything.”

“Call it a leap of faith.” She smiles.

He shakes his head. “You look just like her.”

“Time to go,” she says.

“How do I get back to the church?”

“That way.” She points toward the opposite side of the creek. He sashes his way back to get his shoes and then crosses the creek to the other side.

He takes a last look at Katherine who remains standing in the creek like she has no intentions of moving and then he wanders into the woods.

SIX

The buzz of insects breaks the long silence. He hopes it's a good sign. It seems like hours that Abel has stumbled his way through the woods. His pant legs are still damp—he didn't roll them up high enough—so he knows it hasn't been too long since he saw Katherine pointing him toward the woods. His thoughts are scattered. Thoughts of the mysterious woman who claims to have taken the form of Katherine and as absurd as it seems he knows that she is not Katherine and so he has no choice but to believe the impossible. He wonders about the revolver and why it is important. It seemed just an antique hand-me-down. Something Ray Marshall left him instead of an apology which Abel may have preferred though he isn't even sure if he wants one. What he wants is to see Ray Marshall's face—see the stranger in his casket—but he cannot even get that. He thinks of the empty casket and how it was the reason he stepped outside of the church and saw Katherine in the field. The thought that perhaps she took Ray Marshall's body crosses his mind but he dismisses it. Why dismiss it? he thinks. It's no more ridiculous than anything else that has happened to him.

The buzz of insects gets louder the further he walks. They sound annoyed by his presence. He watches his feet knowing that snakes could be out as well. Perhaps the most dangerous of Oklahoma wildlife. His black shoes looked new when he first arrived at the church this morning but now are scuffed with blots of dirt. What will he tell Leslie when he finds his way back to the church? Will she even be there? He has no idea what time it actually is. The sun is high in the east so it might be earlier than what he thinks it is.

Finally he sees a clearing ahead of him. A wheat field. His spirits lift as he steps into the field expecting to see the church, to have found his way back. Instead he steps into the wheat field and sees nothing but red dirt and short grass at the end of the field. The lifting of his spirits and expectations only makes him stumble further. Now he feels panicky and lightheaded. His throat is dry. The heat nauseates him and his panicky feeling gives way to anger. Anger that has been festering for some time. Anger at the Katherine lookalike for not giving him directions other than an ambiguous point. Is this a trick?

He notices a barbed wire fence separating the field from the land beyond. The land must be owned by someone. He walks toward the fence peering around for any sign of human life. There is a dirt road on the opposite side of the fence. It doesn't look much different than the land beyond except for the tire track ruts. Maybe there is some life around here. The barbed wire fence is bent and crooked as if some animal—perhaps a deer—struggled to cross.

Carefully Abel climbs over the fence. His suit jacket gets snagged on the fence and he hears it tear as he lands on the opposite side. He pulls the jacket free. There is a vertical rip along the right side of the jacket. “Damn it,” he says under his breath. He takes his jacket off, twists it into a thick band and ties it around his waist. He doesn't know why he hasn't taken it off sooner given how hot it is but he hasn't done anything logical since wandering into the woods with Katherine. He rolls up the sleeves to his white button-up—which has quickly lost its bright white color for a more off-white because of sweat and grime—and loosens his tie.

He gauges the sun's position then walks west up the dirt road. He wonders what people might think if they drive past but doesn't think anyone will. He comes over a hill and sees a single-wide trailer to the right. There is no driveway leading to it. Instead the trailer sits in the middle of the prairie around it—not a good sign that anyone lives there—but Abel decides to take a chance on it anyway.

Once again he jumps a fence and jogs as fast as he can on his burning, out-of-shape legs to the trailer. As he nears he hears music coming from within. Even with the muffled sound he can distinguish Willie Nelson's unique wavering voice. Stone steps rest below the front door. He leaps to the top step with a renewed vigor and knocks.

No answer. Just Willie Nelson and his guitar. Abel waits a minute and knocks again this time louder though as small as the trailer is it would be impossible for someone not to hear his knocking the first time. Either no one is home or the occupant is out cold. He waits anyway before knocking a third time. He considers leaving and takes a swift look around him. Nothing but short grass and cacti. He waits another minute and then chances turning the doorknob. It turns with ease and Abel opens the door slowly.

He thinks about all the horror movies he's watched. All the times he has yelled at the screen astonished by how stupid the character was. Some of those times were just like this. Someone walking into a house that didn't belong to them, a house they had no logical reason to enter. But there is nothing logical about this day.

He opens the door wide. "Hello?" he says. He steps inside and a quick look to his left and right assures him the place is empty. He can see from one end of the trailer to the other. There is an unmade bed on the far side and a kitchen with a sink full of dishes

on the opposite end. The trailer smells of urine and the humidity only makes the stench worse. The front door is in the very center of the trailer and Abel steps up into what seems to be the den area. There is a yellow couch in front of him, a record player next to the couch where the Willie Nelson record spins, and a 13-inch television set next to the door on a foldout TV dinner stand. The vinyl record stops spinning and he hears the click indicating the end of that side. He realizes that means it has only been going for maybe twenty or thirty minutes. Someone was there not long before Abel showed up. A hallway leads back to the unmade bed. There is a closed door on the right.

The bathroom. Abel walks toward it. "Hello?" he says again. He reaches the door and knocks. When there is no answer he takes a deep breath and opens the door, half-expecting to find a dead body. Nothing inside but a shower, sink, and an unflushed toilet. He closes the bathroom door and stands in the hallway leaning against the wall unsure what to do next. He could leave and continue his walk along the dirt road. He tries to think of any other options but there are not. Before leaving he leans into the bedroom and takes a look around. There is a desk up against the wall to the left. Papers, notes, and newspaper clippings are scattered across the desk. Once again led by his curiosity Abel investigates the paraphernalia. The handwriting on the notes is illegible. The newspaper clippings are all obituaries. Some very old and one recent: Raymond Lee Marshall. A chill comes over Abel. A swift reminder of the reason he came to the panhandle. Ray Marshall. There is no picture on the obit but he reads what it says.

Raymond Lee Marshall, 50, of Kenton, died Monday.

Raymond was born to Roy and Martha Marshall December 1, 1962 in Guymon, Ok.

Raymond graduated Boise City High School in 1981. He married Deborah Raines in 1997 and they lived together in Kenton, Ok.

Raymond was an oilrig consultant until 1990 and then a rancher until his death. He was a deacon at Black Mesa Baptist Church.

Raymond is survived by two children: Leslie Conrad, of Amarillo; and Tom Marshall, of Kenton. He also is survived by two grandchildren.

A funeral service will be held 1 p.m. Thursday at Black Mesa Baptist Church. Burial will be held at 4 p.m. Thursday at Thunderheart Cemetery.

Abel barely notices anything on the obit after the mention of Ray Marshall's two children: his daughter and his teenage stepson who has taken his last name and taken Abel's spot in the obituary. His eyes blur and his thoughts are fuzzy. A tinge of jealousy rises up which makes him angry. It was only days before that Abel cared nothing about Ray Marshall and in fact rarely thought of his biological father. Yet now he is jealous of an eighteen-year-old he has never met over a man he has never met. It doesn't make sense. He dismisses the feeling and focuses on his mission.

He throws the obit to the side and rifles through the other pages. He comes across a plain sheet of paper with rough edges. It appears to be very old like some of the obits if not older. The handwriting is hard to read but it is clearly a letter. Abel reads slowly:

To my son Owen,

I know your mama don't want me writing you and I promise to leave you be after this but I thought one day when you're older and I'm long dead you might wanna read this letter. I don't know. Maybe not. First I just wanna say that you shouldn't be mad at your mama. She had good reason to kick me to the curb and as sorry as I am it don't change the fact I made a whole lot a mistakes. But you hang tuff. Life can be hard when your pain't around. Your grandpa died when I was a boy and it was a hard time for my mama and for me. So if your mama remarries be kind to the new man of the house and in the meantime help her out and don't give her no lip. I know I'm rambling but I just want you to know that I care about you and I know you'll be good and strong. You also might notice a box comes with this letter. You already know what's in the box. I've told you a hundred times the shooter would be yours someday. Well I know you're young but now's as good a time as any for me to hand it over. You also already know how important it is to not let this shooter get the hands of anyone else so I won't go into that neither. Anyhow keep your mama safe and stand up for yourself like any man worth his name would do. You're a Marshall. Remember that.

Your father,

Lee Marshall

An excitement comes over Abel as he reads the letter. It is as if he has just discovered a huge clue in the mystery. Yet there is also an unpleasantness to the letter. Something about the father's genuine attempt to tell his son how he feels and to advise him. Abel senses Lee Marshall might not plan on ever talking to his son again. The letter is his last word to his son. Abel wonders if a letter from Ray Marshall to him would have been similar. The thought puts a bad taste in his mouth. He considers the clues in the letter. The mention of the revolver; its importance; the warning not to let it fall into the wrong hands; and then of course the letter-writer's name: Lee Marshall. The boy from the grave service. Abel saw with his own eyes the boy receive the revolver and now knows that he can't have dreamed it all. The letter he holds in his hand is real. The name is real. And if Lee Marshall received the revolver as a boy then the letter was probably from the early twentieth century. His jaw falls at the thought of this. A hundred-year old letter, give or take a decade. Is it even possible? He decides it isn't worth questioning. After his time-travelling venture through the woods it would seem anything is possible in the Oklahoma panhandle.

He lays the letter back onto the messy desk. Nothing else interests him or looks like it could be a "clue" though there is so much Abel is in the dark about that he's sure there is probably something that could help him. Help him do what?

It is the first time he stops and thinks about this mission that Katherine—he can't help but still think of her as so—has sent him on. She told him to get the revolver and he would know where to take it but Abel wonders if he shouldn't just find his way back to the church, attend the funeral, and then head back to Dallas. Or perhaps if he has missed the funeral—for he is still not sure what time it is—then find his car and leave. Just focus

on finding the church, he tells himself. After that, go with the flow. Why wouldn't he? He is a spontaneous guy. Has told himself to *go with the flow* many times before when trying to pick up a girl for the night. This was no different he tried to tell himself. But he knows how ridiculous it is to even compare the two.

He walks back through the trailer and steps into the kitchen before leaving. There is an unpaid electric bill on the kitchen counter next to the sink full of grimy dishes. The bill has rough blotches where water has splashed on it. He looks at the name: Elo Marshall.

He attempts to remember whether Leslie mentioned the name when they talked earlier. He can't recall. Another Marshall, he thinks, of course. He scoffs. Simultaneously the words of the letter and the voice of Lee's uncle echo in his mind: *You're a Marshall*. He cannot help but think of a Marshall as whom he imagines Ray Marshall was: an irresponsible heartless womanizer. Suddenly the phrase *You're a Marshall* annoys him. He turns on the kitchen faucet and gulps down some water before exiting the trailer no longer worried about being caught. Elo Marshall is most likely at the funeral. Just find the church he reminds himself as he leaps off the stone steps and walks back to the dirt road.

SEVEN

Having grown up in Texas, Abel is used to the summer heat but he has never been on such a long walk. Never had to remain exposed to the heat for so long at one time. He is lightheaded and groggy and there is only the open prairie around him. No more trailers, no houses, certainly no tiny Baptist church. After walking for what seems like hours he becomes very worried and begins to think this trip might actually cost him his life. The idea of dying overheated and dehydrated terrifies him. Young people aren't supposed to die. Abel recalls the last time he was reminded of his mortality: a classmate drowning in the lake his senior year of high school.

Abel hadn't been good friends with him but they had talked occasionally. He remembered the story spreading through the halls from classroom to classroom the next day at school. The boy—David was his name—and his friends had gone swimming at the lake after dark and David had dived in and not come back up. They say he was caught on some seaweed under the water. Abel heard his friends talk about going under over and over searching for him but never finding him. The authorities finally discovered his body early the following morning. The entire senior class was affected by the death. There was a gloom over the school through the rest of the year. The senior trip was even cancelled. Though David's friends and family grieved, Abel was certain the rest of the class who didn't know David very well felt as he did; David's death reminded them that they wouldn't live forever. Something teenagers often forget.

Dehydrated, Abel begins to sense just how uncertain life is and how quickly a tragedy can happen. This is it, he thinks. His steps slow and at last he stands still

wondering if he should just sit down if only for a minute but he knows if he sits down there is a good chance he won't get back up. Still the desire to do so is strong. He stares at the reddish brown dirt and pictures himself lying there, resting. In his moment of indecision, though, he hears something. The roar of an engine coming from behind him. Over his shoulder he sees a truck coming up the dirt road. He hardly has enough wherewithal to lift his arm and stick his thumb out but he manages the universal hitchhiking gesture.

Dust flies up around the truck as it comes to a stop near him. He dips his head into the open passenger side window and leans his elbows on the seal, exhausted. The driver is an elderly woman—probably late sixties—with long silver hair braided and resting over her shoulder. She wears a black pantsuit. She stares at Abel for an unpleasantly long time.

Finally she says “Are you all right, young man?”

“Yeah,” Abel says, “I just seem to have gotten a bit lost.”

“Here.” She hands him a bottle of water. “You look like you might pass out.”

He takes the bottle and downs it then feels queasy and bends over for a second but his stomach settles.

“Thanks,” he says leaning on the open window again.

“Are you here for my son's funeral?”

“Ray Marshall?”

“That’s him,” she says.

“Sorry for your loss,” Abel says. He studies her, his grandmother, thinking how strange this all is. Nonetheless he is happy to be talking with someone as it somehow gives him reassurance that he hasn’t gone completely mad, one hundred percent disconnected from reality.

“Hop in,” she says. “I’m headed to the funeral now.”

Abel climbs into the pickup truck. The cushioned seat has rips in the leather that prick at his back but even so it is comfortable after having walked in the heat. There is no air conditioning in the truck but he still feels cooler not being under direct sunlight.

“Thanks,” he says.

“Don’t mention it.”

“So the funeral hasn’t started yet?”

“Nope,” she says as the truck starts moving. “It’s almost lunch time.”

“I could’ve sworn it was late afternoon by now.”

“How long have you been out here walking?”

“Not as long as I thought I guess.”

“Did your car break down?” Her voice gets louder as she shifts gears picking up speed. They leave their windows rolled down and the air blows through. Once they’re up to thirty-five mph Abel leans his head out the window and lets the warm air blow into his face, his shaggy hair blowing back.

“No,” he says, his own voice loud now. “It’s at the church.” He notices the confused glance she gives him. “I was there early so I went on a walk through some trees and got turned around.”

She gives a knowing nod. “Yes I know those woods. Easy to do I suppose. I never got your name.”

“Abel Saracen.” They shake hands.

“Well Abel, I’m Martha Marshall.”

Abel leans back into the seat and looks at Martha Marshall. His grandmother. He is having his first conversation with his grandmother and she doesn’t know who he is. Probably the first of many conversations he’ll have with unknowing relatives this day. To Abel this is just as strange as walking back in time in the woods. A thought crosses his mind that perhaps like Leslie she also thought he looked like Ray Marshall which would explain the familiar gaze she gave him. This should make him nervous. But there is a part of him that wishes to tell her who he really is. Perhaps she would agree with Leslie that keeping it a secret at the funeral is a good idea but at least she would know she is driving there with her long lost grandson. There is also a part of him that wants her to tell everyone at the funeral. Some smidgeon of revenge against Ray Marshall. To taint his legacy at his own funeral. But instead of giving into these thoughts and feelings he remains silent. Not out of loyalty to Leslie but perhaps the feeling of apathy he has forced himself to have toward Ray Marshall. He wants to be in control of his future with the Marshall family—not see them after the funeral if he so chooses—and the only way to continue his life as before after the funeral would be if no one knew who he was.

Except for Leslie of course but he is sure she would leave him alone if that was what he chose to do.

Martha pushes her scrawny knee against the steering wheel and steers with her knee while she takes a cigarette from the dashboard of the truck and lights it.

Abel has to restrain himself from reaching for the wheel. After walking for so long he certainly doesn't want to crash on the way to the funeral. Luckily it isn't long before she is using her hand again while she takes a drag from her cigarette and taps the ash out of the window. Abel watches the ash blow backward and mix into the reddish brown dust that blows up into the air behind the truck as they cruise along. She offers Abel a cigarette and he declines.

"So how do you know my son?" Martha asks.

"I don't," he answers honestly. Then comes the lie. "I know your granddaughter Leslie. She and I went to college together."

"At Panhandle State?"

"That's right."

"You from around here?"

"Dallas."

"You must be a really good friend to come all the way up here for a funeral. Especially when you never even met the man."

Abel shrugs. "I don't mind."

She takes a long drag and Abel peers at her for a long time. He can now see her grief as she sucks at the cigarette. She exhales a long billow of smoke and her sad face goes stone again.

“I wanted to have the service at the Indian church but the little Baptist church is where Raymond and his family went every Sunday. He was even a deacon.”

“That’s awesome,” Abel says. Martha chuckles at Abel’s typical twentysomething response.

“You go to church, Abel?”

“Used to. Not as much anymore.”

“Well I’m certainly not the type to harp on about the importance of going to church. You’re probably a free spirit aren’t you, Abel?”

“Eh—.”

“—No? Maybe a *wandering* spirit then?”

“Maybe.”

“That would explain why you’re out here in the middle of nowhere walking around in a suit in hundred degree weather.”

Abel smiles. If she only knew, he thinks.

“My brother-in-law Elo,” Martha says. “Now he could go on and on telling you stories about wandering-spirited people.”

“Is he a storyteller?”

“As much as any lonely old man could be.” She laughs. “Old men seem to either be really quiet or really talkative. My husband Roy—before he passed—was the quiet type unlike his younger brother.”

Abel takes in the information. In his mind he returns to Elo’s trailer. He can see in his mind’s eye the letter and the obituary. He wonders about Elo the storyteller. He must have an interest in the revolver. Abel has no doubt about it. Maybe he could talk to Elo at the funeral; find out why these strange events happened to him. Maybe Elo knows where he is supposed to take the revolver, Abel thinks. He realizes Martha is watching him.

“Sorry,” he says.

“No need to apologize.” She pauses. “You know Raymond was a wandering spirit in his younger days much like yourself.”

Abel swallows hard. He doesn’t like being compared to the man who abandoned him and even coming from the mouth of an old woman it irritates him. Even with the irritation he can’t help but notice the desire he has for her to talk more about Ray Marshall.

“Is that right?” he says.

She nods. “Yep,” she says. “Though I never found him traipsing around in a funeral suit.” She laughs but her eyes well up with water. She looks away from him and takes another long drag—her last—then tosses the cigarette butt out the window.

Abel looks in the rearview mirror and sees the butt skid along the dirt and come to a stop in the center of the road. They are quiet for some time and then the church comes into view. Even from a distance Abel can see there are many more vehicles in the lot now. In fact it is packed.

As they get closer he can see his own car—a green Ford Focus—nestled where he left it parked between two big trucks now. Abel’s nerves creep up. The sight of the cluster of people in black standing outside the tiny brick church is as frightening as anything he saw over the last three hours or so.

“Could you pull over here?” Abel says. They are still a small distance from the church. Martha gazes at him questioningly. “I’m kind of embarrassed and I’d hate for you to get a lot of questions about the strange young man in your truck.”

She laughs. “Sure, sweetheart.” She pulls over. “Here,” she says, taking a handkerchief from her purse and dipping it in a plastic cup of water in her cup holder. “Wipe your face off and put your jacket back on.”

Abel realizes his suit jacket is still tied around his waist. It is probably horribly wrinkled by now. His rugged appearance will probably draw him more attention at the funeral than he or Leslie would have liked. He takes the handkerchief. “Thank you,” he says and gets out of the truck.

“It was nice meeting you, Abel Saracen,” she says. “I’ll see you at the funeral.”

She waves and drives off. Abel wipes at his face with the damp cloth knowing it won’t do much good. He puts his jacket back on and presses at the sleeves. He checks

the right side where it was torn on the barbed wire fence. It isn't too noticeable and he makes a point of keeping his arm at his side to cover it. He takes a deep breath realizing he is about to meet people he is related to and other people who knew Ray Marshall personally. Knew his quirks, his likes/dislikes, knew the way he talked and carried himself. Abel shakes his head dismissing it. They're all strangers, he thinks. But as he walks up the road he gets more and more nervous.

EIGHT

Abel comes to the church through the wheat field sneaking past his car as if he just arrived but eyes seem to be staring at him from everywhere in the crowd.

He considers stopping at his car to get the revolver but the idea of carrying a revolver tucked in his waistband while at a funeral seems ridiculous. Plus there are too many people watching him or so it seems. Most stop looking at him after a few seconds but a few linger a bit longer. All the eyes that glance his way look at him with suspicion. Or is it confusion? He can hardly tell. He is still hot and his vision blurry. He scans the crowd of strangers in search of Leslie but doesn't see her. He spots Martha talking to a barrel-chested man of about the same age as her from the looks of it. The man has a bushy beard and holds a red plastic cup that he spits his chewing tobacco into. The burly man is talking fast with hands flailing all around and then suddenly he gives a booming laugh. Heads turn toward him and many are startled by the laugh. His laughter is out of place at the funeral although none in the crowd seem overwhelmingly sad. They talk in quiet voices but no one appears to be crying.

Perhaps Ray Marshall wasn't a good man, he thinks. Maybe it wouldn't be much of a shock if they learned about his bastard son he abandoned. A hand touches his shoulder.

"Abel," Leslie says. She looks distraught.

"Hey," he says. "I'm really sorry."

“What happened? I was worried about you. Your car was still here but you disappeared.” She studies him. Her eyes widen when she sees how scuffed his clothes are.

“I went for a walk. Back in those woods.” He points. “And I guess I got turned around and lost. My cell phone doesn’t have any service so I couldn’t call.”

She takes a deep breath and looks around. She doesn’t want to make a scene, he thinks. Which Abel is thankful for since he won’t have to explain himself any further. But part of him wants to tell her the truth even if she won’t believe it. Probably even think he’s crazy and regret ever inviting him to her father’s funeral. He remains quiet.

“They’re about to start lunch,” she says. “I’ll have to go be with—” she pauses “—my family.”

“It’s cool,” Abel says. “I’ll be all right by myself. Your grandmother Martha. She found me walking and gave me a ride.”

“Oh wow.” She looks him in the eye. “Did you—”

“—No I didn’t say anything. But from the way she looked at me I wouldn’t be surprised if she has some ideas.”

Leslie nods. “That’s fine. I don’t think she would say anything about it until the funeral is over.”

Abel studies her expression wondering if Leslie had planned on telling anyone about him even after the funeral. But she doesn’t seem upset only contemplative. A good sign, he thinks, feeling a bit guilty for being suspicious of her.

She leans in and her dress brushes against Abel. “Let me point out a few people you might need to know about,” she whispers. She names off some cousins and points and Abel takes in their features but knows he will have no problem remembering their faces. He pays extra close attention when she says: “My stepbrother Tom.” The eighteen-year-old recent high school graduate stands by himself against the brick wall of the church with his arms crossed. He wears dark jeans and a black button-up shirt—not as formally dressed as Abel and Abel realizes no other male is except for Pastor Walt. She points out her stepmother and her uncle and aunt—Ray Marshall’s younger brother and sister-in-law—and then last she says: “And the loudmouth is my great uncle Elo. Dad’s uncle.” She points at the burly man with the booming voice. He makes a mental note to talk to Elo at some point and see if he can learn anything about the revolver. Katherine’s words come to him: *You’ll know where to take it.*

So far he hasn’t got a clue but knows Elo could very well be helpful. Not that he has decided to go through with the mission. He still thinks it might do him some good to just attend the funeral and then go back to Dallas, be rid of this strange day.

Leslie leaves and Abel follows the line that forms and walks to the fellowship hall. He stands on the walkway between the church and fellowship hall at relatively the same spot he was at when he saw Katherine in the wheat field. He looks out there now and sees no one. The wind bends the wheat backward.

Once he enters the fellowship hall the wonderful smell of southern comfort food makes him realize how hungry he is. His nerves kept him from thinking about it before but now a long growl rumbles in his bottomless stomach. He watches the people Leslie

pointed out as the line slowly moves forward. Tom stands near the front of the line and wears an uninterested face as if he was watching a dull movie. He glances at Abel and they lock eyes. Suddenly Tom's uninterested look is replaced by a knowing gaze of mixture of confusion and anger.

Abel swallows hard and his face flushes. Does he know? According to Leslie he shouldn't but then Abel remembers the way she paused upon first seeing Abel this morning. *You look just like him*, she said. Maybe when Tom looks at Abel he sees his dead stepfather. They break eye contact quickly and Tom goes back to filling his paper plate with food. Abel stops scanning the crowd and looks at the linoleum floor. Eventually he reaches the food. The plate's not big enough, he thinks as he scoops mashed potatoes onto the plate followed by macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, slices of roast beef, two homemade sweet rolls, and his favorite—broccoli and cheese casserole. His plate is heavy against his palm as he balances it on one hand. With the other he gathers his utensils and gets a can of Mountain Dew from an ice chest. He scans the room. There are a dozen large round fold-away tables set up with six chairs circling each table. He finds the only one still empty near the far right corner of the room and sits at it. He eyes his monstrous plate gluttonly.

Just as he scoops a big bite of mashed potatoes into his mouth he hears the scrape of a chair being pulled out and looks up to see Elo Marshall sitting down across from him at the table. The large man sets two plates on the table before him and falls into his chair. The chair creaks as if to shout its protest to being sat on by such a big man. Elo doesn't look too comfortable in the tiny chair either but he doesn't say anything. He just

smiles—at least Abel thinks he’s smiling because it is hard to tell with the man’s mouth nearly completely hidden beneath his bushel of beard—and says “How ya doing, boy?”

“Just fine. Yourself?”

Elo grunts satisfactorily. Two other elderly men join them at the table. Both men are Elo’s age if not a bit older though once they reach their sixties it is hard for Abel to judge age. They shake hands with Elo and offer their condolences. Any thought Abel had of bringing up the revolver to Elo has been dismissed now that the other men have joined their table.

All four men sit evenly spaced around the table—each having plenty of elbow room—and eat like men who have been starved their whole lives. One of the elderly men is so skinny and shaky Abel wouldn’t be surprised if it were true. The other man is medium-built, about Abel’s size.

“So how do you know my nephew?” Elo says.

Abel stumbles over the question and stares blankly.

“Ole Raymond? Ray Marshall? The man whose funeral we are attending.”

Abel curses himself for not answering the obvious question right away and still is silent as the burly man stares at him sternly, his eyebrows furrowed. Then suddenly Elo laughs—the same booming laugh from outside—and the elderly men around the table snicker softly and look around as if they’re being inappropriate. Abel doesn’t get the joke.

“I do not mean to scare you, boy,” Elo says. “Just curious is all.”

“I’m a friend of Leslie’s. From college.”

“Aw, yes, Leslie is a fine woman now, is she not.”

“Yeah, she’s great.”

“A fine *married* woman.”

Abel nods and then realizes what Elo is implying. He wants to escape the conversation. Elo doesn’t seem to be the harmless storyteller Abel had imagined him to be. He thinks of Elo’s trailer. The desk with the letters and obituaries and illegible notes. Abel shovels a big bite of broccoli and cheese casserole into his mouth. Elo laughs again. He says, “So you never met Ray?”

“Can’t say as I have,” Abel says between chewing.

“He was a fine man, son. The kind of man you youngsters could take after.”

The old men grunt simultaneously in agreement. Abel feels the urge to prove him wrong by revealing himself but sees Leslie seated at another table glancing his way as if she knows what he is feeling.

“You from the city?” Elo says.

“Dallas.”

Elo stops eating and in fact sits frozen staring at Abel. Then he sets his fork down and begins rolling at imaginary sleeves—for he is wearing a short-sleeve camouflage t-shirt—and says “Hold me back, boys. We got us a Texan.”

Abel just stares at him, irked.

Then Elo laughs again. This time several people in the fellowship hall look at him. “Just teasing ya.”

Abel fakes a laugh and shakes his head. “You tease hard.”

“That I do, that I do. Forgive me.”

Elo stands swiftly and Abel starts surprised by the speed with which the big man moves. Then he reaches his big hand all the way across the table. “The name’s Elo. Elo Marshall.”

“Abel Saracen.” Abel’s hand is swallowed by Elo’s bearpaw.

“Good to meet ya, Abel.”

They continue eating silently for a minute after Elo sits back down. Abel eats quickly so he can leave the table before Elo can grill him anymore but the big man seems lost in his own thoughts now as he digs into his second plate.

After another couple of minutes Elo burps loudly and says “Let me tell ya a story about ole Raymond. Earl, Bob, you gentlemen may have heard me tell this one before.” They both tease Elo about his habit of repeating his stories several times. Elo appears genuinely embarrassed but also proud at the same time. He looks at Abel. His beard hides most of his face and Abel finds him more unreadable than anyone else he has met since being in Oklahoma.

“So Ray was maybe seventeen or eighteen,” Elo says “A couple of years before his first marriage...” Elo narrates a tall tale about a hunting trip in Wyoming with Ray Marshall, a story about Ray claiming to have seen the mythical Jackalope—an antlered Jack rabbit. Abel loses his sense of his surroundings as he listens intently to the tale. It is the first in-depth story he has heard about Ray Marshall. Even as the story grows more and more ridiculous as Elo nears the end he cannot help but be consumed by it as he attempts to imagine what Ray Marshall looks like as he chases after the Jackalope. Even as outlandish as it is Abel wonders if there is some truth to it; after the morning he had he is not as quick to dismiss something unrealistic. At the end of the tale Ray Marshall is a folk hero. Elo talks of his nephew with great pride. Abel wonders if this is how Ray Marshall is thought of by his family and those who knew him: a hero. He feels a tinge of anger at the idea that his absent father would be considered anything other than a villain. In Elo’s story he’s a hero; in Abel’s he’s a villain. Abel offers a weak smile, a sour taste in his mouth, as Elo finishes his grand tale. The elderly men wheeze in laughter.

“Never gets old,” Bob says. Earl agrees with him.

“What do you think of that, son?” Elo says in his deep voice.

“Good story,” Abel says.

Elo leans back in his chair. He takes his can of chewing tobacco from his shirt pocket as if it is dessert. He digs his finger into the can and puts the chew in his bottom lip. Then he stands up. “Nice meeting ya, Abel. You’re all right for a Texan.”

Abel laughs. “Thanks.” After a few minutes he also stands and pushes his chair under the table and takes his plate to the trashcan. He grabs another can of Mountain

Dew and heads for the exit. He makes eye contact with Leslie as he passes and gives her a slight nod. Tom is seated next to her but acts as if he doesn't see Abel. Something's not right, Abel thinks remembering the way Tom gazed at him earlier. He shakes it off though and focuses on the revolver. He recalls every conversation he has had so far and unless he is supposed to take the revolver to Wyoming he is coming up blank.

He steps outside into the sun which is getting hotter now that the day is moving toward the afternoon. He checks his watch but it hasn't worked since he time-travelled and still remains stuck in the a.m. He takes the path between the two buildings and it is as quiet and barren as it had been this morning when he saw Katherine in the field. He walks around the brick church and decides this would be a good chance to go to his car and make sure the revolver is where he left it. He has no intention of taking the revolver inside for the funeral service but has a paranoid feeling he cannot shake. Perhaps it was Elo's interrogation of him or Tom's knowing glare which has him feeling this way.

He unlocks his car and opens the door. He doesn't immediately get in knowing that the heat coming out of the car will be unbearable. After thirty seconds he sits down in the driver's seat. The heat is still suffocating even after waiting but he doesn't plan on staying inside long anyway. He reaches underneath the passenger's seat and feels around the dirty floorboard for the shoebox. His hand touches it and he pulls the box out and sees that the revolver is still inside. He looks in his rearview mirror to make sure no one is around. Then takes the revolver out of the shoebox. At first he touches the metal and it burns red-hot against his touch so he pulls back. The already scabbing burn on his hand from touching Katherine flares up. He blows on the burn until it cools and then carefully grabs the revolver by the grip.

A sinking feeling comes over him. The feeling as well as the weight of the revolver seems heavier than the first time he held it. It reminds him of the heightened sense of mortality he had this morning when he walked along the road except there is sadness on top of that. This sadness has no obvious cure because he is not sad over any specific thing. Put the gun down, Abel thinks. That is the cure. And so he does. At least he tries. It is several seconds before he can get his hand to respond to the command to replace the revolver to the box. He feels conflicted over the decision as his brain battles against the desire he has to hold the revolver longer. At last after those seconds pass he sets the weapon down in the shoebox and puts the box back under the passenger's seat. Immediately he has an immense sense of relief.

What was that all about? he thinks. He remembers the letter from Lee Marshall—the small boy at the gravesite in the woods—to his son. One sentence in particular: *Ya know how important it is to not let this shooter get in the hands of someone else.* Was that Lee Marshall talking or the revolver? Abel wonders if Lee had the same desire to keep the revolver in hand as Abel just had. Or perhaps Lee knew something Abel doesn't. It is of little consequence at the moment though; Abel has no clue where to take the revolver. As far as he knows he may never find out and may never see the Katherine lookalike again. He realizes he is burning up inside his microwave of a car.

He walks back toward the church knowing it won't be long before the funeral starts. As he reaches the front entrance to the church he hears a voice call: "Hey."

Tom Marshall walks around the side of the church. He stands a few feet away from Abel and leans against the brick wall with his hands in his pockets.

“So you’re a friend of Les’s?”

“That’s right.”

The young man glares at Abel like he is a convicted felon. In appearance he is the opposite of Abel. Black hair, reddened tan skin, brown eyes, and he is short and stout while Abel is closer to six feet and average build—though at eighteen he had been a lot skinnier.

Abel puts his hand on the glass door but doesn’t push it yet only wanting to signal to Tom he wasn’t in the mood to talk. Tom just looks at him and then says “I know who you are.” Abel’s full stomach turns.

“I’m Abel Saracen, friend of your stepsister’s.”

Tom smirks. “Sure you are.”

Abel nervously chuckles and pushes on the door. Tom follows him inside. It is deathly quiet in the church. Everyone is still in the fellowship hall. Abel walks to the end of the hallway where to the left the hall is pitch black as it was this morning. To the right the sanctuary is filled with multicolored sunlight that pours in through the stained glass windows. The casket of Ray Marshall is still there at the end of the center aisle though Abel knows there is no body inside. He turns around at the end of the hallway and leans against the wall.

Tom stands a few feet away but steps a little closer. He carries himself like a high school bully. He looks up at Abel.

“I overheard her talking to Dad,” he says.

Abel gulps.

“I heard him tell her about you.”

“I don’t want any trouble,” he says but feels himself getting angry as Tom stands close trying to intimidate him. “You’re directing your anger at the wrong man.”

“I know he left it to you,” Tom says. “The gun.”

For the first time Abel thinks this could be it. Maybe Tom knows where he is supposed to take the revolver.

“That’s right. It’s just a gun though. Right?”

Tom squints as if he is trying to read Abel’s mind by staring into his eyes. Abel’s eyes get wider. Then another thought crosses his mind. “You wanted the gun? It’s always passed from father to son.”

Tom shrugs nonchalantly. “Oh no I don’t want that thing. It’s nothing but trouble.”

“How so?”

Tom looks up at him. “Listen. You should just leave. Now, before everyone comes inside from eating.”

Abel glances into the sanctuary again and looks at the casket. “I was invited,” he says. “Don’t worry. I don’t have any intentions of telling people who I am. You and Leslie are the only ones who know.”

“You’re in over your head here.”

“Why is that?”

Once again Tom avoids his question and just says “Just leave as soon as you can before people figure out who you are.”

“That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

Tom has relaxed some, no longer appearing as if he will hit Abel. Abel cannot remember the last time he has been hit and he is sure he would go down easily. But now Tom seems deep in his own thoughts.

“That’s all you need to know as long as you leave after the funeral.”

Tom turns and walks toward the exit.

“Wait, Tom. I need,” he pauses. “I need to know more about the gun.”

For a moment Tom’s hard exterior softens. Abel wonders if Ray Marshall talked about the revolver like this. If he longed to discover the revolver’s secrets. Perhaps even obsessed over it. All this from a look and Abel realizes he might be letting his imagination run wild. Tom shakes his head and exits through the double doors.

Abel stands alone in the church once again. This time he looks toward the dark hallway away from the sanctuary. He walks down the hallway.

NINE

He searches for a light switch as he stumbles his way through the hallway holding his hands out—one in front, the other brushing against the wall. He cannot believe how dark it is.

You're in over your head, Tom said. Abel believes him now. He looks back but it is only darkness behind him. He wonders what has happened to the light from the entrance hallway and the sanctuary.

He starts as his hand touches solid rough wood. He feels his way around it. A door. The metal knob is cold. He turns it. It is unlocked but the door is jammed. He pushes hard against it but it doesn't budge. He puts his weight into it but still nothing. He recalls the cop shows on TV and tries to do as they do and slams his shoulder against the door. A sharp pain in his shoulder. But on his second try the door opens with a crack.

Inside is a well-lit room with a long table in the center. A Sunday school room. But Abel hardly notices the features of the room because there are three men seated at the table. "Sorry," Abel says and takes a step back but no one looks at him. A tiny boy, maybe five or six, sits cross-legged playing with a wooden horse in the corner of the room. Oh no, Abel thinks knowing that the lack of acknowledgement from anyone in the room after bursting through the door means he is invisible again which means he has time-travelled again. Just as the first time Abel feels strange about being in a room with people who can't see him. There is something unnatural and frightening about it. The men are having a serious conversation with raised voices.

“Come on, Brother Owen, you need to do what’s right by us here,” says an older man with thick gray hair slicked back. He points a meaty finger at the man seated at the end of the table as another man sits on the opposite side of the table nodding his head violently to show his agreement. He is also an older gentleman but is bald with a white beard. The man at the end of the table is middle-aged much younger than the two who seem to have ganged up on him. This is Brother Owen. The name seems familiar to Abel but he can’t place it. Instead he walks to the table and pays closer attention to their conversation.

Brother Owen is quite calm given the hostile finger-pointing and raised voice of the old man. “I hear your point, Brother Don, but we’ve got to follow God’s Word. We should all pray over our decision and then let the church vote on it. That’s how we’ve always done things in this church.”

“You don’t need to preach church doctrine to me, boy. I’ve been a deacon in this church before you were born.”

Brother Owen stares at him as if he has crossed the line. Even the bearded bald man looks over at Brother Don after he calls the pastor *boy*. Brother Don puts down his pointing finger and clears his throat and adjusts his tie. “My apologies Brother Owen,” he says.

“It’s fine,” Owen says. He glances over his shoulder where the small boy absentmindedly plays with his toys. “I agree with you, Brother Don. This church is going to need another building. The children will grow up and they will have children themselves and from what I can tell and what I feel the Spirit is telling me, this church

will continue to grow. But the money is not ours to spend as we see fit. Somewhere along the line we stopped letting God lead this church and started making decisions ourselves.”

The bearded bald man looks as if he has been scolded by his mother. On the other hand Brother Don doesn't appear guilty but rather prideful. His face turns bright red. He leans in close and whispers. Abel stands right up close next to Brother Owen. *Owen*. The name seems so familiar but he is too distracted by the conversation to think about it.

Brother Don whispers “Everything we've done, we've done for this church and these people. Now, brother, you've only been pastor here for a year and I know you have your own ideas about how to run things and that's just dandy but I'm asking you to compromise a bit. Just as we've done in accommodating you.”

The bearded bald man appears uncomfortable but remains silent. Owen sits still.

Don continues speaking. “Don't think we are not aware.” He glances over Owen's shoulder and looks at the boy, then leans even closer. “We know you go for a walk at night. Sneak into the woods. We know what you make out there. But it ain't just the whiskey is it? I do not think it would go over so swell with the flock if they knew you were bringing it into the house of God.”

Owen remains calm but Abel notices his hand shakes slightly. “Jesus turned water into wine,” he says. “I don't think the occasional drink is going to send me to Hell.”

Brother Don sighs and sits back in the chair. “Not so sure the people will see it that way especially since spending countless hours in the middle of the night in your office is a little different than occasionally.”

“You’ve made your case, Brother Don,” Owen says. “Please give me some time to consider your request.” He reaches a hand out and Don smirks and shakes it. The bearded bald man shakes Owen’s hand as well but avoids eye contact with him. The two older men exit the room through the door Abel came through. Able stays in the room with the pastor and the small boy.

Owen walks over to his son and ruffles his hair. The boy smiles at him and then continues playing with the wooden horse. Owen walks to the far end of the room where there is a door to the right. Abel follows him. It is a square office with a desk and a bookshelf filled with a hundred books all spined out. PASTOR’S STUDY reads the sign on the door. Owen sits down behind the desk and runs a hand through his hair. Abel can see he is deep in thought.

Then Owen takes a key from a necklace around his neck and unlocks the bottom drawer on his desk. Curiously Abel peeks in the drawer. Inside is a flask and a gun. *The* gun. The revolver. It hits him. Owen is the son that the letter from Lee was written to. Owen Marshall. Owen reaches down into the drawer and hesitates. Then takes out the flask. He unscrews the top and dips it back. He replaces the top, puts it back in the drawer and then grabs the revolver. Abel watches the way he stares at it. It is just as it is now—bent barrel and halfcocked hammer—but not quite as rusted. He puts the revolver back and locks the drawer and opens a bible that is on his desk. Folded inside marking a

page is a piece of paper. Owen unfolds it and of course it is the letter Abel himself had read only hours earlier this morning. Or is it years later in the future? The time-travel is too bizarre to comprehend.

Abel watches him for ten minutes wishing he could talk to him. Find out more about the revolver. Is it dangerous? Does it have some secret power that if in the wrong hands can be used for evil? Is that why it has to be passed down from generation to generation? He's watched too many movies, he thinks, but given the information he has this seems as good of a guess as any. But try as he might Owen just reads and ignores him. The small boy comes into the office.

"I'm humgy," he says in a soft voice.

Owen grabs his hand and they walk out of the office toward the door Abel had busted through like a cop.

As soon as they walk out the door, someone else comes through it and startles Abel. "Hello, Abel," says Pastor Walt. The old man walks toward him limping with an unlit cigarette in his mouth looking just as he did when Abel met him this morning.

"Pastor," Abel says. He glances around the room and everything looks just the same as it had moments before when he thought he was in another time: the long table and office in the corner.

Pastor Walt looks at him suspiciously. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah, fine," he says. "Is the funeral about to start?"

"Soon. Everyone is still finishing up in the fellowship hall."

Abel nods and walks past the preacher then stops. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Was anyone in the Marshall family ever a pastor here?”

“As a matter-of-fact Ray’s granddad Owen was the pastor here until he passed away. I was pastor after him.”

“When did he pass away?”

“Oh he must’ve been around fifty. His oldest son was in his twenties and Elo—you probably met him—was a teenager.”

Abel looks at the corner of the room where the boy played with his wooden horse twenty minutes ago—or fifty or sixty years ago, Abel thinks; the thought is overwhelming.

“About the same age as Ray,” the preacher says. “It’s too bad. There is so much life to be lived after fifty.”

Abel considers this for a moment. “And what about Ray’s dad? I understand he’s deceased, too.”

Pastor Walt blinks several times deep in thought. “Must’ve been twenty some-odd years ago when he passed. Probably a little after fifty.” He raises his eyebrows more out of curiosity for what Abel is trying to get at.

“Hmm,” Abel says and half-smiles as if to say *what a coincidence*. Why would Pastor Walt think it was anything else? He hasn’t had the day Abel has. The preacher

steps past Abel and goes into the pastor's study where Abel had just stood watching Owen Marshall sit like a beaten boxer in the corner of the ring.

Abel leaves the room and this time the hallway is dimly lit by a flickering bulb in a glass light cover halfway down the hall. It hangs high on the left wall almost to the ceiling and no light switch is in sight. The walls of the hallway are wood-paneled and Abel now sees there is a door on the left and two on the right. The door on the left is a restroom and he goes in there and flicks on the light. He stares at himself in the mirror. He looks as if he's aged a decade since he left his motel room in Guymon that morning—the last time he stared into a mirror. His tie is loose so he unknots it and sets it over the closed toilet lid. Then he leans over the sink and turns the faucet on and splashes cold water on his face. He continues splashing and rubbing his face until the grime and dirt is replaced by the feeling of coolness. The strange departures he has had—most recently in the back room of the church—have settled his nervousness about the funeral. The funeral seems minute compared to time-travel. But he still has plenty of complicated emotions boiling inside him though he wishes to make no attempt to sort through them now. He thinks again of his desire to see his father's face and visualizes the empty casket in his memory. He realizes he has learned if Ray Marshall was cremated. There is the chance that it was somehow part of his craziness; that there really is a body in the casket. Perhaps seeing Katherine in the wheat field was not the beginning of his surreal experience but it was the emptiness of a casket which is supposed to contain a dead body. He wonders if he'll ever know for sure—if perhaps there will be some mention of cremation during the service—and doesn't think it matters any longer. His chance of

seeing his father in the flesh was taken from him the moment Ray Marshall left his pregnant mother all those years ago, Abel tells himself.

Will he tell his mother when he gets back to Dallas? Once again he feels guilty about not telling her about his unexpected trip. He takes his tie off the toilet lid and puts it back on knotting it tight against his neck. He fidgets with it until it is comfortable.

Looking much better, he thinks. When he opens the bathroom door he can hear voices down the hallway. The friends and family march into the sanctuary.

TEN

The sanctuary is overcrowded. Abel wonders where all these people came from. He knows from looking at his map on the drive here that there are small towns around: Boise City, Kenton. But on his walk the only home he came across was Elo's trailer. Other than that just the barren prairieland of short grass, dirt, and the occasional wild animal.

The dozen pews on each side are filling in a hurry. Abel weaves between people and finds an empty seat at the end of the back pew on the left side of the center aisle. He sits down and peeks between bodies, attempting to see Ray Marshall's casket. He spots it. Still closed. And wonders about the lack of body inside.

Eventually those around him sit. Middle-aged men pull in metal chairs and prop them in the back of the sanctuary leaving only space in the middle for the aisle. The metal chairs fill quickly and the rest of the people stand against the back wall, elbow to elbow, blocking the opening to the exit. Abel's own left arm rubs against his neighbor's—a portly woman who breathes through her mouth. Luckily he isn't squeezed between two people but his right side presses against the wooden edge of the end of the pew and a dull ache ensues. Hooks on the back wall are completely full of hats—mostly wide-brimmed cowboy hats.

Abel studies the stained-glass windows lining both walls. A single ceiling fan spins wildly in the center of the room but the air-conditioning works well and it is quite cool. Even so, Abel is sweating beneath his suit and his suit is suffocating. He wonders if it is the enclosed space or the warm, sweaty body of the big woman pressed against

him. But there were other reasons for him to be feeling this way. He stares at the wooden box at the front and center.

It is strange how quiet things are here in comparison to a normal Sunday service Abel is used to at his mother's church in Dallas though he hasn't been to a church service in several years. The only person who seems to be talking is Elo who shakes hands with men who gather into the pews around him. Again Abel wonders what he might know about the revolver though thoughts of the revolver seem foreign now. Like before Abel feels as if he stepped into another separate universe. That Ray Marshall's funeral is all that matters which only angers him. It was only the night before when he lay in his motel bed in Guymon thinking of the funeral and Ray Marshall with a satisfying apathy. Now his absent father and these people—no telling how many Abel is related to—is all he can think about even after the peculiar unreal events of his morning.

Once everyone is seated Pastor Walt steps to the pulpit. He looks much more tired and old behind the pulpit. His suit is black and clean. He stands for a minute silently looking down at the casket below the pulpit.

“Raymond Lee Marshall,” he says. He clears his throat. “My brother in Christ.” Abel hears snuffles. “A father,” he continues, “a husband, a son.” Pastor Walt looks at Martha, who sits in the front row next to Tom. Abel can see the back of her head. Her long, black hair with strands of gray. Tom has his arm around her.

“Ray had a way of making those around him feel good. He had a way of making them happy. And even me—a cranky old-time preacher—couldn't help but love him.”

Abel squirms in his seat. Uncomfortable. Even Pastor Walt seems to think of Ray Marshall as a folk hero. The woman next to Abel nudges him with her elbow.

“Ever since he became deacon of this here church Ray never made a fuss or complained about anything I asked of him. And he had an effect on this community. We were all touched by Ray. And that’s because he was a good man. Sometimes, a bit spontaneous and adventurous as Elo can certainly attest to.” Elo nods from his seat in the second pew from the front, seated directly behind his sister-in-law Martha. Abel watches him spit into his red plastic cup. “But Ray took care of his family and he always thought of this entire town as his family.”

Family. Through the crackling speakers each syllable of the word echoes over the crowd. *Fam-i-ly.* Abel feels a tinge of jealous anger—the same confusing feeling he has had several times since the very first phone conversation with Leslie.

“He was always quick to help,” Pastor Walt says, “and always slow to anger. Like all of us he had a lot of growing to do over the years. From a young buck who wanted to do nothing but swish a million baskets on the high school basketball team to a feisty, young man with a taste for adventure and then into the family man we all knew him to be before he got sick.”

Abel closes his eyes and listens to the preacher’s message. His growth, Abel thinks. Is it possible Ray Marshall changed—grew—since he impregnated a much too-young teenage girl and abandoned her and his unborn child? Abel doesn’t think so. His logic is simple: if Ray Marshall had changed, he would have contacted Abel before he passed away. He had plenty of time to do it but instead chose to leave a cryptic message

in the form of a gun which meant nothing to Abel and even now he wonders if the revolver holds some power or if he is just crazy. The questions overlap each other in Abel's mind. How long was Ray Marshall sick? If he knew he was dying, he had no reason to not contact Abel or at least a letter. Abel finds himself more bothered than ever before. He attributes it to the alternative message he was hearing from the preacher. *The family man we all knew him to be.*

As Pastor Walt continues to praise Ray Marshall's many accomplishments and strong character, Abel opens his eyes and studies the crowd. People listen intently to the preacher. Most look up at him—their damp cheeks glistening in the light coming through the stained glass windows—while a few stare down at their laps. Abel wonders if each and every one of these people knew Ray Marshall. A thought suddenly comes to him. They should know. He is surprised by the thought. Sure he is angry but it isn't malice that led to the thought. He seems to have an actual desire to tell these people Ray Marshall wasn't the man they thought he was. He wants to save them from mourning a fraud.

Pastor Walt comes to the end of his sermon. As composed as the old man is Abel can see how glazed his eyes are. He takes a handkerchief from inside his suit jacket as he steps away from the pulpit and sits in a chair directly behind it. Three elderly women step up to the stage. They look identical. All wear dark dresses and are frail in stature. Each woman holds a hymnal tucked under their right hand. A fourth elderly woman moseys—leaning on her cane—to a piano to the right of the stage. She sits and begins playing “Amazing Grace” as the three others hold their hymnals in front of them and begin singing. Abel thinks of his mother's church and how different it was. It was

Church of Christ and he heard plenty of old-fashioned hymns in her church but only the voices of the people of the church were allowed—no instruments. The piano sounds elegant but the trio of singers are off-key and do not harmonize well. Though this only distracts Abel for a minute as he continues studying the crowd who for the most part seem genuinely upset by the loss of Ray Marshall. He thinks of his promise to Leslie. What if she has no intention of ever telling her family about Abel? Again this question passes through his thoughts and again he tries to dismiss it as just another nonsensical thought that could pass through his mind at any given moment. Then he thinks of Tom. It looks like her plan to keep things secret has already failed, he thinks, but then again it isn't as if Tom has any interest in letting anyone else know about their abandoned relative. In fact quite the opposite. Briefly Abel relives the moment he and Tom shared in the hallway. The elderly choir reaches the fourth verse of "Amazing Grace". Leslie did *really* stress the importance of keeping his identity a secret.

The women finish their hymn and begin another that Abel isn't familiar with. At this point, he has completely lost interest in the choir. The seed in his mind grows. They should know, he repeats to himself. He attempts to think clearly—what of the revolver? Is it safe to reveal who I am?—but the sermon of Pastor Walt echoes in his mind, blurring his logic. Even if Leslie does tell her family later, he thinks, the rest of the people at this funeral will most likely never know the truth. It isn't like Abel is going to be living in the panhandle with his grandmother Martha or anything. He will be gone back to Dallas regardless of if they find out who he is or not. They deserve to know.

The hymn plays on. *Thou my great Father, I thy true son*, the choir of women croaks out though they seem to have a better grasp of their harmony this time. Abel is

leaning forward now balling his hands into fists. He is aware of the portly woman seated next to him staring at him curiously but is not aware of much else. The song ends. The piano stops. The crowd claps quietly.

Abel stands up. No one notices him other than those seated closest to him and perhaps those behind him but he cannot be sure because his eyes are forward looking at the closed casket. Again the longing to look inside the casket and see Ray Marshall's body; to see what his father looked like. He hesitates then walks toward the front slowly. He is not nervous and begins to feel invisible as if he has time-traveled again. But then the eyes of the congregation turn toward him. Pastor Walt is stepping behind the pulpit and stops short of speaking when he notices Abel in the aisle. He freezes halfway up the aisle. He is unnerved. Any desire to tell these friends and family of Ray Marshall the truth has left him now that he has their attention. He attempts to avoid eye contact with anyone but several times he locks eyes with a random curious onlooker. Then he sees Leslie. She doesn't appear terrified as he expected but full of empathy and perhaps guilt. Tom sits next to her with a boiling hot stare directed at Abel.

"Mr. Saracen?" Pastor Walt says. Abel snaps from his frozen stance and halfheartedly waves at Pastor Walt as if to say, "Nevermind," and then turns and walks briskly toward the exit. The crowd standing in the back of the church divide for him as he marches by. As he pushes through the double doors he can hear layers of voices talking loudly from the sanctuary. "Please quiet down," he hears Pastor Walt say.

The bright sun causes him to go blind for a moment as they glaze over. He wipes at them and his vision clears. He practically runs to his car. His tie blows into his face

against the wind. The sun disappears behind a cloud of which the sky is now full. Mostly cotton white clouds though there are a few that are gray like woolen socks.

Abel doesn't notice any of this. He has eyes only for his green Ford Focus. His heart races and images of the staring congregation strike at him. As he unlocks his car he looks back for the first time. For some reason he expects someone to be running after him but there is no one there. The little middle-of-nowhere church seems tranquil and peaceful. He can only imagine what might be happening inside. Even though he refrained from saying anything he knows suspicions have arisen about his identity and if Leslie is right about him looking just like his father there is probably more than one person putting two and two together. He looks to the field. The Katherine lookalike is not there. Got to get out of here, he thinks and gets in his car and backs out of his spot in the gravel lot.

As he pulls onto the dirt road he glances over his shoulder just make to sure Leslie or Martha or Katherine isn't standing outside waving him down. No one.

ELEVEN

His first thought is to return to Texas. Leave it all behind. But to return to Dallas would be even worse. For he would be returning to the reality that he has impregnated a stranger; a girl he slept with one time. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, he thinks echoing a phrase Grandpa Saracen used a lot. He wonders what his grandpa would have to say to him now. What any of the Saracen family might say if they knew he was running around in the Oklahoma panhandle escaping his responsibilities. He wishes he could call his mother. He should have told her, he thinks. But he still has absolutely no signal on his cell phone. His gas gauge is low. He tries to remember the last gas station he passed while driving and recalls a small store with a boarded window and one gas pump. He isn't sure if it was even open and it might be the only gas station for a hundred miles for all he knows.

He takes a crumpled sheet of paper from his passenger seat and tries to read his directions in reverse. In the back of Abel's mind he hears Katherine's voice: *You'll know where to take it*. He reaches under his passenger seat and feels the shoebox. He pushes it and feels the heavy weight to make sure the revolver is still there. "Guess you shouldn't have taken that 'leap of faith'," Abel says out loud as if Katherine is sitting there next to him. He cranks up his stereo. There is static on the radio and just as he reaches to push the CD button, music comes through the static with crisp clarity. The song sounds familiar: a female artist with a 60's pop sound. Then it hits him and his face flushes. It is the same song that was playing in the café in Dallas when Katherine—the real Katherine—told him she was pregnant. It seems an eternity ago. The taste of blueberry

scone and Mountain Dew comes to him as he reminded of the reason he left Dallas for this funeral despite apathy toward Ray Marshall.

The song fades out into static again and Abel is snapped back to the present as his car fishtails on the dirt. He realizes he is driving way too fast for a little car on a dirt road. He slams on his brakes and jerks his wheel to straighten his car. His car slides around in a 180 and comes to a stop. Red dirt floats in the air around his car. Abel exhales a hard breath. The song fades in again. How long is this song? he thinks. Then he laughs hysterically convinced this trip could be the end of him. The song fades out again before quickly fading back in. A thought comes to him. Is this his sign? he thinks. *You'll know where to take it.* Maybe he is supposed to take the revolver back to Dallas; take it to the real Katherine. He laughs again at how absurd of a theory it is and begins driving again this time going much slower. Just get to the gas station and then go home. The adventure is over he tells himself with a sense of finality. Then he pushes the power button on his stereo and the song is gone.

The gas station is at the corner of a four-way stop where the dirt road intersects with a paved road that Abel remembers will lead him to the highway. The gas station still looks unoccupied. There are no other vehicles around. The store itself is little more than an old shack made from cracked boards with windows stretching along the entire front of the store, half of them boarded up.

He pulls up to the pump. The gas pump is old fashioned. There are two nozzles—one red, one black—both connected to black flexible hoses that connect to the

pump. The black nozzle is on the right and has a sign saying diesel while the red nozzle on the left side of the pump says unleaded. There are no buttons on the pump, only a latch by each nozzle. The gauge is reading all zeros so perhaps it still works. Abel checks his wallet. There is no slot on the pump for a credit card. He gets out and walks toward the store. As he nears he peeks through the window. There are no lights on and no one walking the aisles. The racks are mostly bare other than a bag of Cheetos here or can of tomato soup there as if the world has ended and someone raided the store. But when he reaches for the door it is unlocked. He opens it slowly and dips his head inside. No air conditioning and the humidity is suffocating. He notices a small fan resting on the front counter by the checkout panning back and forth as the blades whirl.

“Hello?” he says. He waits. No answer. “Anyone here?” he says more loudly.

There is a noise from the back of the tiny store. A door swings open but Abel can only see the very top of the door from behind the racks. “Yessum sir, come on in,” a voice says. Hesitantly Abel steps inside. Then a small boy comes around the side of a rack. Maybe nine, ten years old. He has a shaved head which is much bigger than his much-too-thin body giving the boy an unbalanced appearance like a melon on top of a baseball bat—it doesn’t make much sense.

“Sorry if I scared ya,” the boy says. “My pa says I ain’t hit my growth spurt yet.”

“It’s cool,” Abel says confounded that such a small boy is running the gas station. But when he thinks of where he is and what has already happened to him this morning it seems fitting. “You guys take cards?”

“Some days. If the machine is working. We can sure give it a shot though, mister.” The boy scratches his butt as he steps back behind the front counter. He wears a pair of cutoff jean shorts and a white undershirt tank top which is too big for him—probably his dad’s shirt—and has a big circular coffee stain on the front. He has no shoes or socks on.

Abel nods. “Sure. Let’s give it a shot. You guys got Mountain Dew?”

“Oh yeah we got all kinds of pop around here. We don’t get much customers ‘cept the locals and ranchers don’t drink as much pop as young fellas like you and me.”

Abel cannot help but smile a little as the boy lumps the two of them together.

“The name’s JoJo. JoJo Smith.”

“Abel.”

“Nice to meet ya, Mr. Abel. I’ll warm up the card machine if you want to get your pop. We got some deer jerky too.”

Abel hasn’t had deer jerky since he was a preteen—possibly the boy’s age. He would stay the weekend with his grandparents and Grandpa Saracen would make jerky. They would sit on the back porch eating jerky until his teeth hurt. It is a fond memory and Abel cannot think of the last time he has seen his grandparents much less spent a weekend with them. Probably Christmas, he thinks. Since he didn’t go to the family get-together for Easter because he had a girl over the night before and overslept on Easter morning. *You need to visit your grandparents.* His mother’s words come to him. *You never know how much longer they’ll be around.* Funny how he drove all the way to the

panhandle of Oklahoma to see the family he never knew, he thinks, when he wouldn't drive fifteen miles to visit his grandparents. Feeling a little guilty he shuffles to the back of the store where the coolers are located. The coolers are also not very full but sure enough Mountain Dew is there. An entire row of sparkling green in a clear plastic bottle situated as if it is the centerpiece of the collection of soda in the coolers. Abel takes out three bottles and carries them to the front counter. A display of the local deer jerky is next to the counter and Abel grabs a bag of it as well heeding the JoJo's suggestive sell. The boy smiles, proud of himself no doubt.

“You won't be disappointed, mister,” he says.

Abel nods.

JoJo slides Abel's card through the machine. “Looks like it's gonna work. It'll just take a minute.” Abel removes his tie and uses it to wipe sweat from his face. He feels as if he has been sweating all day and wonders if there is a point when a human stops sweating because he's sweated too much and fears he must be nearing that point. He notices JoJo eyeing his suit.

“Came from a funeral,” Abel says.

“You knew Mr. Ray?”

Of course the boy knows Ray Marshall. “Not exactly,” Abel says.

“Mr. Ray used to come in here all the time. Used to try giving me a knuckle sandwich. I didn't like that much. You kin from far off?”

Abel doesn't answer right away. His initial impulse is to stick to the story Leslie created but then he has the desire to tell this boy who he is. He says "Something like that."

"I can tell. You look like him. Like a Marshall."

Abel swallows hard thinking he'll never see for himself what Ray Marshall looks like.

"Well I didn't know him too much," JoJo says. "I don't talk to old people much." The card machine prints out a piece of paper and JoJo lays it on the counter before Abel. As Abel signs the receipt and slides it across the counter JoJo says "He used to carry this old gun around. Kept it hidden but he'd pull it out and show me when my pa wasn't around in the store."

Abel gazes at him, sparked by the coincidence that JoJo would mention the revolver. "An old gun, huh?"

"That's right. This old thing that don't work no more. All bent up and rusted. Mr. Ray told me secrets about it too. Told me never to tell no one and I didn't. I told him I take it to my grave. My pa likes to say that: 'I'll take that secret to my grave'."

More than a coincidence, Abel thinks, half expecting Katherine to come walking into the store at any moment. This is it, he thinks. "What kind of secrets?"

The boy smirks like ornery little boys do and seals his lips. Abel can take the hint but tries another tactic. Doing his best to mask his curiosity and appear bored he shrugs

and says “Sounds like a piece of crap worthless pistol anyhow” in his best Okie impression. “It doesn’t even work you said.”

The boy’s smirk disintegrates. Abel takes his copy of the receipt and plastic grocery sack of Mountain Dew and deer jerky and turns toward the exit.

“It ain’t just a worthless pistol,” JoJo says.

Abel stops and shrugs. “If you say so.” He pushes the door.

He is halfway through the door thinking JoJo might be a better secret keeper than he thought when JoJo hollers “It was carried by a outlaw.”

Abel looks over his shoulder and raises an eyebrow. “Outlaw?”

“Yep. Mr. Ray said he was Marshall blood from a long long time ago. In the Wild West. He was only a outlaw ‘cause he used the gun to go around killing these guys from a gang because they killed his pa.”

Abel walks back to the counter. He can see the boy puffing his chest. He has a story to tell and an audience to tell it to and couldn’t be happier about it, Abel thinks.

“So this guy—this relative of Ray Marshall’s—hunted down the men that killed his pa.”

“That’s what Mr. Ray told me. They was called The Devil’s Hand gang. But they wasn’t much of a gang when this guy hunted them down. They was old people then.”

JoJo leans over the counter. He is sitting on a high stool with a thick hardback dictionary on the seat under him. "This guy with the gun," he says. "When he finds the last guy from The Devil's Hand gang, he chases him up to Black Mesa. Just over yonder. Then kills him dead. That was the last time the gun was used to kill a man."

"Then what?"

JoJo shrugs. "He goes back home I guess and gives the gun to his nephew."

Abel thinks of the man on the black horse from the grave service in the woods. He recalls the wintery breath coming from his own mouth, his frozen fingers, and numb wet nose. He sees in his mind the man handing the boy the revolver. Sees the way its silver shines.

"And that's all he told you?" Abel asks.

"Yep. And now you know my secret. You ain't FBI, are ya?"

"Maybe," Abel says. "Maybe not. But don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

JoJo seems unconvinced. He reaches his hand out. "Shake on it."

Abel shakes his hand. The boy has a solid grip. "You have my word," Abel says.

JoJo grins wide. "Sure enough." Abel gathers his plastic bag while in his mind he considers what the boy has told him. It leads him to one conclusion. Black Mesa. The place where the revolver was allegedly last used to kill a man.

"How would someone get to Black Mesa from here?"

TWELVE

After leaving the gas station with a full tank he finds himself back on a dirt road. JoJo wrote down directions to Black Mesa on receipt paper but his handwriting is hard to decipher. He is only a mile from the gas station when a truck pulls off a side road in front of him. Abel slams his brakes and his car fishtails again but stops. The truck creeps along slowly. There is a single block of hay in the bed and the tailgate is down. Abel imagines the bale of hay sliding off and crashing into his front windshield. He is about to pass the truck when the truck comes to a stop in the middle of the road and its hazard lights come on. Abel stops his car wondering if they need help. Dust blows around the truck from its abrupt stop. Then the door opens and out climbs a large burly man. Abel recognizes him immediately. Elo Marshall. He lifts his large hand in the air and waves.

Oh great, Abel thinks hesitant to get out. Worried that Elo might be upset by the way he interrupted the funeral and stormed out. Elo walks toward his car still wearing the overalls and camouflage t-shirt he wore at the funeral. Abel takes off his seatbelt and steps out of his car knowing it would be rude to not do so. His stomach—now full of deer jerky—feels empty. At this point his tie and suit jacket are laying in his passenger seat and his button-up shirt is untucked, half-unbuttoned—exposing his white v-neck t-shirt—and his sleeves are rolled up. He rounds the front of his car and leans against the hood.

“I thought that was you,” Elo says with a laugh. “What a co-inky-dink.”

“How about that,” Abel says. His nerves ease after the large man’s cordial approach. They shake hands.

“Never thought I would see you again,” Elo says.

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

Elo shrugs. “Whelp, cannot say I blame you for not seeing the thing through. Once you left it was pretty obvious what was going on.”

Abel squints as he looks up at Elo and inadvertently into the sun. “Really?”

“You look just like him. Plus I did the math in my head and Ray was in between wives at the time.”

“Still I wouldn’t expect people to draw that conclusion. I mean he was some kind of hero around here, right?”

Elo laughs hardily. “I would not say that. It was his funeral, Abel. You think Pastor Walt is going to be up there talking about Ray’s wild oats days?”

Abel considers it and smiles with the sense of a small victory. Perhaps they did know Ray Marshall by his true colors after all. But then the same dilemma he had considered during the funeral comes to mind. If everyone knew about his “wild oats days” and still thought of him as a good man, had he changed by the time he died?

“There’s a difference between sowing wild oats and abandoning a woman you impregnate.”

Elo grunts. “You got a point. I ain’t here to argue about Ray’s character. Just trying to reassure you that the fine people of the panhandle do not hate you.”

Abel wants to ask about Leslie but he doesn’t, afraid of what Elo might say.

“That’s good to know,” he says. He glances at his watch pretending to check the time but it still doesn’t work. “I guess I need to hit the road.”

“Headed home?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. Well you are headed the wrong direction if you’re trying to get to Dallas.”

Abel wonders if he should tell him. Elo can probably tell him more about the revolver, maybe even help him. But in the back of his mind something tells him not to confide in Elo. The man stares at him waiting for an answer as if he knows Abel is up to something.

“I’m—really? The wrong direction?”

Elo laughs. “Texans in Oklahoma. Never fails. The grave service is soon. They’re still at the church right now. But I might could lead ya back to the highway.”

“No that’s fine,” Abel says. “I’ll find my way.”

“Right,” Elo says. He can see right through you, Abel thinks. He is unnerved again. Abel begins to sidle around to the driver’s side of his car. “Before you go,” Elo says. He stands really close to Abel now looking down at him. “I was wondering about something. Ray had this revolver, a family heirloom of sorts. Passed from father to son, generation to generation. Since you’re his son and all, I was wondering if he might have left it to you.”

Abel shakes his head. "I'd hardly say I'm his son. I'm sure he would have left something like that to Tom." He reaches for his car door and Elo slaps his hand against it. He chuckles as if to ease the tension, to say he means him no harm which only makes Abel more nervous.

"I already asked Tom. He does not have it."

"Maybe he didn't feel like leaving it to someone." Abel stares at Elo's hand still pressed against his car door.

"I have to admit something," Elo says. Abel can feel his hot breath but keeps his eyes low. "It is no co-inky-dink that I found you out here. I left the funeral shortly after you did once I put it together that you were Ray's son. I went by the gas station and little JoJo told me you had been there. Said he gave you directions to Black Mesa."

"Just thought I might as well check out the one tourist attraction this place has to offer."

"JoJo told me you asked about the revolver, Abel. That boy loves to blab about the secrets he keeps."

"He brought it up. Not me."

"Son, I understand you don't want to talk much about this stuff. You never met your pa and then he leaves you some ole gun. This is probably very strange to you. And normally I would not pry into your personal business. But I must tell ya, that revolver has a lot of meaning to me. And I would like to see it remain close by. If not with Tom, then with myself."

Elo speaks calmly but his body language is hostile. He stands as if he might pounce on Abel like a bear protecting its cubs. Abel knows the man is not asking for him to give him the revolver but insisting on it.

“I can see why you’d want it to stay here,” Abel says. “Sentimental value and all that.” Elo nods his head and grunts. “But I have a feeling this gun is—” Abel pauses. There is no way to explain what happened to him this morning. “—important.”

“If you only knew,” Elo says with a crackle in his voice. The desk in Elo’s trailer comes to Abel’s mind. The countless notes and cutout obituaries and letters. Abel can now truly sense Elo’s obsession with the revolver. He looks up at the man finally and looks him in the eye. For a brief moment the longing is still there visible in his dark eyes. The longing for the revolver; the longing Abel himself feels when holding the weapon. Then Elo blinks and hides any emotion from his eyes. “That is why I think it needs to stay with me,” he says. “Because it is important.”

Abel knows he cannot say no. He has never felt so alone as he and Elo stand squared off, no houses or other vehicles in sight. Just the dirt road and the plains of the Oklahoma panhandle. The short grass and hot wind. Tumbleweed slowly crosses the road like a turtle. Abel fears what Elo will do if he says no. Yet he cannot give it up. He is twenty-four years old after all. A man in his own right. He shrugs. “He wanted me to have it.”

Elo stands still his eyes half-closed and Abel is ready to run if Elo attacks him.

“Ya know Abel,” Elo says slowly. “Little JoJo probably did not tell ya everything about that outlaw.” He clears his throat. “Ya see when that outlaw finally tracked down

the last of the Devil's Hand gang and cornered him atop Black Mesa, he told that man 'I'm here to avenge my father whom you and your gang killed right in front of me.' And he lifted the revolver and aimed at the man. Well the man just stared at him confused but before he says anything the boy shoots him down. 'Course the truth is they didn't kill the boy's father. Wade Marshall didn't get murdered. No sir, he left *with* the Devil's Hand gang that day. Because he used to be a member himself."

Elo pauses to let Abel process the story. "Ya see, Abel, this poor boy was so baffled and distraught that his pa would leave him, he created a story in his mind that this gang murdered him right before his eyes and then spent the next decade of his life perfecting his aim and then avenging his father's death. Now no one knows why Wade Marshall left his son standing alone in the field while he rode off with his old gang. Some say they were struggling and that he was gonna rob a train and then come back home but no knows really. All we know is he did not come back and that poor boy went through life denying the truth. Make-believing that his life was important and meaningful because he did not have his pa there to tell him it meant something."

Abel remains silent as Elo takes a deep breath.

"Abel, you are kidding yourself if you think you have some kind of destiny with this gun. This gun belongs with a Marshall."

"Screw you," Abel says. He grabs his door handle and tries to pull the door open. Elo grabs Abel by the throat and flings him backward with ease.

"This is not a game, son," Elo says.

Abel stumbles to the ground and begins coughing, his throat burning. He realizes just what Elo is willing to do and again notices just how alone they are.

Reluctantly he nods. "All right."

There is movement in Elo's face and Abel assumes he is smiling though he cannot tell through the tangle of beard and mustache. Abel steps around to the passenger side of his car. His steps are slow and deliberate as if Elo will change his mind if he takes long enough. He reaches under the seat and takes out the Justin's Boots shoebox. Elo watches him with his arms crossed.

"Just tell me something," Abel says. "Why is this gun so important?"

"It is more than just a gun to me." Abel feels like there is more than Elo is telling him. Oh well, he thinks. Sorry, Katherine. He hands the box to Elo who immediately opens it and removes the revolver. The box falls to the dirt at his feet and he holds the revolver close to his face and looks as if nothing else in the world matters. He wonders if this was how Ray Marshall had been and those before him who had the revolver. There is a rumble in the sky and Abel sees dark clouds to the west. Elo lowers the revolver to his side.

"Looks like we are in for some weather," he says observing the clouds to the west.

"Looks like it," Abel says.

"That's good. It's been awful dry around here. Whelp I should be going. You can keep the box." Elo kicks the shoebox out of his way and walks back toward his truck

without another word. He has no reason to humor Abel anymore now that he has what he wants. He clambers into his truck and drives away. Abel picks up the shoebox and shakes off the dirt. He climbs into his car and again there is a clap of thunder. He feels defeated and is angry at himself for feeling this way. "It is just a stupid gun," he says aloud thinking that it is because the revolver was Ray Marshall's that he cares so much and wonders if perhaps like the boy in the story he is imagining things. But that's that, he thinks. Time to move on. He wonders if what Elo told him about the people from the funeral is true. Are the friends and family of Ray Marshall really not angry at him for disrupting the funeral service? He feels unsatisfied. The day has left him with more questions than when he arrived. And yet he knows if he can get back to Dallas back to his life then he can forget all about this—or so he tells himself. More problems await him in Dallas. He is not ready to be a father. And Katherine is a stranger. He knows nothing about her. Does she even have a job? He has to finish college before he can support a family. Maybe she took care of it, he thinks and he prays she got the abortion. It's the right thing to do.

He crumples up JoJo's directions to Black Mesa and tosses it on the floorboard. He turns his car around in the middle of the road. Just as he straightens his steering wheel and begins to backtrack to the gas station he sees her. Standing in the middle of the road is Katherine.

She stands with her arms pressed flat against her sides and her thin summer dress blows back in the wind tight against her skin and Abel can see her perfect curves and is reminded of seeing her naked in his apartment. How gorgeous she is. He gets out of his car and sees that she is shivering. He runs toward her and stops short of grabbing her and

lifting her into his arms, frightened by what he sees. She is pale and her cracked lips are blue.

“Katherine?” he says.

“Y-You g-gave it to him,” she says obviously freezing.

“Hold on,” he says and runs to his car and gets his jacket. He returns to her and flings the jacket around her and holds her close to him. He rubs her arm and it is ice cold opposite of the scorching heat of it the first time he saw her this morning. “Are you okay?” he says.

“Y-You weren’t s-supposed to give it to h-him.”

Abel gets defensive. “How was I supposed to know?” he says though he did know. “You never told me anything. Just that I would know where to take the stupid thing.”

“And y-you do know n-now.”

“What’s going on here? Why does this matter? Am I crazy?”

“He’s c-coming.” Again he hears thunder in the distance. This is absurd, he thinks though the last thing he wants to do is laugh. He feels as if he is in a disaster movie but it is not entertaining as it is for the audience. He is frightened and realizes how little he actually sympathizes with the character’s plight in a disaster movie.

“Who’s coming?” he asks.

“The r-revolver’s rightful owner. As long as it was passed from one generation to the n-next it was hidden. Until it could be returned or destroyed.”

Abel continues rubbing her body but she is not warming up. The sense that this is all his fault weighs down on him. But how can this be his responsibility? It is Ray Marshall’s fault. Suddenly he pulls away from her, his own body growing cold now.

“This is ridiculous,” he yells. “I’m going crazy. I’ve watched too many movies and now I’m going crazy because of that stupid bastard Ray Marshall.”

Katherine crosses her arms and shivers. His jacket remains covering her like a poncho much too big for her. She shakes her head. “You’re n-not crazy, Abel.”

“Sorry, Katherine, but you’re just a figment of my imagination. I mean seriously think about it. You look just like a girl I impregnated. And you’re trying to send me off on some crazy adventure but you won’t even tell me why or how or anything. And why’s that? Because you don’t know because *I* don’t know.” Even as he says these things he is confused. Despite his words he is convinced this is real. Convinced she is real. Her skin against his skin is as real as the night they slept together. But he steps away from her.

“P-Please Abel, it’s not too late. You have to hurry. Take the revolver where you know to take it. He’s coming. He will destroy this land. These people.”

Abel’s face is flushed. His heart pounds at his chest like a prisoner held captive. He backs all the way to his car never taking his eyes off Katherine. And he has reached a point he can only think of her as Katherine. That the freezing girl before him in his suit jacket is the same scared girl seated before at the café, the same angry girl who called

him a jackass, the same girl who lured him in at the club with her mischievous smile, the same sexy girl who satisfied him to completion that night. More thunder erupts behind him as he climbs into his seat. He looks in the rearview mirror and sees a flash of lightning in the distant dark clouds. And in that brief moment in which his eyes are away from Katherine she disappears. He is alone and for a moment he is still. Then anger rises through his body. Through his fear and confusion. He slams his fist against his steering wheel and his horn blares loudly as he screams. “Damnitdamnitdamnitdamn!” he shouts.

Water trickles from his eyes—tears of anger—but they only last a minute and then he takes a deep breath. As his breath exhales his anger seems to go with it. And he is left unsure what to do. Then he sees something ahead of him. Maybe miles away up the road because the land is very flat in this direction. Is his craziness causing him to see more imaginary things? But as he remains parked on his side of the dirt road it comes nearer and he begins to see more clearly the long row of cars. At the front is the hearse. As is customary when driving opposite the road from a funeral caravan he stays parked but has an urge to hide and considers laying his seat back so he is out of view of the passersby. Instead he waits nervous and embarrassed. The hearse rolls past slowly and the tinted windows do not allow Abel to see inside. He imagines Leslie and her stepmother and Tom staring at him from inside. He imagines them maybe even cussing him. He cannot help but think Leslie in particular is angry at him. He had promised her he would not reveal himself at the funeral; that he would draw as little attention to himself as possible. And though he did refrain from blurting out to the congregation he is the bastard and abandoned son of Ray Marshall, he knows leaving in the middle of the service with all eyes on him most likely had about the same effect. As the hearse passes

he is stuck watching the rest of the long line of vehicles pass most of which do not have tinted windows. He nods to each and then sees Martha's truck. She looks at him with sorrowful eyes and even appears guilty as if she didn't raise Ray Marshall correctly and it is her fault he left Abel's mother. He nods at her as well and wishes to let her off the hook. To tell her it is not her fault but Ray Marshall's alone. He can tell she wants to stop but the caravan must keep moving out of respect for the deceased. Screw the deceased, Abel thinks, still harvesting his anger toward Ray Marshall, perhaps even more so now that his absent father's decisions have obviously upset Martha. He continues his slight nods at the others most of whom gaze at him as if they feel sorry for him. This only makes Abel mad and embarrassed.

The last vehicle to pass is the truck with the hay bale in the back. Elo must have caught up with them. To Elo, he doesn't nod but only glares trying his best to impersonate the glare Tom had given him at the funeral. On the other hand, Elo raises his entire arm out of his window and waves at Abel. He hollers something but Abel cannot hear him through his closed window. Elo spins his tires as he goes by causing dirt to fly into the air around Abel's car. The wind pushes the dirt away from his car until it disintegrates. He waits watching the caravan go farther and farther away until it turns left onto another road. He realizes he is burning up with his car windows rolled up and no air conditioning on. He turns the key in the ignition. Nothing.

Another clap of thunder.

"You got to be kidding me." He takes another deep breath to control his emotions. He tries the key again and the car again refuses to start. "Whyyyyy!" he cries

looking upward as if God is behind all of this. But in reality he doesn't know where God stands in all of this. Instead he insists on blaming Ray Marshall for this situation. He waits another minute. Checks the rain clouds in his rearview mirror. Then he says "Okay." And exits his car.

The gas station is less than a mile up road. He begins walking in that direction. The sweet scent of honeysuckle hangs in the air. It calms him, gives him hope. Then he sees a truck up ahead. Two trucks in fact. Confounded, certain there were no vehicles anywhere ahead of him just moments before but like the honeysuckle he doesn't argue this positive change to his luck. He begins a light jog toward the vehicles.

He sees a man stepping out of each truck. "Hey," he shouts waving at them. The men don't notice him and he thinks the strong wind might have muted him. But the closer he gets the more he knows they should have seen him by now. His jog slows to a walk as he realizes what is happening. It isn't the first time this day he has been completely ignored invisible to the gathered party. Both men are tall but one is skinny while the other is robust. The thin man wears a crewneck t-shirt and faded Wrangler jeans with work boots. He has a goatee and mustache and a full head of hair that is completely gray though he only looks middle-aged. The large man is also middle-aged—perhaps a bit younger than the other—and has overalls on with a white t-shirt. He is clean-shaven but as Abel approaches he begins to see a strong resemblance. The lack of beard causes hesitation but there is no doubt this big man is Elo Marshall only younger.

Abel walks right up to them saying "Hello" one more time because it is just too strange to think these men cannot see him. He touches the truck. It is real. Hot from the

summer heat caked with dried dirt on the side. He wonders for a moment what would happen if he was to touch one of the men but is too scared to do it. Instead he listens to their conversation which seems to be all he is capable of doing during these scenes from the past.

“I don’t know, Roy,” Elo says. His voice is the same sonorous tone as it was less than an hour ago when he took the revolver from Abel and it is weird seeing this clean-shaven less weathered version of Elo talking with the exact same voice like a pubescent boy much too small to elicit such a deep voice. “I love your son but he does not care about the pistol. It is a waste to give it to him.”

“And you think I should give it to you?” Roy’s voice is scratchy but calm. Monotone compared to the range in his brother’s. Abel studies Elo’s face for without the beard it is much easier to see the twitch to his upper lip, the way he disguises his anger in a dimple-less round cheek smile. “I know you want the pistol, Elo. You always were more interested in it than I was. But you know the rules. You know how this thing goes. I *have* to give it to Ray or risk—” He pauses. Abel urges him to continue speaking but knows the man cannot hear him.

Elo lets out a grunt. “It’s BS. You and me both know that. Hell, if that is not all bologna then what is the point of all this passing it down from generation to generation. It ain’t got no end?”

Roy shrugs. “I don’t know, but there is no point in us arguing here. Now you make me meet ya out here ‘cause you’re afraid of who might listen when we talk about

the pistol and now you're saying it is not important and the legends ain't. I do not know what to make of you, Elo."

Elo sighs. Abel can see how desperately he wants the revolver and truly believes great harm would have come to him if he had not willingly given the revolver to Elo. And yet he feels guilty. Roy Marshall seems levelheaded but he will not break the rules. Abel wishes to know what he knows. He thinks of Katherine's frigid body in his arms. *He's coming. He will destroy this land. These people.* Elo tucks his hands into his overalls and looks up at the sky. For the first time Abel notices the weather is different. A blue sky with a cool breeze, probably springtime.

The silence lingers. Elo seems to be trying to get a grip on emotions as if an internal struggle rages and Abel is reminded of the conflicted feeling he had when gripping the revolver. Elo shakes his head and walks back to his truck.

"Why don't we go up to Wyoming next week," Roy says. "Get outta Cimarron County for a while."

"Sounds all right to me," Elo says without looking back. He climbs into his truck and pulls away waving back out of his window. Roy returns the wave and stands for another moment. He scratches under his neck where his goatee comes to an end. He sighs deeply as if he has held his breath this entire time. His eyes are bright green like Abel's but are also bloodshot and his eyelids sag from lack of sleep. The man appears older like a man at the end of his life and Abel realizes he is probably close to the age at which he passed away. Roy climbs into the truck and drives leaving Abel standing among the cloud of dust. When the dust settles the cool breeze has disappeared and the

heat has intensified. The clear blue sky is gone replaced by clouds, a scorching sun, and dark clouds to the west which release an eruption of thunder. Abel looks ahead toward where he knows the gas station is, then peers back at his broken down car and past it to the side road where the funeral caravan of mourners turned left toward the cemetery. He knows it goes against reason but he walks back toward his car. He passes the car. As much as he tells himself he is crazy he cannot help but be drawn to believe this is all real. To believe he must get the revolver back. The image of Katherine in pain freezing to death haunts him. If there is even a possibility that she is real shouldn't he do what he can to help?

And so he finds himself walking in the heat of the day once again but this time he has a plastic sack with two and a half twenty-ounce bottles of Mountain Dew. He takes off his button-up long sleeve shirt and wraps it around his waist tying the sleeves together in a knot. His feet still ache from his morning hike but he seems to have stopped sweating. Oh no, he thinks wondering if he has reached that point where his body has sweated out. It gives him no reservations though. He walks with purpose and turns left onto the other road, hoping the cemetery isn't too far away.

THIRTEEN

The land around him is brownish green contrasting with the reddish brown dirt. The humidity has not let up since the morning and in fact is worse now in the afternoon. The hot wind is getting stronger as the storm clouds approach slowly from the west to his right. He has been walking the road he last saw the caravan turn onto for what seems like an hour though is probably more like half an hour. There have been no other roads so he knows he still on the right road. And though there are slight hills here and there he can see far enough to the left and right to know if there was a cemetery out there—at least he hopes he can. He has finished off his first bottle of Mountain Dew, dropped the empty bottle in the ditch, and then picked it up after feeling guilty for littering. He knows Mountain Dew might be hurting him more than it helps but since he doesn't know for sure he'd rather quench his thirst momentarily and hope to find water soon. Hope. He finds himself hoping for a lot and making a lot of assumptions. His sense of his own mortality is at an all-time high—more real and raw than it was when his high school classmate drowned—and Abel has rolled the dice. He can see them now. Headlines on some major news network: YOUNG MAN DIES WHILE TRYING TO FIND HIS FATHER'S FUNERAL—HIS FATHER HE NEVER MET! It reads more like a tabloid headline than one from a news channel but would certainly draw an audience either way. Abel would be posthumously famous but no one would ever know the real truth. A sour taste fills his mouth at the thought that the locals would think he died because he wanted to be with his dead father. It provides him with more resolve to keep moving even though his legs throb and he has a pounding headache. *He's coming.* The ominous words of Katherine seem closer to his consciousness the farther he walks. Could she

mean the approaching storm? Taking a revolver to Black Mesa is not going to stop that storm, he thinks. He finds a busted tree branch in the ditch and uses a solid long piece as a walking stick. He feels like an old man. He comes upon a tiny hill and leans heavily on the stick to get over it. On the other side of the hill is a side road and he pauses. He stands at the top of the hill and tries to look down the road but he cannot see too far. Ahead of him he can also not make out much other than more road. He digs into his pant pockets hoping to have a coin to flip. No coin. He curses under his breath and randomly chooses to go straight. Then out of the corner of his eye he glimpses a shade of dark green in the ditch. He takes a better look and sees there is a sign half buried beneath the grass. The sign reads CEMETERY → 1 MI. "Thank God," he says realizing how close he was to going the wrong way. The walking stick creaks with every other step he takes.

FOURTEEN

As he approaches the cemetery he stays closer to the ditch trying to avoid being seen. The cemetery is to the right as the dirt road continues onward to the west. The dark clouds are not far off now. The wind knocks him off balance every so often. He stops just outside of the cemetery and leans down near the ground and peers out at the many rows of headstones. It is a small cemetery overall but bigger than he would expect out here. He wonders if it is a Marshall family cemetery or public. He sees no signs outside the entrance of the cemetery saying what its name is.

He spots the large crowd of people all dressed as they were at the church. Many women appear uncomfortable as they hold their hands down against their skirts which threaten to blow wildy in the wind. He sees they are just now unloading the casket from the hearse which is parked next to a fresh pile of dirt and open grave. The headstone is large and square but Abel cannot read the inscription from his viewpoint. He sees Elo standing with a group of elderly men including the two who sat with them at lunch. Tom is among the pallbearers as they carry the casket. All eyes are on them.

Now's the time, Abel thinks and sneaks up among the vehicles which are all parked nearer to him beyond the cemetery. He hops the barbed wire fence and sprints in a crouched position until he is hidden behind an SUV. He scans the vehicles for Elo's truck. It is on the back row—farthest away from the gravesite. Abel begins thinking this might go extremely smoothly.

He runs to the truck and does a forward roll like he's in an action movie. He peeks up over the truck and sees the casket is being attached to a machine which will

lower it down after the last words are spoken. He checks the truck's door. Unlocked. Slowly he opens it worried the door might creak or make some other annoyingly loud noise but the wind would probably disguise any noise he might make. He climbs into the seat and checks under the seats keeping an eye on the crowd. No one pays him any attention. They all watch the casket their backs to Abel. Nothing under the seats but gravel and dried mud. He checks the glove compartment. Only unpaid tickets and napkins inside. He sighs. Of course.

He closes the glove compartment and considers his options. He could wait until Elo comes back to his truck and try and swipe the revolver from wherever he has it on his person. He could attend the funeral and then tell Elo about everything that has happened to him and hope not only that Elo doesn't think he is crazy but also is willing to return the weapon to him. Or he could try to sneak up on Elo now while they're distracted. All options seem like a bad idea. But if there are people Elo is less likely to kill him if he swipes the revolver off of him. The logic seems solid to Abel. He allows himself a brief moment to laugh at his predicament. But nothing about this is funny to him. .

Quietly he climbs out of the truck and closes the door. He sees the back of Leslie's head—her long braid resting between her shoulder blades—in the middle of the crowd. Maybe if he could get her attention he could tell her Elo stole the revolver from him and maybe—just maybe—she will help him. Convinced this is his best chance he sneaks around the vehicles and approaches the gravesite from the most conspicuous angle he can.

Pastor Walt is talking boisterously to be heard over the wind. He holds the Bible tight against his chest as he waves his hand around in the air. Abel cannot hear what he is saying but begins weaving between distracted people silently. No one says anything to him but instead merely look at him curiously. He reaches Leslie quickly and taps her lightly on the shoulder. When she sees him her bright green eyes go wide. He glances past her at Elo. There are enough people between them that he doesn't think the burly man sees him. Abel raises his index finger to his lips and then motions for her to follow him. She shakes her head.

He feels eyes burning into the back of his head. He knows he doesn't have much time before he is the center of attention. This slightly amuses him—as it would make him happy to draw more attention away from Ray Marshall during his final moments above ground—but knows it would ruin any chance he might have to explain things to Leslie. He nods violently and she shakes her head in return. He grabs her arm and tries to pull her. She rips her arm away. “No!” she shouts. “Abel this is not the time for this.”

Uh oh, Abel thinks. People are now staring at him as they did at the church service and Pastor Walt has stopped talking. Abel raises his hands. “Nothing to see here,” he says. The pallbearers led by Tom march toward him as Elo pushes from the other side. “Leslie, listen, I need your help. The gun. I need to get the gun from Elo.” He does his best to keep his voice down but worries she didn't hear him over the wind.

She appears confused. “Abel can we please get through this first?” For the first time he sees beyond her pokerfaced expression and realizes she is pleading with him. That she needs to get through the funeral without any more interruptions and he sees how

much she is hurting. Her green eyes take on a glint Abel has never had in his own green eyes. In the glint is a love for her father Abel does not know; a longing to have him standing next to her rather than in the casket. But he's not in the casket. The intimidating men are fast approaching but time seems to slow as Abel and Leslie stare at each other.

"He's not in the casket," Abel hears himself say aloud. He feels as if he is floating above his body watching the scene unfold.

"What?" Leslie says. "Of course he is."

"I need to get the gun," he repeats.

An idea comes to him. Maybe she'll listen if she sees that her father isn't in the casket. Maybe they all will. Just then Elo steps in front of Leslie. Abel sees a rope tied around his neck and hanging from it on display is the revolver. Elo is wearing it proudly. The pallbearers approach from behind him. Abel leaps toward the casket.

"There's something weird happening, Leslie," he shouts. "Your father isn't in here." He lifts the top half of the casket and freezes. Before him resting in the casket is the unmoving body of a stranger. The body of Ray Marshall.

Ray Marshall's body from the waist up. His arms stiff at his side. He does not wear a suit but instead has a solid black western pearl-snap button-up shirt and a turquoise bolo tie tightened at the collar of his shirt. His face is familiar for it is much like Abel's own, only older. The man has a strong jaw and a round chin. His nose is

proportionate to his face like Abel's but has a crooked and jagged bone structure like the top of a mountain ridge as if it has been broken. His hair is blonde with streaks of gray. Though his eyes are closed, Abel knows how green they are.

"I don't understand," Abel says. He turns around just in time to see Tom's fist sailing toward his face. The punch brings him back to his body from floating above it. The pain is searing and immediate and his eyes go dark as he feels himself falling into the casket. His arm falls against the rigid body of Ray Marshall's corpse before he tumbles into the open grave and is stuck between the casket and the dirt. He opens his eyes and red spots fill his vision. Then he feels hands pulling him out and lifting him in the air. His vision clears.

"I'm not crazy," he says trying to locate Leslie but his sense of direction is lost and he ends up only staring at the sky noticing the dark clouds getting closer. "There wasn't a body in there earlier."

He realizes talking about the body only makes him sound crazier. He changes tactic as his feet drag against the grass. "I have to get the gun or we're all in trouble." He looks forward as he is dragged away from the crowd and gravesite now. He sees Tom staring at him angry as another young man holds him back.

"Tom!" Abel shouts. "Get the gun. We have to take it to the mesa. He's coming for it." Tom continues to glare at him ferociously. The men carrying Abel drop him to the ground, one of whom is, of course, Elo. The other two men are pallbearers. They look at Abel like he is a lunatic. Maybe he is, he thinks. They shake their heads and turn

back to the grave service and Elo pats them on the back. Then Elo leans down with a grunt. The revolver dangles in the air from the rope around his neck.

“Abel, Abel, Abel,” he says. “Listen, son, I understand you are probably hurting. Hell, you’re hurting in a way no one at this funeral can be possibly understand. But this is unacceptable.”

“But it’s acceptable for you to threaten me into giving you the gun.”

Elo’s hand reaches for the revolver and palms it as he brushes his index and middle fingers against it slightly. “You gave me the revolver, son. Now do not go being an Indian giver. Got enough of them around here already.” The big man laughs his booming laugh and Abel is sure the ground shakes around him. “Now where’s your car at?”

“Where I passed the cars going to the cemetery,” Abel admits. “It broke down.”

Elo chuckles. “Damn, son,” he says. “It’s turning out to be a horrible day for ya.”

“I guess so.”

For a moment Abel worries what Elo is going to do to him. Then he sees Martha approaching. “I’ll give him a ride after the service,” she says. “You can go back now, Elo.”

“Martha, see that your son is put in the ground. I’ll take care of this.”

“That’s mighty considerate of you, brother-in-law, but there’s no need.”

“Martha, I must insist—”

“—He’s my grandson, Elo. Let me help him.”

Abel’s heart flutters when she calls him her grandson and he feels something like pride.

Elo falls silent. He takes another look at Abel, sighs, and then stands with a grunt, his knees popping. Martha stands straight and looks him in the eye as he clammers past.

The crowd watches until Elo reaches them and says something and points. Onlookers seem bewildered as they give long glares in Abel and Martha’s direction.

“Just go to my truck, Abel, and wait there.” Martha says. She pulls a pack of cigarettes from her purse. “Cigarette?”

He shakes his head. She replaces the pack and returns to the gravesite.

Abel waits in her truck and watches as men shovel dirt onto the casket.

FIFTEEN

After sitting in Martha's truck as they drive along—the wind blowing his hair back through the open window—the situation doesn't seem as dour. Instead it is his sanity that has reached a low point. He feels tired the weight of the emotional day taking its toll.

“Why was it a closed casket ceremony?” Abel says. “Was his body mangled or something?”

“His poor wife couldn't handle it, says Leslie,” Martha answers. She has just finished one cigarette and is pulling another from the pack.

Abel pauses then says “Do you think I'm crazy?”

She looks at him. He can see how conflicted she is learning of her adult grandson on the day of her son's funeral. A tinge of guilt hits him.

“It has been a long and stressful day for ya,” she says. “People crack sometimes in these situations.”

Abel half-grins, one dimple showing. “You shoot straight, Martha. Thank you. I need to hear it.”

“Then again strange things have been known to happen around here.”

“Like what?”

“Mostly UFO sightings. That sort of thing.”

“So I’m one of *those* people.” Abel laughs which causes a pain in his face from where he was hit. He examines his battle wound. A large purple streak is forming over his right cheekbone and it has a slight swell.

Martha laughs too. She reaches out and pats Abel on the leg. “You’ll be all right, Abel. Just need to get back to civilization. Preferably be that storm hits. Looks like a big one.”

Abel takes a moment to study the sky. A strange contrast seeing the bright sun and clear above them against the dark sky to the west. “It seemed to come out of nowhere.”

“That it did.”

There is a prolonged silence and they both depart to their thoughts and Abel considers telling her everything. All about the other crazy things which led him to opening Ray Marshall’s casket but he cannot bring himself to talk about out loud for fear that hearing the story told aloud will only make him feel worse about the state of his conscious mind. They come upon his car parked in the middle of the dirt road where he left it.

Martha laughs. “Funny thing is this ain’t all that out of the ordinary to see an abandoned car in the road.”

“It’s got to be tough not having a reliable car out here. With no one around for miles.”

“That’s true. ‘Course the park ranger from Black Mesa State Park drives these roads pretty often.”

Abel hadn’t even considered that there was a state park at the Black Mesa. “It’s close to here then?” he asks.

“The Mesa? Yep, not too far away. Just west.” She points.

They get out of her truck and pop the hood to his car and Martha takes a look making an *mmhmm* noise as she exams the motor.

“You know what’s wrong?” he asks.

“Not a clue,” she says. She closes the hood. “Let’s just go down to the gas station and see if we can call someone out here.” They walk back toward her truck and then Abel sees another truck slide around onto the road from the direction of the side road to the cemetery. The black truck with large tires spins out and races toward them. What now, he thinks. Martha stares at the approaching truck with a concerned expression.

“What is it?” Abel says.

“It’s Tom.” There is a sudden ache in Abel’s bruised cheekbone.

“Back to finish a job,” Abel jokes but Martha doesn’t laugh and he is concerned it might be true. No sucker punches this time, Abel thinks wondering if his height advantage over Tom will make up for his lack of fighting experience. Probably not he decides. He has never been in a fight before and never even punched anyone.

The black truck pulls right up alongside Martha's truck. Abel stands on the opposite side more at ease with Martha *and* her truck between he and Tom. Tom climbs out of his truck and walks around to the side nearer them. He stands with his arms crossed and peers past his grandmother at Abel.

Before Martha says anything Tom says "You're not crazy." Abel glances around him as if Tom must be talking to someone else.

"You came over here to tell me that?" he says.

"I believe you." Tom pauses. "And I've got a plan."

"Is this about that damn gun?" Martha says.

"Yes, Grandma."

Abel can see she has a very low opinion of the revolver and he wonders if she had to deal with her own husband's obsession over the revolver and he thinks of the last scene from the past he witnessed. The conversation between Elo and his brother—Martha's husband. He wishes to tell her about it. To tell her that her husband didn't really care about the revolver only that it continue to go from father to son—generation to generation. But he imagines she already knows.

"You say we need to take the gun to the Mesa. Why?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I just think it's important."

Tom squints and stares, his arms still crossed. Abel wonders after a long moment if he is going to say anything and then he says "Get in the truck." Martha looks at Abel

questioningly and he knows what she is thinking *Do you trust Tom?* He doesn't but still feels led—like he had felt to follow Katherine into the woods this morning—to go with Tom. He is not sure if it is his curiosity leading him but he nods.

“All right,” he says.

“I'm going to head on to the gas station and see if I can get your car fixed,” Martha says.

“You really don't have to do that.”

“Don't even try to talk me out of it, Abel. You could use a little help today.” She glances at Tom with a look that only a grandmother can give to a grandson and Abel is reminded of receiving the same look from Grandma Saracen. A look that can only mean *Don't do anything stupid*. Tom and Abel get into the black truck. It smells like hamburgers and the floorboard is full of trash and empty energy drink cans. Abel struggles to click in his seatbelt and then sees that Tom like his grandmother Martha doesn't wear his. As the ignition roars and Tom revs it up Abel wonders one last time if he is doing the right thing or if this will lead to yet another regretful moment. Then Tom hands him a lukewarm unopened can of Mountain Dew. Abel takes it and pops the tab.

SIXTEEN

Immediately Tom explains his idea to Abel like a squad leader. It is a simple plan. Take the revolver from Elo who has returned home to his trailer and then get to Black Mesa.

“He’s going to come after us,” Tom says. “I know how much that gun means to him and he’s going to be pissed if we take it from him now that he finally has it. So we’ll stay off the roads. Take the plains to the Mesa.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Have you ever ridden a horse?”

Abel shakes his head reluctantly. Tom clears his throat. “Hope you’re a natural,” he says. Is that humor? Abel thinks and almost smiles. For a moment he wonders what being friends with Tom must be like. Of course he hasn’t exactly seen Tom’s friendly side—if he even has one—so he has trouble imagining it.

“What about the storm?” Abel asks.

“We’ll have to hope we beat it.”

They don’t talk much and Abel can tell that Tom has in no way warmed up to him so he stays silent careful not to provoke him. Before long they turn into a long gravel driveway. A tall electric fence is on both sides of the driveway separating them from the pasture on either side. Cows occupy the pasture grazing or lying down as flies buzz around them. Then he sees the large house at the end of the driveway, longer than it is tall with a wooden patio wrapping around it. A beautiful house compared to the smaller

cheaper houses he has come across in the panhandle thus far. The home of Ray Marshall. Abel imagines what it might have been like to visit this house in the summertime. What it would be like to drive toward it with pleasant memories—or memories at all—of hot days and awkward moments spent with his father’s family. Instead of allowing his imagination to wander further in this direction he pushes his mind toward apathy. Four large German shepherd dogs and one small rat terrier run toward Tom’s truck as they approach but Tom doesn’t stop at the house. He drives around to the back where there is a weathered red barn.

“We’re really doing this,” Abel says. “Riding horses?”

Tom doesn’t answer him. He climbs down from his truck and Abel follows his lead. Tom walks quickly heading straight for the barn after briefly petting each of the excited pets. After barking at Abel—startling him—the dogs jump on him and he rubs their fur then follows Tom into the barn. There are four horses each in a stable. Tom grabs two saddles and wastes no time strapping each horse. He tightens the girth under the barrel of the horse and Abel can only watch having no clue how to do this himself. The large animals frighten him a bit but he approaches a dark horse which reminds him of the horse the young rider was on the first time he supposedly had gone back in time. The horse’s mane is coarse its skin hot. It looks at Abel with its black eyes and Abel sees himself reflected in its pupils. Tom notices Abel and the horse watching each other. He approaches with the second saddle, hesitates, and then begins saddling the horse. After Tom saddles both horses he leads them from the barn by the reins.

He explains to Abel how to climb onto the horse using the stirrup and cantle. Abel surprises himself by getting onto the black horse the first time. In all the westerns he had seen you could tell who the buffoons and inexperienced riders were because they would struggle to mount their horse and it would take them several tries before they did. Abel expected this to be him but after his first attempt he finds himself situated atop the dark horse. He feels like the rider—the outlaw as JoJo called him. He watches Tom elegantly mount his horse like a Rodeo cowboy—especially since he is still wearing the same clothes from the funeral: black button-up with dark blue jeans and black cowboy boots. All he is missing is the cowboy hat; instead he wears a brown baseball cap with the green John Deere tractor logo embroidered on the front. A well-worn cap with a broken-in brim perfectly shaped into a downward semicircle. His black button-up reminds Abel of the shirt Ray Marshall was buried in.

Tom's horse is reddish brown with white freckles on its hindquarters that look like stars in a clear night sky. Both horses are male and both are well-trained. *He'll make it easy on you*, Tom said while saddling the horses. Though Tom says nothing of it Abel cannot help but think the horse he is now riding is the horse Ray Marshall himself rode especially because of Tom's hesitation before saddling the horse. He doesn't know what he thinks of this.

They trot through the gigantic stark pasture empty except for the occasional cow. The wind is still strong and hot and Abel wonders why the storm hasn't reached them yet but decides not to jinx it by saying anything. Instead he asks Tom "So why do you believe me? Why are you helping me?" Tom is a little ways ahead of him—as Abel

struggles to direct his horse though finally seems to be getting the hang of it—and for a second he doesn't think Tom heard him.

Then Tom answers. “The last thing you said to me was ‘He’s coming for it.’ It was then that I started to wonder just how much you knew about this gun.”

“What is it *you* know about it?” Abel says.

Tom looks at him over his shoulder. “Just stories my dad told me.”

Abel closes the gap between them. Their horses now travel stride for stride next to each other. Thunder rumbles over them. The burning sun has disappeared and the sky is beginning to darken. “I’ll be honest with you,” Abel says. “I really don’t know much about it. But someone told me I need to take it to Black Mesa. Told me he was coming and was going to destroy anything in his path or something along those lines anyway.” Abel chuckles but Tom just looks straight ahead with the same poker face as his sister and grandmother and it seems all Marshalls have perfected the unreadable expression. “I don’t even know who *he* is but when they said this, I believed them. And maybe I’m crazy but I don’t think this storm is an accident.”

“If you’re crazy then I am too,” Tom says. “Which might be the case. But my dad told me this story about the pistol once. How much do you know about?”

“I know it belonged to a Marshall from every generation since the outlaw who killed the Devil’s Hand gang with it because he thought they killed his father. Of course according to Elo, the boy was just crazy and only convinced himself they killed his father because he couldn’t deal with his father leaving him.” Abel feels weird talking about it.

As if he is talking about himself even though he doesn't think his situation is anything like this.

Tom takes a bottle of water from his saddle bag and takes a swig. "So you don't know about the weird stuff?"

Abel could tell Tom about the "weird stuff" that he has encountered this day seemingly because of the revolver but elects to just shake his head.

"Well according to legend—this according to my dad, mind you—the gun was purchased by Wade Marshall and given to his son who would become the guy who killed the Devil's Hand gang. Wade bought the pistol off of a strange little man outside of a town in Kansas. This strange man told Wade the story and Wade told his friends and told his son and soon a legend followed this pistol and grew when he started hunting down Wade's old gang.

"So the story goes that this strange man told Wade that he stole the pistol off of Death himself."

"Huh?" Abel says. Not because he didn't hear what Tom said but because he struggles to process his last sentence. Even with everything that has happened to him he cannot help but want to snicker a bit at the idea of *Death himself* being involved in this like a fairy tale or a story Grandpa Saracen might tell to entertain him.

Tom continues though. And surprisingly speaks assuredly as if this tale is the fifth gospel—absolute truth. "The man tells Wade that he has to keep the pistol hidden or Death will come for it and Death will be angry. He says that Wade has to pass the gun

down to the next generation—preferably his son—who must either return the pistol to Death or pass it down to his son—or as it turns out, his nephew—in order to keep it hidden from Death.”

“So you’re saying this is all based on what one man told Wade Marshall a hundred years ago?”

“I suppose,” Tom says.

This can’t be real, Abel wants to say but the story meshes with what Katherine told him.

“How can you hide something from Death?” Abel says.

“Apparently by passing it down to your son. Now that you gave it to Elo, I guess Death knows where it is.”

Abel wonders what will await him at Black Mesa. Is he taking the revolver there to destroy it or return it? Goosebumps prickle his skin as a chill runs up his body. Death. He notices Tom eyeing him. He wonders if Tom longs to hit him again or if perhaps he is warming up to him. It is too hard to tell but Abel feels a sense of solidarity with the stepson of Ray Marshall. They have a common mission—a mission that is either much bigger than either of them can possibly wrap their head around or a mission that it is foolish and nothing more than an adventure being played out in their imaginations like two neighbor kids playing Cowboys and Indians. Either way Abel is glad to not be wandering the panhandle alone.

As they near Elo's trailer there is a light sprinkle falling and streaks of lightning ever so often. Thunder rumbles long and muffled like an empty stomach as if it is holding back for a bigger assault later. Abel hopes that later doesn't come.

The trailer is the same as Abel remembers. He didn't bother telling Tom he broke into Elo's home earlier this morning and sees no need in bringing it up. This is where Tom and Abel split up. Tom begins riding toward the trailer from the driveway leading up from the road while Abel canters around from the side. Given that the land surrounding Elo's trailer is barren they only hope Elo is not checking his surroundings through his side windows or their plan is no good. Atop his horse Abel rides to what he would consider a blind spot at the back of the trailer still twenty yards away. He is impressed with how quickly he has gotten the hang of this horse riding thing. He even noticed Tom glancing down at the black horse while they rode. Perhaps he was impressed as well. From Abel's angle twenty yards from the back of Elo's trailer he can see Tom approaching from the front. Casually Tom leads his horse up the driveway and then as he reaches the front door Abel loses sight of him.

He gets jittery as he awaits their agreed upon signal. He waits. He told Tom he thought the signal was a bit of stretch and now is thinking he was right. But then he hears it. Elo's booming laugh. The signal. Tom hit him with the lowbrow joke that Abel didn't find funny but Tom insisted Elo would. He was right.

Abel dismounts his horse and then leads it to the back of Elo's trailer. Silently he ties the horse's reins to an exposed metal pipe at the bottom of the trailer. He peeks around the corner and listens for voices.

“Strange weather,” he hears Elo say. Good, he thinks remembering the plan for Tom to keep Elo outside. Then he tiptoes up the back steps of the trailer which is nothing more than half a dozen concrete blocks stacked on top of each other. Slowly he turns the doorknob knowing that as small as the trailer is any noise—even the slightest creak—could alert Elo. Then he opens the door and removes his dress shoes—a trick he learned watching television—and leaves the shoes on the steps. He enters and continues on his tiptoes in his black dress socks. He scans the kitchen and living room for the revolver but already has an assumption it is in the bedroom at the messy desk with the letters and clipped out obituaries. Though he is nervous he is slightly amused to find himself breaking and entering into the same home twice in one day. He hears Elo laugh loudly again as he skulks deliberately down the tiny hallway into the bedroom.

And there it is. The revolver rests on top of the desk. The rope Elo used as a necklace is still looped through the trigger. Abel approaches the revolver and picks it up. As soon as he squeezes the hilt which seems to fit perfectly against his palm he feels a jolt like touching an open wall socket and starts but holds on to the revolver. The faint feeling of sadness he felt while previously holding the revolver has transformed into a heavy depth of emptiness. A feeling of inevitably like his sense of mortality but much stronger than ever before. His face turns pale and he knows that whatever was keeping the sadness from being stronger before is gone now. He is now feeling the full force of the revolver’s power and it is overwhelming. It’s too late, he thinks. His mind wrestles against his emotions as he tells himself he no longer wants to hold this thing and yet the strong urge to never let it go is alluring. Suddenly he wants to scream and it takes all his

might to not do so. He forces his hand to open up and the revolver drops back on the desk. It lands with a loud clunk and his mind clears.

“What was that?” he hears Elo say through the thin walls.

Uh oh, Abel thinks. For a brief moment he considers making a run for the backdoor with the revolver in tow but the moment to do so has passed as he hears the front door opening. Quickly he climbs under Elo’s bed as quietly as possible though it is a tight squeeze. His back is against the rough carpet while his body presses against the cold metal of the bed frame. He holds his breath as he hears footsteps approaching.

“I didn’t hear anything, Uncle Elo,” Tom says.

“It came from here,” Elo says. Abel watches their feet. Elo’s big steel-toed boots stand over the desk. Abel imagines him staring down at the revolver seeing if it is exactly as he left it. “Someone was in here.” Elo’s voice grumbles like a dog about to bark.

Tom laughs nervously. “That’s crazy, Uncle Elo.”

“They musta just left.” Elo stomps back down the hallway. Tom follows in a scramble trying to distract his great uncle. Abel decides the time has to be now. He slides out from under the bed just as Elo reaches for the backdoor. Abel snatches the revolver by the rope—afraid to touch the hilt—and loops it around his neck. Tom turns and sees him. Elo opens the backdoor. “What the hell?” he shouts no doubt seeing the black horse and scuffed dress shoes neatly arranged on the steps. Tom’s eyes go wide as he sees what Elo sees. Then Tom rams into Elo’s back. Abel watches the big man

stumble forward and outside. Tom slams the backdoor closed and locks the deadbolt. Abel stands frozen in the hallway shocked that Tom would push Elo out suddenly realizing how real this all is. Tom hollers, “Front door! Front door!” And Abel snaps out of it and races to the door just as Tom swings it wide open and goes out.

Abel sprints through the small trailer and the entire trailer shakes under his heavy footfalls; a pot falls from on top of the pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and makes a powerful crashing sound as it hits linoleum. Abel bursts through the front door as Elo comes running around the side of the trailer. “Hop on,” Tom says from already on the horse. Abel leaps from the top stair of the concrete steps leading up to the trailer. He bangs into the side of the horse knocking his breath out of him and the horse whinnies and nearly falls but holds its balance as Tom pulls Abel up behind him. He kicks the horse and the horse gallops away from the trailer.

“Judas Iscariot!” Elo yells among more choice words disowning Tom in the process. Abel clings to Tom his arms wrapped around his torso, the revolver the only thing between Abel’s chest and Tom’s back. He feels awkward and yet the physical closeness is the closest he has ever been to another male near his age and perhaps the closest he’s ever been to having a brother. He looks back over his shoulder. Elo continues shouting until they can no longer hear him. Then he disappears into his trailer and reappears with a rifle and gets into his truck. Again the weight of his predicament startles him. Nothing short of life-threatening. He is shocked to see Elo is willing to use a gun on them to get the revolver back.

“He’s got a gun,” Abel says in an abnormally high-pitched voice. He turns and looks at Tom for the first time since their escape. Tom is smiling. The smile seems unnatural to Abel but Tom appears to be quite comfortable with it.

This kid’s going to get you killed, he thinks then smiles himself.

SEVENTEEN

The sky is purple. The wind calms almost to a complete stop. There is still a light rain and it feels good given how hot and sweaty Abel has been all day.

“Are we almost there?” Abel asks.

“Yep, pretty close. It’s too calm out here.”

“My thoughts exactly. Tornado weather.”

“Mm, hmm.”

The horse gallops along and Abel stares down at the horse’s strong legs as they whip back and forth. He can hear the strain on the horse in its breathing.

“What the—?” Tom says.

Abel looks up. Straight ahead surrounded by open country is a wooden shed. Next to the shed is a tall lamplight that glows faintly.

“No way,” Tom says almost in a whisper.

“What is it?”

He notices Tom turn white under his baseball cap. Tom slows the horse down as if he is hesitant to approach the shed. The shed itself seems out of place in the prairieland. “Why are you stopping?”

Slowly Tom says, “I know that shed.” The horse walks slowly now directly toward the shed. As they near, the sky seems to darken and stars come out.

“No way,” Abel says looking upward. Soon they are under a starry night sky with a full bright moon. “You’re seeing this too, right?”

“Sure am,” Tom says. “This is—this is pretty familiar.”

For the first time Abel is validated in his sanity for he is not alone. He isn’t sure if this is a good thing though for if he was crazy it would not matter if he succeeded in getting the revolver to Black Mesa. But his mind only considers it momentarily as the more pressing matter is just ahead of them.

“I think we might’ve gone back in time.”

Tom looks at him confused and opens his mouth. Abel expects an argument but Tom stops short as his eyes gaze at something ahead of them. Abel sees what has his attention. Tom Marshall stares at Tom Marshall. He pulls the horse to a sudden stop and Abel stumbles off. Other Tom is standing behind the shed peeking in through a tiny square window. A light clicks on inside the shed. Other Tom jerks his head down and then continues his spying after several seconds pass.

“This is crazy!” Tom shouts from his mounted position. Abel worries he might turn and run and attempts to calm him.

“It’s okay, Tom. We just time-travelled. Don’t worry. We’re invisible. We can’t change anything. We’re one hundred percent safe.”

“That’s me, man!” Tom says unable to tear his eyes away from Other Tom who continues to peek through the window. Abel is curious and walks toward the shed trusting Tom will not ride off on him.

“What are you doing?” Tom says behind him still freaking out.

“I’m checking it out. You coming?” Abel waits a minute as Tom begins to calm some coming to grips with the impossible situation he finds himself in.

“I think I already know what’s going on here,” he says. “Think I’ll stay here.”

“Suit yourself.” Abel approaches the back of the shed and walks right up to Other Tom. He looks about the same as Tom from today so Abel knows he is not witnessing a scene from too long ago.

The window has a screen but no glass. Abel approaches and peeks through over Other Tom’s head and his eyes widen. Inside sitting on a stool next to a workbench is Ray Marshall. He backsteps away from the window.

“Tom, what is this?” he says. No answer. He looks back and sees that Tom has dismounted his horse and stands next to it brushing its mane. He appears contemplative.

“Dad?” Abel is taken aback by this other voice. Leslie’s. It comes from the other side of the shed. Abel looks at Tom once more and then walks around to the front of the shed. Leslie leans into the open doorway. “Hey,” she says and walks inside. Abel follows her.

“Hey, girlie,” Ray Marshall says. His voice is hoarse like he has been singing as loud as possible for several hours straight. He wears a bathrobe over blue jeans and his skin has a yellow tint to it.

“You wanted to see me?” Leslie says. She hardly seems a grown woman with children of her own in the presence of her father.

“That’s right,” he says weakly then stands with great effort from his stool and Leslie helps him. Abel can see how gravely ill Ray Marshall is. He begins to feel sympathy for the man. Pity, not sympathy, he tells himself refusing to acknowledge he might actually feel sorry for the man who abandoned him and never bothered to call. He recalls Pastor Walt’s sermon from this morning and the questions it caused Abel to consider. Had Ray Marshall changed? Was he a good man? A sick man can still be a bad man, Abel thinks.

Ray Marshall leans on the wooden workbench. At the far end of the workbench is a power saw. Other tools hang from hooks along the two sidewalls of the shed. There is also a table at the far end and a wheel barrel in the far corner. Abel spots the top of Other Tom’s head through the window but Leslie and Ray Marshall don’t notice. They look at each other like father and daughter and Abel feels a tinge of jealousy. He swallows hard and dismisses it.

“You’ve always been so grown up,” Ray Marshall says. He laughs. “Even when you were a little girl you were following your mama around, barking orders.” Ray coughs. Leslie pats him on the back.

“Are you all right?” she asks.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” He draws a deep breath. Abel studies closely the way he presses a hand to his thigh to help support himself his shoulders slumping as if a sack of rocks is weighing him down.

“I need to tell you something important, Les,” he says.

Leslie waits silently as does Abel.

“I’m not the father you think I am.” And he tells her. It is surreal listening to Ray Marshall tell Leslie of his three-week trip to an oilrig in Texas while working as a company man. He speaks as if he has practiced the story in his head over and over again but never actually told it aloud pausing frequently and saying *uh* and *um* a lot. He talks of Abel’s mother fondly the way men she has dated over the past twenty years have spoken of her when talking awkwardly to Abel about their intentions with his mother. Ray Marshall calls her Rose which is her middle name but she never goes by it preferring Melanie—her first name and it is the first time he has heard anyone call her Rose. Leslie appears confused perhaps wondering why her father is telling her of a fling he had after divorcing from her mother. Then he tells her of Abel.

“Sh-she got pregnant,” Ray Marshall stutters trying to hold himself together as he confesses his sins. “She kept it,” he says. He and Leslie’s identical green eyes lock and Abel wonders what he is expecting from her. Perhaps he wishes her to be his priest, to absolve him of his sins. “His name is Abel. Abel Saracen. He’s twenty-four now. She and I had a mutual friend from Dallas. That’s how I know.”

Abel wonders who this could be though it hardly matters for he has met very few friends of his mother’s. He wonders about his mother. If she has tried calling him and is worried or if she left him alone this day and has not a worry in the world for her son who is far from home in the middle of nowhere seeing his father in the flesh.

Leslie bombards Ray Marshall with several basic questions but she speaks harshly angry in a way Abel has not seen her before and Abel cannot help but feel sorry for Ray

Marshall as the broken dying man answers her questions calmly. He deserves this, Abel thinks countering his feelings. He shouldn't be left off the hook just because he's dying. Abel feels himself growing angrier as he realizes this is the only time Ray Marshall told someone about his bastard son in all his life. His own questions rattle in his mind and he begins shouting out loud toward Ray Marshall his voice getting louder with each question.

“Why didn't you try to meet me?” he says. “If you feel so bad, why didn't you try? You had twenty-four years, you douche bag.” But Ray Marshall does not answer his question. Abel runs up next to Leslie. “Ask him,” he says yelling into her ear. “Ask him why.” But Leslie doesn't ask him. Ray Marshall points toward the table at the far end of the shed and Abel sees Other Tom's head quickly duck behind the window. On the table is the Justin's Boots shoebox.

“Make sure he gets it,” Ray Marshall says.

“Right because you didn't have the balls to give it to me yourself.” Abel's eyes fill with hot tears his face burning. He stands between Leslie and Ray Marshall now and stares at his absent father but Ray Marshall ignores him looking right through him at Leslie. His fists ball up. “You selfish bastard,” Abel says. “How does a man not own up to responsibilities, take care of his own child?” Abel wishes for Leslie to yell at Ray Marshall but her angry voice has left her now. She speaks sweetly telling him she will see to it Abel gets the gift. No, Abel thinks feeling as if Ray Marshall is getting away with it. Feeling the man will die having never had any repercussions for his decision to abandon his son. Abel stands over his father who is still slumped from his illness. Then

in his anger Abel pulls back his balled fist and swings it at Ray Marshall slugging him in the gut. Immediately his father stumbles forward coughing and shaking. Abel starts and leaps out of the way as he falls to his knees. Leslie rushes forward and holds him.

Abel's heart races like a kid caught stealing. He expects them to turn and see him, to see the man who suckerpunched a dying man. But he is still invisible. He takes a step forward and reaches his hand out. Just as he is about to touch Leslie on the shoulder a clap of thunder rumbles and shakes the shed. He pulls back. The table at the far end falls over and the tools hanging from the hooks on the walls begin falling to the ground as wind pushes the shed from outside. Then the first board flies off the wall and many follow. One breaks near Abel and whacks him in the head. Sharp pain. His eyes blur for a moment. When his vision clears he looks up just in time to see the tin roof collapsing. Abel rushes out of the shed taking one last look back at Leslie and Ray Marshall huddled together on the floor oblivious to the collapsing shed. Then the roof crumbles over them and Abel immediately is pelted by icy rain blowing at him from the west rather than above. The wind knocks him to the ground and there is no night sky above him anymore but instead low dark clouds hiding the purple late afternoon sky. The rain is quickly soaking him but he can still feel the warm thick liquid where his head stings above his right eye where his hairline ends. He touches it with his fingers knowing already he is bleeding.

“Abel!” Tom's voice is barely audible over the roar of the wind. Abel spots him holding onto his horse's reins as the horse bucks wildly. “Come on!” Tom shouts. With great effort Abel climbs to his feet again and runs toward Tom. “I can't get 'im under control.”

Abel grabs onto the reins as well and Tom works his way around to the horse's side. Abel spreads his legs and digs his feet into the ground to balance himself against the wind. Tom attempts to jump onto the horse's back and is bucked off landing on his back with a thud. Abel moves toward him to help him to his feet and Tom says "Stay there! Hold on to them reins." He gets to his feet on his own and rubs the horse's mane to try and calm him as Abel continues pulling at his reins. Then as the horse stops bucking Tom tries again this time succeeding in staying in the saddle. A roar like a train fills the air and Abel sees a dark cloud in the near distance much lower than those around it. Tom helps him into the seat behind him and they take one more look at the cloud as it begins cycling vertically. "Go," Tom shouts and the horse gallops toward the cloud as its vertical spin twist around.

"You're going toward it," Abel says starting to believe Tom might have a deathwish. "That's a tornado, Tom."

"The Mesa's that way. What do you think? You want to find shelter instead."

"Can we make it to Black Mesa before getting sucked up by that thing?"

Tom hesitates. "Maybe." Abel looks back toward where the shed had been. Where he had seen his father, alive. There is nothing there now. Not even the remains of the crushed shed.

"All right, let's get to Black Mesa."

"Hold on tight."

EIGHTEEN

He has nearly fallen off several times as the powerful wind pushes directly at them. The rain pricks against their faces like tiny needles. But they press on. Abel holds tight to Tom worried he might be making it hard for him to breath but Tom doesn't say anything about it. Abel also worries about the horse as it soldiers forward against its natural instincts of self-preservation. He knows at some point the horse will quit following orders and buck them off and make a run for it.

Despite the antagonism of the wind and rain they stare straight ahead at the tornado hoping it will lift into the storm clouds. But it doesn't. Instead it grows stronger and closer. They see debris filtering in and out of the cyclone.

The landscape has changed. Rock formations surround their path and Abel can see the highway some distance to the left swerving around the hills and rocks. Tom says something about this up-and-down land will help slow the tornado, maybe even stop it. Abel is thankful not the entire panhandle is flat. But this doesn't change the fact they are still heading directly toward the tornado. Abel is convinced the tornado is headed right for them in fact seeking them out. Knowing what they possess: Death's revolver. The revolver. One of several things Abel has paid little attention to as they race along. The other is the fact he is still shoeless. His socks are covered in mud from where he dug his feet in the ground to give him traction when holding the horse down. His feet are freezing and wet. The revolver is pressed between Abel's chest and Tom's back as it was before but Abel feels a faint burning sensation from the weapon. He wonders if Tom feels it too but doesn't ask.

“There it is,” Tom shouts pointing slightly to the right. Past some rocks and open prairieland is a tall flat elevated surface. Its sides are steep though Abel can see a minor slope here and there for hiking. Grass covers some of it but the rock sides do indeed appear to be black though Abel cannot see it clearly through the storm. As they gallop toward it the rain seems to get thicker as well blocking them from seeing more than a few feet in front of them. The tornado is visible now just to their left only a couple of miles away. A large house looks to be in its path. “A bed and breakfast,” Tom says a tremble in his voice.

Katherine’s words haunt Abel. *He’s coming. He will destroy this land. These people.*

The bed and breakfast disintegrates in an instant as the cyclone demolishes it with ease. Suddenly Abel feels incredibly small as if he is attempting to thwart God Himself.

As they approach the mesa they come upon a parking lot and beyond that a trail leads to the top. In the parking lot there is a large glass sign that has information about the Black Mesa and its animal inhabitants. They race past it. Their horse is slowing now and Abel thinks the beast might not go much farther. “He’ll die if he keeps this up,” Abel says. “Let’s go on foot.”

Reluctantly Tom nods. They dismount and the wind knocks Abel off balance. Tom considers tying the reins to the information sign but then drops the reins and pats the horse on the hindquarters. The animal sprints away. Abel realizes that their last chance at outrunning the tornado has just dashed away. Emotions stir inside him as he realizes

how much faith Tom has put into him. His life is in your hands, he thinks. Tom turns toward him.

The trail has a sign in front of it that reads: DO NOT STRAY FROM THE PATH and has a warning about dangerous snakes. Abel doubts snakes or any other predator would be out in this weather and rather than follow the path he plans to make a straight shot for the top. He still doesn't know what awaits him and his only wish is that once he reaches the top the storm will stop.

"Abel," Tom says over the loud wind. "Go now." Abel looks and sees headlights through the thick rain getting nearer and nearer. Elo. Abel hesitates wondering why Tom doesn't follow him. But he listens to him and runs through the tall surrounding the trail.

His feet bang against rocks and dirt and he stumps his big toe on a protruding rock. He screams aloud; the pain from the stubbed toe is worse than being hit in the face by Tom or being smacked in the head by a broken board. He hops for a second and the wind knocks him back and his butt slams against the ground. He pushes himself to his feet again and is yanked back to the ground by the rope around his neck.

The revolver remains rooted to the ground. He pulls on the rope but the revolver refuses to budge. He takes the rope off of his neck. Then he clammers to his feet. He digs his feet into the dirt and grabs the rope with both hands and pulls upward leaning back with all his weight. The revolver doesn't move an inch as if it weighs as much as a truck. He inhales a deep breath and pulls again. Veins pulse in his forearms and his face turns red. Then the rope snaps and he sails to the ground scraping both elbows which it hit the

ground first. He tosses the broken rope and the wind grabs it and rips it away into the air. He crawls to the revolver and pushes his face right up to it—his nose all but touching the metal and his eyes crossing—and screams in anger “Aaarrrrggghhh!” The revolver appears as indifferent and immobile as ever. He stares for a second knowing he is wasting too much time. Then he grabs the revolver and it lifts easily. The two-pound weight familiar and not at all the immovable object it was seconds earlier.

He grips the hilt in his palm. The feeling overpowers him. Dark sadness as if the universe has no meaning. A longing for it to end. A longing for Death. Somewhere among these emotions he is still himself though. It is himself which tells him to run. To take the revolver where he is supposed to take it like Katherine told him to do so long ago as they stood knee deep in the running stream. But his eyes narrow onto the revolver and the world around him is silent and dark. Nothingness. Then his mind pushes him outside of it and he floats above his body like before. And he looks down on his body—a statue frozen in time—and calls “Go.” He is in his body again and tears his eyes away from the revolver. He grips it tight in his hand as the wind seems to focus on this hand and pushes even harder against it in an effort to dislodge the revolver. Abel holds it tight against his body and covers his arms around it like it is a delicate flower. He dashes toward the top of the mesa once more.

The land gets steeper the closer he gets and he realizes he has picked the wrong spot to climb up the highest point in the state of Oklahoma. He finds himself scaling the cliff at a steep angle with his hands and feet and struggles mightily since the revolver is in his right hand, he has no shoes, and the rain and wind continue to attack him. But he is close. He can see the sharp corner at the top. Gun in hand he stretches his right arm to

the top in an attempt to hook it over the side. Just then with his arm outstretched a singular forceful wind pushes his hand and it feels as if a claw has hooked his hand and is ripping the revolver away. He holds tight though and grunts as he wrestles his arm toward the flat surface of the mesa. He pushes with his foot to get a little closer and is able to push his gunhand over the corner and then pulls his body up. He crawls over the side as if he has just free solo climbed a mountain though he knows it was not quite that steep and if it wasn't for the rough weather might have been a lot easier. He rolls onto the surface and lays spread eagle flat on his back breathing hard his heart pounding in his chest feeling like it might come up through his throat. He squints his eyes as a bright light shines into them. Immediately water fills his eyes and he closes them and rubs them. As he does so he feels the wind and rain stop and the temperature rises. He opens his eyes and stares into the bright light that had blinded him. It is the harsh yellow sun surrounded by blue. No dark clouds blanketing the sky, no tornado, no hard rain.

The revolver remains in his outstretched arm a burning sensation pulses against his palm like a heartbeat. He rises into a sitting position and gazing at the surface of Black Mesa high above the earth as long and flat as a football field. Below his rolled-up sleeves his elbows sting and are bleeding from where he fell and scraped them. His face is still soaking wet from the rain and he touches the spot on his head where he bled earlier and it has stopped bleeding now just a minor cut.

He stands up his whole body aching and wonders if he did it. If he stopped the tornado. The day seems much as it was before the storm—stifling summer heat and clear skies. The sun lingers to the west near the edge of the mesa so he knows it is still the late afternoon. Abel sighs and cannot resist smiling. You did it, he thinks. Then he looks off

the mesa to where he has come from. No sign of Tom or Elo's truck and there is no information sign or parking lot. This gives him pause and his smile disappears as it dawns on him. Now what, he thinks. Then hears the echo of a horse's hooves plunking against the ground. It comes from the west.

NINETEEN

Look to the west.

From the west rides a young man in a black duster and black cowboy hat shielding his face. His steed is a brown mustang galloping like a racehorse, a certain air of superiority.

Abel knows who this is. The rider is the son of Wade Marshall who sought revenge against the Devil's Hand gang despite the fact they did not actually kill his father. He recognizes the rider and his horse from the grave service when he gave the revolver to young Lee Marshall. Abel can only imagine why he has time travelled again. He only hopes it has put an end to the storm. As the rider gets closer Abel notices something strange atop the mustang. Another man hogtied on the back of the horse balancing there behind the rider.

Abel stands near the western edge of the mesa and watches the rider. He doesn't bother to hide, knowing he is invisible anyway. His hands dangle at his sides lazily the revolver weighing in his right hand. He looks at it, wonders what he is supposed to do with it now that he has brought the weapon to the top of Black Mesa.

The rider charges ahead around the mesa to the far side. Abel loses sight of him and makes no attempt to rush to the other side of the mesa because he assumes the rider will reach the top soon enough.

He wishes Katherine was there and keeps hoping she will show up. He even wishes Tom was there with him. His skin has already dried despite being soaked by the

storm. Luckily, his clothes are still damp and this keeps his body somewhat cool under the burning sun. The rider comes up the far eastern side of the mesa and Abel walks toward him. He sees the hogtied man more clearly now. His hands are knotted behind him and he is belly down on the horse softly bouncing with each gallop. His legs are also tied and his mouth gagged with a bandanna. The rider comes to a stop somewhere near the center of the mesa. He dismounts the mustang and brushes its mane. Then he grabs the hogtied man by his britches and yanks him off the horse. The man flips around and lands hard on his back. He grunts loudly in pain. He is a tall lanky man, thin, with graying shaggy hair and a grayish blonde beard. Dust billows where the man has dropped. The dirt is redder than the rest of the panhandle. The rider takes off his hat and rubs his arm along his perspiring forehead. The rider takes a tan waterskin from his saddlebag and swallows gulp after gulp. Abel smacks his mouth feeling thirsty himself watching the rider drink. It still feels strange to be invisible when those in front of him are flesh and blood.

When the rider finishes his long gulp he pours water onto the hogtied man who squirms under the water before suddenly stopping as if realizes how good the water feels on his sun-scorched skin. Then suddenly the rider turns toward Abel and looks directly at him. Abel's heart skips a beat but he has been here before and knows the rider is only looking through him.

“You there,” the rider says. Abel is stunned. He peeks over his shoulder making sure he is alone. He is. The divide between himself and the past is broken by the rider's words and Abel feels like he is doing something wrong. Something worse than anything else he could possibly do. As if answering the rider would somehow be the greatest sin

in the world breaking the rules of logic, bypassing the laws of how time and space works created by God Himself. He feels like Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He looks around making sure Katherine has not appeared to tell him not to talk to the rider, to tell him to ignore this person who has been dead for a hundred years. But Katherine is not there. It is only Abel and the rider and the hogtied man and the brown mustang. All alone in the barren prairieland of the Oklahoma panhandle high above sea level nearly to the clouds above.

“Me?” Abel says.

“That’s right,” the rider says. The same voice Abel heard before. A teenager forcefully talking harder and deeper than his natural voice actually is. If this was a normal situation like a teenager in a café talking like that Abel might smirk or chuckle a little. But here he is serious. “What ya doing up here?” the rider asks.

Abel looks around then shrugs.

“Come here.” The rider eyes Abel’s revolver and Abel realizes how it must look to him. He tucks the revolver into the front of his pants and laughs apologetically as if to say he wasn’t aware that the rider might be threatened by a man with a gun in his hand. Then he notices for the first time that the rider has no revolver. He wears a belt with a gun holster on his hip but there is no gun.

Reluctantly he walks over. As Abel nears him he notices again how young the boy is. Younger than Tom even. They study each other silently. They are even in height and build.

“I’m glad you’re here,” the rider says at last. “You see that man?”

“Yeah?”

The boy sighs. “That there is a very bad man,” he says. “A murderer, a liar, and a man who has abandoned his family.” As he speaks Abel scans over the hogtied man who is crouched sitting on his knees as if ready for execution, his legs and hands still tied. The man looks up at them. His bright green eyes are full of sadness. Bright green. Abel makes the connection. This is the boy’s father. Wade Marshall. “I once thought this man was dead,” the boy says. “Murdered in fact. But I was just fooling myself.” He has his hand over his empty holster looking at his father with disdain. The father cannot look him in the eye. Instead he looks at Abel as if pleading with him. His gaze is unnerving and Abel looks away. “I’ve come up here to execute him,” the boy says nonchalantly as if he is simply going out to feed the cows instead of ending his own father’s life.

“I see,” Abel says nodding his head. He is unsure what else to say.

“The thing is I seem to have lost my shooter. I notice you got yourself one there. I need you to give it to me so I can end this murderous bastard’s miserable life.”

Abel inhales a deep breath and holds it in his lungs. He raises his eyebrows considering the request though he knows the boy is not asking but telling. But he doesn’t immediately hand it over. Even if he has no choice he cannot help but feel as if giving the revolver to the boy would make him responsible for the death of Wade Marshall. He looks down at the hogtied father who continues to stare at Abel. But his eyes have taken on a more apologetic glint as if Abel has already handed over the revolver. He looks at

Abel as if he wishes to apologize to him for having to be a part of this. Abel feels queasy and reaches down for the revolver and takes it from his slacks. The grip fits perfectly in his palm and yet no sad or awful feelings come from the weapon as had been the case previously. Instead it is as if it is just another antique revolver nothing more or less than two pounds of metal. He notices the halfcocked hammer. Suddenly he feels relieved and nearly smiles as he says "It doesn't work."

"What's that?" The rider can hardly believe it. Abel shows him how the hammer is stuck in its halfcocked position. Shows him the bent barrel. "How about that," the boy says in a whisper as if talking to himself. His face is stone but there is pain in his eyes. Try as he might the boy cannot hide the desperate need he has to be rid of his father as if the only way to get over his pain is to kill the man who abandoned him.

Maybe we aren't so different, Abel thinks and shudders at the thought that he would have so much in common with a killer. And yet it wasn't so long ago that he suckerpunched his dying father. Just then the hammer clicks. He looks down and the hammer rests against the frame of the revolver. The boy notices as well and a sly smile twitches on his face for a moment.

"Well look at that," he says. Abel gives a brief nervous laugh. "Let's have it," the boy says. He reaches a dirty calloused hand toward Abel who holds the revolver close and glances at Wade Marshall a broken man on his knees with his head down. A man with a lifetime of regrets.

Of course he looks that way, Abel thinks. Trying to get me to feel sorry for him. Abel cannot help but imagine Ray Marshall seated there tied up beaten down his life in

Abel's hands. But Ray Marshall is already dead and Abel has never had an opportunity to affect his life in any way much less decide if he should live or die. The connection he senses to the boy is stronger than ever. He recalls how different he felt this morning. How foreign Ray Marshall was to him. A man he neither wanted to hurt nor befriend. But now his resentment to the man was unavoidable. A deep pain centered around what could have been. The things he could have learned about life that only a father can teach. His anger builds.

“I get it,” he says. “This man deserves to die.” The sun seems to empower Abel's hot anger.

“He does,” the boy says. They seem to form a telepathic connection during the silence. A connection built on anger.

Wade Marshall sways slightly calm and still. He is no longer fighting the inevitable, reminding Abel of Ray Marshall in his shed. A contemplative fragile man. What did he think about? Abel wonders. Did he regret not having a role in Abel's life? Abel wishes to ask this man these questions. To find out why he would leave his young son and never see him again. But there is no time for any more questions. The boy holds his hand toward Abel. His palm sweats against the grip of the revolver. He loosens his grip then begins to give him the revolver as his mind continues to ponder what he missed out on growing up without a father. Suddenly Grandpa Saracen comes to his mind. He remembers his grandfather teaching him to knot a tie as he prepared for his high school graduation wearing his grandfather's gray suit. A knot forms in Abel's throat and his

face flushes as emotions come over him. His eyes fill with water. He pulls back the revolver just as it nears the boy's hand. "I can't do it," he says.

The boy lowers his outstretched hand back to his side where he holds it against his empty holster. He clears his throat. "*You're* not doing it." His voice shakes with anger. "I am."

Abel is calm. He feels his anger and resentment leaving his body as he exhales a long steady breath. "I know this man abandoned his son," he says. "And he probably deserves his punishment. But my dad abandoned me too. Before I was even born. But this isn't the way to deal with it." Abel shrugs. "You just have to move on." He hesitates and a sinking feeling rumbles deep in his belly as he says "And try not to end up like your old man." He sees an image of Katherine storming out of the café.

The boy looks at Abel for a long moment and then laughs subtly. Abel laughs nervously with him hoping the laughter is a good sign. But then the boy stops laughing and snorts and hocks and spits. "Whelp," he says. He looks at his mustang as if talking to the horse. "Guess that's it, boy. Glad we got our lesson for the day, ain't we? Never thought it was that easy. Just move on."

"It's not easy," Abel says. The lines in the boy's face deepen as he glares at Abel, his rage creating an aura around him. Abel realizes his hand has moved to the trigger as he holds the revolver at his side. His heart races. The boy looks over his shoulder at his father hogtied, unmoving like a corpse. Then he whips his head around and rushes at Abel no longer even looking human at all. It happens so quickly and instinct controls Abel as he raises the revolver pulling back the hammer. The boy is on him in a hurry.

Abel squeezes the trigger just before the boy reaches him. Not only a bullet but fire comes from the revolver. Flames burst from the shot and the kick knocks Abel to the ground. Time slows down as he falls. He sees the flames explode into the boy's face wrapping his face in fire. Then the fire begins to flow inward into a tiny hole just above the space between the boy's eyes like water going down a drain. As Abel hits the ground the fire disappears and the back of the boy's head explodes as blood and fire bursts through. The boy collapses to the ground in front of Abel, his green eyes closing as he does so. The blood lands in the red dirt as the fire dissipates replaced by blue smoke that billows from the boy's head as his body twitches slightly. Time returns to its normal pace. Smoke exits from the end of the barrel of the revolver still clutched in his right hand. He can only stare still on his backside considering the implications of what he has just done. Has he changed history? Will the revolver never be passed down now? Was he supposed to let the boy kill his father? These questions overlap until they become muddled and indistinguishable and hardly questions at all but instead foggy memories almost dreamlike. The father remains on his knees tied up and gazes upon his son's dead body and Abel wonders if the man would have preferred Abel kill him instead.

A light cool breeze blows at Abel from his back. Then another cool breeze tickles his skin from in front of him. The mustang whinnies, aware that his rider has just been gunned down. The wind begins getting stronger and stronger coming from all sides. Dust blows up from the ground into the sky. Abel watches it go up and up and notices the sky beginning to darken. A clap of thunder is followed by lightning. Then a powerful wind sweeps up the deceased body of the boy, a strange and terrifying sight. Abel watches the motionless body whip back and forth in the sky and suddenly Wade

Marshall's hogtied body is yanked into the air as well. The mustang follows, too, and Abel watches in stupefied amazement as the three of them whirl around in a circle. Then simultaneously all three are pulled as if by an invisible hand toward the west. Abel follows with his eyes turning over and sees the bodies pulled right into a dark tornado at the western edge of Black Mesa little more than a hundred feet from Abel.

He feels the tug of the mighty wind coming for him and he crawls away from the tornado which seems to have stopped at the edge of the mesa. It is dark and rain shoots at him from the side like BB pellets. He has returned to the present again and the storm has not been stopped. He can hardly see in front of him but continues to crawl not knowing where to. A figure appears before him. He looks up.

Katherine stands there. She still wears the same purple summer dress with an assortment of brightly colored flowers but her belly protrudes like a fitness ball is tucked under her dress. She is incredibly pregnant. Her hair dances into her face and the wind pulls at her body. Abel crawls to her feet and tries to stand himself but feels himself going backward and keeps imagining himself flying into the tornado like the boy, his father, and horse had done. He locks eyes with Katherine. And she appears more like the real Katherine than ever before because of the fear he sees in her brown eyes. The same fear and worry he saw at the café.

"You didn't give it to him!" she shouted over the storm.

"No," Abel says. "I didn't." He smiles. He doesn't know why he does it for he finds nothing funny about his situation and as scared as he has ever been. But irresistibly he smiles. Lightning strikes the ground just to his left. Thunder roars all around him.

Katherine shakes her head. He knows he has not done what she wanted but he doesn't regret not giving the revolver to the boy. He pulls himself to his feet grabbing onto Katherine's body like she is a tree. He wraps his arms around her hoping their shared body weight will be too much for the tornado. He pulls her close. Her frigid skin is as cold as a can of soda after it's been kept in an ice bucket. And yet he feels a burning warmth against his belly and realizes it is her pregnant belly that presses against him.

"Abel!" Elo snarls over the yell of the tornado as he clammers over the side of the mesa to Abel's right. The big man struggles to steady himself but still manages to hold onto his rifle. Abel realizes his own right hand still clutches the revolver so tight that his hand is going numb. Quickly he positions himself between Elo and Katherine. Elo pauses, confounded as he notices Katherine. Then he aims his rifle anyway. In his outstretched arms the wind knocks him off balance. But Elo strains his muscles to keep the rifle straight at Abel.

"Hand it over!" Elo shouts.

His vision blurs as dirt flies into his face and the irritation makes him squint. He can barely see Elo before him. Time slows as Abel's mind takes him away from the present, away from his body. He concentrates, bringing himself back to where he is, and realizes the tornado has moved him away from his station several feet westward. He looks at Katherine who stares at the tornado. Her dress flutters around her exposing the bottom of her pregnant belly. "Abbellll!" Elo screams.

Abel turns toward the tornado. Lightning flickers inside the darkness like a lightning bug. He pulls his gunhand back and leans on his left foot like he's throwing a

football and chucks the revolver toward the cyclone. He expects Elo to shoot him in the back with his rifle before Abel can throw the revolver but a shot doesn't come. Instead the revolver releases from his palm and flips over as it sails upward. The wind plucks it from the air and sucks it into the tornado. It disappears and then the tornado begins retreating upward back into the clouds. The wind steadies as it does and Abel watches for several minutes awed by the strange exit of the storm. Dirt and grime stick to his wet face and his clothes feel grainy. He wrestles to regain his composure but his heart continues to pound through his throat. He turns toward Elo, still unsure if the man will shoot him out of anger. Instead Elo has dropped his rifle to the ground and stands in his overalls with his shoulders slouched. Pale and tired. His beard covers his face and so Abel cannot tell if the man is emotional but from his body language he can sense regret in Elo. The big man looks at him and then looks past him. Abel wonders if Elo wishes he would have jumped into the tornado after the revolver. Elo peers into the now empty cloudy sky for a long time and Abel doesn't say anything. Then he turns without a word and shuffles down the side of the mesa from which he came.

Katherine is gone. It was the first thing Abel noticed when he turned back toward Elo. Of course he knows she was not really Katherine but only looked like Katherine. Still he is sad he will never see her again. He stand alone now atop the mesa somewhere near the center. The air is stale and cool. No wind. He wonders if he will think of this Katherine lookalike every time he sees the real Katherine. Then wonders if he will even see the real Katherine again. He wonders if he will tell his mother about what has happened to him. Or his grandparents whom he resolves to visit more than just the

holidays. Life is short and they are old. *You never know how long they have left*, his mother's voice echoes in his mind.

Tom climbs over the side of the mesa and looks at him. Abel wonders what he must look like—shoeless, his hair disheveled, his shirt untucked with half his buttons snapped off in the storm as the tornado grasped for him. But Tom appears as straight-faced as ever as he glares at Abel. He looks down at Elo's rifle and picks it up and clicks the safety on. He holds the barrel toward the ground as he walks toward Abel.

"You did it?" he asks.

Abel shrugs. "Looks like it." Abel notices a cut on Tom's head. "You all right?"

Tom touches the spot delicately. "Yep. I tried to stop Uncle Elo and got a bear's paw upside the head." He laughs.

Abel smiles. "Thanks for trying."

Tom shakes his head. "Looks like it was worth it. Uncle Elo—he wasn't acting hisself. Of course he looked like he'd seen a ghost when he came down."

Abel chuckles. "Death himself, right?"

Tom laughs with him as if it is a joke but they both know they don't believe that.

Through the cool air Abel feels comfortable warmth on his shoulders. He turns and looks into the western sun which reveals itself through the gray clouds that continue to disappear. The sun doesn't seem as threatening as it had all day.

"Strange Oklahoma weather," Tom says.

Abel nods in agreement. They pass a mental note between them. A sworn secrecy. And Abel suspects they may never talk about this day. But he thinks they will talk.

EPILOGUE

Abel Saracen sits at a table for two in the middle of the café. There is a smell of a robust blend of coffee. The blenders whirl loudly drowning out the music. The café is only half-full. Hipsters gathered together talking, college students scattered at different tables studying with their hefty textbooks flopped open before them while they slurp down a frappucino, and one man in a cowboy hat in a corner booth—it is Dallas after all.

Abel scratches his trim beard as he eats a blueberry scone and drinks from a 32-ounce Styrofoam cup purchased from a gas station. Every time the front door swings open Abel looks up in anticipation. He is waiting for someone. Each time yet another college student walks through and Abel returns to eating his scone, waiting patiently. The barista wipes down tables near him and ask if he needs anything else. She is the same barista from that fateful day and it is eerie how similar this all is. But Abel has frequented this café since then and no longer thinks of the place as simply the place where he learned that he had impregnated a girl and then assumed she would have an abortion. Instead this is the meeting place. Every other weekend.

The glass door swings open and this time Able is not disappointed. His face flushes with excitement. The girl Katherine comes through the door. Holding her hand is a toddler: a chubby little girl with fair skin and sandy blonde hair. The tiny child sees Abel and yelps and smiles wildly. Katherine lets go of her hand and she waddles toward Abel. Her father.

The same exhilarating feeling comes over Abel each and every time he watches her clumsily run toward him. There is a tinge of nervousness but it has become less and less noticeable with each visit.

He picks her up into his arms and kisses her and she wraps her tiny chubby arms around his neck as much as she can. "Hey," he says to Katherine who smiles and sets down a lime green diaper bag on the café table. They small-talk for a minute before Katherine leaves. He still sees flashes of the Katherine lookalike but the memory fades with each passing day. A strange thing the memory. Even our fondest memories can easily become more like dreams or the experiences of someone else as time moves on. After Katherine leaves he puts his daughter in a booster chair and finishes his scone. The front door continues to swing open as patrons arrive or leave. Suddenly Abel has a feeling that comes to him every so often and he expects Ray Marshall to walk through the door. He knows it will never happen for Ray Marshall is dead. Yet his absent father was never more alive to him until after he had died.

The day of the funeral still remains a mystery to him. He cannot distinguish between what was real or not but he has been able to put it away into the depths of his long-term memory. The empty casket still bugs him. That is the reason he expects Ray Marshall to come strolling down the sidewalk while he and his daughter are on a walk in the park or to call his name when Abel is grocery shopping or to ask to speak to a manager when Abel is working or to stride into the café while they sit and eat a scone. But every time, this passes in a moment, and Abel looks at his daughter, her big bright green eyes studying him and every single move he makes, and offers her a goofy face to

make her giggle. He thinks of his mother and his grandparents and his occasional phone conversations with Leslie Conrad or Tom Marshall and reminds of himself of the truth.

This story is not about Ray Marshall.

THE END