

HELL'S COMING

Leaning against the doorpost of the smithy, I pretend it is a normal day. For the thousandth time in the last hour, I wonder whether I should say good-bye to Luis or just slip away. The boardwalk outside blazes as bright as the forge — it always does — under the light of a sun that sits on the horizon and refuses to set. Were farewells ever easier at night, all those years ago, when there was darkness? Before the Zone. Before the Visitors came to this world and stopped it dead on its axis. I try to picture the light of the moon. Silver, so people say.

Luis pulls the last horseshoe from the furnace, lays it on the anvil, and hammers it into shape. Cisco waits patiently, ignoring the roar of flames, the clatter of new steel.

I'm not so patient. I must go. Today. But it's not like I'm going forever. Except I most likely am. If I'm honest.

Luis pulls up his goggles and shakes the sweat from his head, watching it sizzle on the anvil. "Is not so long since Cisco here before," he says.

My shrug is awkward. This nonchalance game is harder than it looks.

"Maybe you like it, this place, too much." He grins at me.

"I just don't like leaving it 'til his shoes are worn right down."

His shrug is genuine. "Is your dollars. These ones last good long time. Or good long journey."

It seems to me he's taking his sweet time about this job. He batters a clip onto the front of the shoe, then dunks it in cold water. I've seen him reshoe three horses in the time he's lavishing on mine. Like he's got something on his mind, too.

"Luis . . ." He looks up and my nerve fails me. "We never agreed on a price."

He shakes his head. "Is on this house. Free for amigas."

"That's good of you but . . ." I fumble out some cash.

"*De nada*." He waves me off, almost angrily, I think.

"No, it wouldn't be right."

He looks me in the eye. "Mañana, next time . . ."

I look stupid with the money in my outstretched hand. "Yes, next time."

"Megan," he sighs. "There's no mañana, eh? You, Cisco — you ride into the Zone. I know this."

"That's not true," I blurt out. One lie hot on the heels of another.

"To find your padre. New shoes for Cisco, supplies from Betsy's — blankets, canned food, ammunition."

I look at him aghast. I know Marfa is a small town, but I thought

I'd been careful with my preparations, spreading them out over several months.

"I see you gaze west always. You talk many times about the Zone, but you stop this talk weeks back. So stands up to reason. You leave now."

He waits for me to confirm or deny, but still I don't speak.

"But no adios." He sounds hurt.

"I wanted to. I really did but I didn't want to make a fuss. I mean . . . I'm going alone. If you had any notion about tagging along, then just forget it, because it's too dangerous, you know that."

"More danger even than going solo?"

"Luis, I have to."

"I know. And I am coming also."

"Now wait just a minute!"

"They find another boy for this place. I have dollars . . ."

"No, Luis. I'm going alone. You don't know the first thing about the Zone. You don't even have a horse."

He rolls his eyes as if these obstacles are of no concern. "I tell you, I have dollars for a horse."

"I'm going today, just as soon as Cisco is ready, and I'm not wasting time while you bargain with a horse trader."

"How come now? Why hurry, eh?"

It's a good question, and one that I barely know the answer to.

"I'm . . . just ready. That's all. It's time."

"You know this from the Zone?"

I nod, unable to explain. And I'm hardly going to tell him about the strange thoughts that have been arriving, out of the blue, in my head recently. Suddenly the need to go into the Zone feels more urgent. I've explored the border a few times, even dipped into the periphery. And when I've been there, the urge comes from *inside me*. A powerful urge. I have no idea where my father is — I just know he's out there somewhere, alone, waiting, in peril. So each time I ride to the edge of the Zone, the temptation to keep on riding into the unknown grows stronger and stronger.

"Zona de Diablo." Luis touches the crucifix around his neck, then sizes the new shoe onto the base of Cisco's hoof. "You think I watch my friend ride alone into this place?"

"It's not up for negotiation," I mutter.

"*Conforme*," he mutters back.

The truth is I can't decide whether his insistence is endearing or annoying. I've always considered this *my* mission, and mine alone. Having anyone else along for the ride will just cloud my thinking. The best Zone trackers operate solo, or so the wisdom goes.

"You tell your aunt?" he asks without looking up.

"Not yet. Not that it's any of your —"

A gunshot cuts me short. Cisco tenses and his smoking shoe drops to the floor. It wasn't that far away — a couple of blocks north toward the edge of town. Probably the saloon — though it seems a mite early for drunken arguments. I peer along the boardwalk.

Luis curses in Spanish and steadies Cisco.

Another gunshot. This time closer.

"¡Jesús y María!"

Still, neither of us moves. It is a common hazard of the Welcome Saloon — one that doesn't concern law-abiding folks. The sheriff will settle it if any gamblers are still standing.

But then I hear footsteps running along the boardwalk, and a figure emerges from the dusty light. He staggers up to me — Connor Fishwick — a regular from the saloon. A man whose haggard face I know only because they throw him into the street when his credit is bad. For some moments he's so out of breath he cannot speak.

"Jesus, you the Bridgwater child? Megan Bridgwater? Hell's comin' for you. They's comin' and they want answers!"

"Hey, slow down! Who's coming?"

Luis steers me toward the back of the smithy. "Go, now!"

"Wait! Who's looking for me? What do they want?"

"Does it matter a goddamn?" Connor gasps for breath. "I ain't seen 'em before. Looked like badass cowhands but they's maybe *Visitors*, I reckon!"

"Visitors? Are you sure? How can you know?"

"Hell, there ain't no guarantees! They all look the same as us, don't they? But they sure was mean-lookin'! Been askin' all over for Joan Bridgwater and Megan and waving round reward money. Daniel Gough acts the big man: 'Go home,' he says. 'We don't want yer dollars.' And the head honcho, he shoots him down in cold blood. People start talkin' then,

sayin' you're always hangin' round the smithy. They's comin', Megan."

I wrestle free of Luis. "Finish Cisco! Do it now!"

I figure he's going to argue, but he sets to it. I peek down the boardwalk. There are two silhouettes swaggering down the street, leading their horses, guns drawn. Throughout the neighborhood, I hear the sound of shutters and slamming doors. Connor Fishwick has already fled.

"Hurry, Luis!"

He mumbles something, his mouth full of nails. More figures tramp into view. I didn't even think to bring Pa's gun today — everything is back at my aunt's shack together with my expedition pack.

Luis hammers the last nail home. I throw myself into the saddle.

"Wait!" he cries.

Trust a farrier to insist on rounding off the job when your life's at stake. But I've heard him talk through his skills enough times — if the shoe isn't seated properly, it can injure the horse.

"¡Completo!" he shouts. He tosses his tools to one side, and for a moment we stare at each other.

I should go now, straightaway. But if I do, I won't see him again. No time for good-byes — it isn't how I've imagined this at all. My departure was meant to be a dignified, heroic affair. I steal a last look at him — wiry and tall, with hair cropped close, white burn

scars on his arms and shoulders, and those dark, dark eyes. Cisco paces the floor of the smithy, restless for a command.

I hold out my hand to Luis. They'll kill him if I leave him here. He grins and swings up into the saddle behind me. A shadow falls across the entrance. Luis grabs me around the waist as I spur Cisco forward.