

Chapter Six

BLOOD LIES and, also, because if they were called witches something would've had to be done, and this was pacifist country.

We knew people had come to Oma for her salves and charms. A con, Pop told us. *If they got better, it was her work, and if they kept hurting, God had reasons they should suffer.* She died soon after Pop came home from Vietnam, her prayers answered and him, whole. Ruth said a mother should've known better. Near her own end, she wanted Bethany and me to divulge our fears to her, all our hates and hurts. She swore if we talked she'd be there, she'd listen. But we knew by then—and we knew she knew—she would not.



DEC15

Solo must have been watching me. Must've seen Bethany when she came by and followed her home. He was there today when she went to start dinner. Tim called. *Your sister is babbling*, he said. He did not say, *My wife*. Could I come? He doesn't know who else to call, not the church, they'd try to exercise her. He said *exercise*. Their congregation believes in that shit, speaking-in-tongues and demons and the spirit-sculpting rites of jazzercise.

Shut up Agnes.

I am a terrible person. *The children are upset*, he said. *And Bethany won't do anything*. Not cook, not clean. Not nothing.

Tim's no star either.



I got Bethany into bed finally. More than an hour she sat there, at the kitchen table, muttering at the window.

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It was there by the gate. It was just getting dark and it was beside the gate.

That's how I could tell it wasn't my eyes making it big—because of the gate—how it brushed against it, then shook its wing out like it was caught. It looked at me. Directly into me. Through the window like the window wasn't there, like it could reach me from there at the gate, like there was nothing to stop it.

You mean Solo.

And I knew it, I knew it. I threw my hands over my ears then because no. How is it possible, all of them in one body, you put them all into one body, Agnes, how could you? Did you marvel—because what-was and was-not has now come? How could you be so stupid?

Bethany, you need to lie down.

How did you not know you've been lied to? How can you think that it's you making these decisions? That you ever did? You vain idiot. You've always been blind. Books? Math? Pride! You're not in control. If you think you are, that's you—being controlled.

You're not making sense.

You're a puppet. They are up inside you jerking you around like a two-dollar whore.

A two-dollar whore. Really, Bethany, what century are you in?

Listen to me, Agnes. You have to kill it now. Kill it.

Solo.

Shush. Be quiet. You can't name it, don't give them a name. You give them a name, you're calling them to you, inviting them in.

So Solo's a vampire now?

*You think your cleverness will save you? It won't. You have brought evil here. To my door, my children's *home.* It was at the gate. Why did you ever, ever decide to come back here?*

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Bethany you know why. Because Pop . . . and for Mina.

That's a lie. You wanted to show Bruce who you were so he'd leave you, and he did. And he took her. What did you expect him to do when he found out? People aren't perfect, Agnes.

Oh, I am aware.

They're sinners. You're a sinner.

But Bruce is a saint?

If he is, you drove him away for it. And why? To replace him with this? I felt it Agnes, cold and dark and swole like the Susquehanna in March. Why won't you face facts?

You don't truck in facts Bethany.

Tell me you don't remember our crows.

What about them?

*You listened to them. Do you not remember? Because I do. I remember you under the tree. They spoke to all us women, but you *listened.* Do you remember what they told you to do? Because I remember, Agnes.*

I remember helping you.

Once I got Bethany quieted and into bed, Canon and Prosper came out to the living room. Tim talked softly, pulling them close. Honor was singing to Forbes and Serenity, some hymnlike thing wafting down the hall. After a bit, Merit appeared out of the dark in a soft green nightgown. She tiptoed over to me and leaned forward to whisper: *Mommy loves you.* Her eyes were rimmed with lashes dark like Ruth's. She put her hand up to my face in that old-person way some children have. She is their most pensive. She looked like a paler, softer version of my daughter, come to comfort me. Of course, Mina has never done this—she doesn't really walk. I got up, went to the sink, and poured myself a glass of water I wished

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were bourbon. Tim sent his daughter back to bed. I took a few sips, said goodbye to Tim and the boys, and went home.



DEC16

This time he left me a spine.

I think a groundhog's (~*Marmota monax*). This, based on the shape and length of the coccyx. I walked out to the pen at dawn, to see if he'd come home after scaring my sister shitless. The cold snap's over, snow melting. No bird, but in the muddy pen there was a snake of bones. Vertebrae, with bloody viscera hanging from them like fringe and beads.

Avian predation is not as well documented as you'd think, given the thousands of years humans have spent observing them, but there are isolated reports of birds of prey feeding this way: first severing a rodent's spinal cord, then seizing the base of the tail with their beaks as they stand on the body. One swift yank and the inside is out.

Though Solo's no raptor.

Beside the offering was something else catching the early light—like a flashlight skimming the surface of a mirror, broadcasting midnight trespass to passersby. I opened the gate. I made out a crystal pendant, its chain snapped, blackish, coated in half-congealed blood. Potentially the rodent's.

Wild crows have been known to engage in relationships with humans that last years. They bring items to curry favor with their people. Shiny things: coins and pins, bottlecaps and tabs from soda cans. Jewelry. This bit of glitz was not in and of itself an untypical Corvid gift.

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The biomatter read more like a mafia threat: *This could be you*. But that's human logic at work—my own flawed thinking. Correlation does not equal causation. Or motive. Organized crime requires at least semiorganized thought. Solo's smart but not as smart as even a stupid mobster. Animals do threaten each other with demonstrations of size and power, but these occur only during real-time altercations.

Animals do not play chess.

The message confused me. No matter what he meant or didn't mean, the spine *felt* like a warning, but the necklace? That surely conveyed our bond—a find that reminded Solo of me, to come back to me. A nod to the strength of our relationship, a forget-me-not. It might explain him at Bethany's: something prompted him to follow her home, some curiosity about our sisterhood or jealousy of it. He may have sensed our tension. It's possible he feels she's a threat to me.

Alternately these items could be trophies from separate kills.

Don't be ridiculous Agnes. A crow does not murder. A murder comprises more than one crow—by definition. Solo cannot in and of himself a murder make.

Where was Bruce when she needed language to save her? I ask myself. But poor Agnes, I cannot find her way to an answer.

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Letter, cont.

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What is important to remember Mina, is that he flew. Solo flew. I did that for you.