

# CHAPTER ONE

## TURTLE

Lucy hunched over the corpse and felt a tiny bubble of hysterical laughter gurgle up. But as she stared at the lifeless turtle stretched out on the rough plank, the laughter died abruptly. The tang of fresh blood was unpleasant. She should have butchered it outside, by the shore, but the hour was getting late and she'd felt exposed on the sand. Besides, she had never actually done a turtle before, never noticed how the wizened face and papery eyelids made it look like a very old person.

She positioned the knife edge along the thinnest section of gray, wrinkled neck and pushed down, fixing her gaze steadily in front of her. The knife stuck. She tried to stop her brain from screaming thoughts of sinew and bone, and leaned her weight on her hand. The flesh resisted, then suddenly gave way. The knife slammed into the hard wood underneath, and the head rolled off onto the ground with an audible *thump*.

Her stomach heaved. Fortunately, it was empty. Lucy put her knife down and dragged the woven screen away from the entry hole to her shelter, letting a breeze sweep in and clear the stench from her nose.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, sinking to her knees. She could smell the scent of impending rain. She wondered whether she could survive it for another year. Two days of steady rain had already turned the ground outside her camp into a series of muddy pools threaded by soggy grassland, and since her shelter lay in a hollow, there was now what amounted to a narrow moat right outside the front entrance.

The floods had first come about five years ago, when she was eleven years old. Melting polar caps; rising sea levels; increased rainfall; a steady battering of hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes weakening the land: everything the scientists had warned them about. And the world mapped in her geography books had changed with a frightening rapidity; continents shifting shape, coastlines altered. San Francisco, Los Angeles, Venice, Thailand, Spain, her beloved Coney Island, Japan, had all but vanished beneath the waves. Australia was half the size it had been, shrinking like an ice cube in a warm drink, and New York City had become a clump of six or seven scattered islands connected to the mainland by a few big bridges — the Geo Wash, the RFK, the Will Burg. Some were only accessible during the Long Dry.

Small but fast-moving canals flowed over the same routes as the old roads. Lexington Avenue, Fifth Avenue, 42nd Street, were all underwater now. But people had rallied and rebuilt. They'd stretched suspension bridges strong enough to hold a dozen people and a few bicycles at a time across the swollen canals that now ran in a crisscrossing grid over what had been Manhattan. Thousands of sandbags shored up the dikes along the smaller waterways, and a massive wall of masonry and detonated high-rises had been built in an attempt to keep the inland sea back from the edges of Harlem and Washington Heights. Cheap plywood houses sprang up on stilts, altering the cityscape. Deep, wide gutters were cut into the ground, and cars were banned from the city, except on

the outskirts and the few roads that had survived the earthquakes.

They'd called it "New Venice" jokingly, and it had seemed okay then. Lucy, living in the solidity of northern New Jersey, miles away from the shores of the sea, had felt safe, and she'd kept on taking the train into the city or hitching, kept on cruising the vintage stores for cool clothes. It rained frequently, making whole neighborhoods inaccessible for months out of the year, and the summers were more sweltering than ever, but the streets were still packed with people buying and selling or just hanging out. And then, as if all that had been just a dress rehearsal for some disaster movie, four years later the plague had arrived.

She could almost hear the newspeople again, like something out of one of those cheesy old sci-fi television shows: the warnings to stay inside; the rising panic; the video of gaunt, red-eyed survivors, their skin seemingly charred; the doomsayers with their sandwich boards, black robes, and crazy talk about disease-carrying birds and God's wrath. Seeing anchorwomen, who normally looked like airbrushed mannequins, seriously freaking out was scary. Lucy still had nightmares. She still woke up certain that her skin was covered in scabs and she was bleeding to death from the inside out.

Instead of globe-eyed aliens or a gigantic meteorite headed straight for Earth, it was the resurgence of a killer disease that had reduced the global population to less than 1 percent of what it had been within three short months. Eating healthy, exercising, living in a big house, driving a fancy car — none of that mattered at all. The pox took almost everybody, and it seemed that people between the ages of thirty and sixty died faster and harder than anyone.

And who would have guessed that Lucy would have turned out to be luckier than her entire family?

Lucy "Lucky" Holloway. She used to hate her nickname, but now — now it was different.

It was weird to think that her younger brother, Rob, had started calling her that as a joke. He'd also nicknamed the dog, Rex, "Tex Mex" after it had been discovered that the golden retriever could scarf down a dozen frozen burritos without vomiting, and he'd renamed their older sister, Susan, "Maggie" (short for "Maggot") because she liked to eat rice pudding while bundled up on the couch in an old blanket.

Maybe Lucy had gotten off easy. *Lucky* instead of *Lucy* wasn't too bad, and most people didn't realize it was meant sarcastically because of her ability to trip over her own two feet, break dishes, and knock books off of shelves merely by walking past them. As a preteen, she'd managed to run through the glass French doors that led into the kitchen from the pool, not once, but twice, necessitating visits to the emergency room and eleven stitches in her calf the first time and then, six under her chin.

She knew her clumsiness annoyed her parents. She'd always felt as if she were a changeling dumped into their magazine-perfect midst. She didn't even look like them, having inherited some recessive gene from an ancient Welsh ancestor. She was slim and gray-eyed, with wildly curly black hair — shocking compared to their pink and blond athletic good looks. She was awkward and she was ugly. And worse than that, she wasn't a superjock like her brother or a brainiac like her sister. She was something her happy-homemaker mom and her big-lawyer dad just couldn't understand: good at nothing in particular.

In her journal she'd written long, angry, tearful diatribes about feeling out of step and alone at home and at school, where the cliques were ruled by people just like her brother and sister, until she'd convinced herself she didn't care, forced herself to tune out when Rob's latest game score or Maggie's newest scholarship was being discussed over the dinner table. At least she hadn't been nicknamed after something that pulsed and wriggled on rotten food.

Poor Maggie. Gone, and her old blanket gone, too, burned in a useless attempt to get rid of the sickness.

Together with the quilts Grandma Ferris had painstakingly pieced together and Lucy's threadbare teddy bear and the embroidered sofa cushions and everything else it seemed had made life soft and comfortable. Great piles of sheets and bedspreads, mattresses and pillows were piled sky-high in every neighborhood, then doused in gasoline and coaxed into infernos that burned for weeks. When the wind was coming from the east, Lucy imagined she could still smell the acrid fumes like burnt hair, could still see the towers of black smoke billowing against the blazing blue sky. It was not until the Long Dry was over and the Long Wet began again that the fires were finally quenched by the pelting rains. The parched dirt liquefied into slow-moving rivers of sludge and covered everything in mud, including the pits — the deep trenches used once the cemeteries were full, where bodies were stacked in rows like cut logs and scattered with quick lime to hurry the decay in an attempt to prevent reinfection. Then the controlled bombings began, turning high-rises into massive concrete cairns over the sites where thousands had died within days of one another. The skeletal bodies, the livid marks on blackened skin, were buried under tons of rock, and all the crushing details of life as it used to be were erased.

The memories she tried to preserve were of her life before the plague descended, and in her mind it was like those times were lit by a gentler sun, all Technicolor blurry and beautiful. She remembered the smallest things: her mother's buttermilk pancakes and homemade blackberry jam, the smell of fabric softener, the feel of socks without holes. Now, looking at her grimy fingernails and dirt-encrusted skin, she was amazed at how much she had changed. How things like homework, a daily shower, and a hot breakfast on the table seemed so unimaginable to her now.

She was certainly not lucky. She was Lucy, plain and simple.

She leaned back on her heels, staring at the flattened pile of dry grasses where she slept, her sleeping bag with her vintage leather motorcycle jacket scrunched up for a pillow; the crooked shelf she'd hung from a couple of branches holding a dented tin plate and bowl; a camping knife, fork, and spoon strung on a piece of string so she wouldn't lose them; her backpack with the essentials; a change of clothing. All she had left in the world besides her knife, the survival manual she'd scooped off the floor of a bookshop with all the windows smashed out, and a few other personal items. The book was battered and stained, pages escaping from the cracked binding, but it was precious.

She scraped her hair back off her sweaty forehead. It was too short to stay tucked behind her ears and just long enough to fall into her eyes constantly. She felt an oozing wetness on her cheek and looked at her hands. Mud, blood, and who knew what else. Tears? Lucy didn't cry too often. She figured she'd used them all up by now. She bit her lip hard between her teeth and stood up clumsily. She'd been crouched over for so long that her right foot had gone to sleep. She dragged the screen back over the doorway, then limped over to the bucket she kept filled with rainwater and rinsed her hands, drying them roughly on the legs of her jeans.

The turtle wasn't getting any deader, and she had a lot to do before she lost the last of the daylight. She walked back over to the rough table she'd made out of a few pallets and peered down at the manual, held flat under a couple of rocks. The instructions had seemed simple enough. The capture had been easier than she had expected: sneaking up on the creature while it sunbathed on a mud bar on the shore of the Hudson Sea, grabbing it by the thin leather whip of a tail, and holding it well away from her body until she could shove a stick between the snapping jaws. And she hadn't felt much sympathy, not after it tried to bite her; hadn't felt so much as a twinge, even though before everything that had happened she'd been a strict vegetarian. No, she'd held it flat against the ground with the pressure of her knee, waggled another stick in front of the cruel, predatory-bird mouth until the

neck was stretched taut, and then bopped it hard on its little old lady head with a handy rock.

She checked the book again. There was a page missing; there must be. She flipped backward and forward, looking for the sequence of actions that would yield four slabs of pink meat, as pristine and antiseptic as anything you could have bought off a refrigerated shelf in a grocery store. If there had still been any around. She stabbed at the creature in a sudden fury. The knife turned on the shell. She yelped and tossed it from her in disgust. She'd gouged her left palm — a long, wide gash that instantly welled blood. She sucked on her hand, not really enjoying the coppery taste. She pulled her bandanna from her neck and wrapped it around the wound, pulling the ends tight in a knot with her teeth. Then she kneeled down and picked up the knife, rubbing the dirt from it and checking the blade for damage. She heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed okay. She ran her thumb over the edge, feeling a burr of roughness, the smallest of nicks. It would need to be re-honed before she could continue.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she told herself.

At the bottom of her backpack was a narrow rectangle of gray stone. It felt like fine sandpaper. Five sweeps of the blade against it and the edge was sharp enough to draw a thin line of blood across the fleshy part of her thumb. She turned the knife over to sharpen the other side.

Lucy walked back over to the book and pushed her hair back behind her ears again with force. The gory remains of the turtle were laid out on some broad leaves. It looked nothing like the neat illustration. The vibrantly colored picture showed tidy quarters of pale rosy meat — not this mutilated lumpy mass leaking muddy water and blood. The shell was the problem. Bony, hard as granite, it just wouldn't come off. She'd followed the instructions, tossing the corpse into a saucepan of water over the fire. She'd even left the turtle in the pot for longer than the ten minutes specified, but now she had to wonder if perhaps the water hadn't been hot enough.

The words danced in front of her eyes. She stared so long that they stopped making any kind of sense. The sun was setting, and the light leaking through the willow screens was dim. Lucy inserted the knife between the shell and the carcass and jimmied it around. There was a snap and the tip of the blade broke off. She stared at the knife for a moment, disbelieving, and then with a cry of rage, she picked up and threw the book with all her strength, sending it skidding across the dirt floor.

"Crap!" she yelled, and instantly was aware of the frustration welling up in her throat and the hot tears coming. She bit down hard on her lower lip until the pain pushed back the angry sobs catching in her throat. *Deep breath.* You did not waste food. Not when it was so scarce. Not when the birds were poison and squirrels were skittish. Carefully she checked over the knife. The main part of the blade, about six inches, was still good. She could use it for most jobs. With a sigh, Lucy bent down and picked up the book, shuffling the pages back into the binding and smoothing the cover.

She leaned over the body, poked at it with her finger. The turtle's legs flopped like a rag doll. She couldn't imagine anything less appetizing, but there was no way she was going to give up now. She hadn't eaten anything since that morning, and then it had only been a scoop of porridge and a handful of dried, shriveled raspberries, which had tasted moldy. She took a couple of pieces of wood from the scanty pile stacked beside her and added them to the fire. She held her hand over the mouth of the cooking pot. It was hardly steaming. The wood was too green, the fire still not hot enough; the cooking stones barely sizzled when she aimed a goblet of spit at them, and the dented saucepan of water refused to boil.

She sighed. Her fists were clenched and she could feel the pinch of her nails against her palms. It was already

too late in the day to build up a good fire. The turtle's mottled skin, the ragged ruin of its neck, were taking on an unhealthy gray appearance. And she could smell something swampy and briny, like stagnant water. It was already cooler than it had been for the last six months, but still warm enough to turn meat bad fast. If the last four hours weren't going to be a complete waste of time, she'd have to do something. Lucy hefted one of the heavy, river-smoothed rocks she kept nearby and smashed it into the shell, which broke into irregular pieces, some large enough to dig out with her fingers, some small bits, like yellow pottery shards, embedded into the leathery skin of the turtle's underside. She went to work picking out the pieces until she could make a long incision in the belly. She shoved her hand in under the tough hide and scooped out the stomach and intestines, careful to breathe through her mouth. She'd gutted plenty of fish in the last year, and the looping entrails didn't bother her too much anymore. They were neat little parcels as long as she was careful not to puncture them. She piled them on a few broad dock leaves and covered them up against the flies. Later she'd bait her fishing lines with them and see if the catfish and eels liked innards better than the night crawlers she normally used. She flipped the turtle over, smashed the upper plate with the rock, and picked out as much of the shell as she could. After consulting the book again, she made four slits down the inside of each leg and cut away the skin. It slipped back easily, sort of like peeling a banana, and with only a little bit more cutting she was able to pull it free from the turtle's feet.

Lucy ran her finger over the hide, wondering if it was tough enough to patch the many holes in her boots. *Nothing wasted*, she thought, putting it aside to deal with later. She'd cured a rabbit pelt and a couple of squirrel skins before and ended up with serviceable but stinky leather, too stiff to work with easily but good enough to mend holes. She looked down at the oozing carcass, casting her mind back to tenth-grade biology, trying to remember anything useful. That had been frogs, in any case. Rubbery, fake-looking, and smelling overwhelmingly of formaldehyde. If she had a frog in front of her now, she'd have been able to skin and fillet it in two minutes flat, like one of those Japanese chefs.

She had a wild impulse to just dump the turtle and eat acorn porridge and dried berries for the fourth day in a row, but her acorn flour store was getting low, fresh meat was rare, and she needed the protein. She suspected, too, that there was more squirming weevil than powdered acorn at the bottom of the old coffee can. Perhaps if she just shoved the meat back into the saucepan, put the lid on, and left it to sit for a while over the bedded embers, the flesh would fall from the bones and she'd have turtle soup or turtle tea. There were a couple of shriveled wild onions left, some woody mushrooms she could toss in. She'd eaten far worse.

Lucy stuck the turtle in the pot and covered it, piling the smoking wood around it. She rinsed her right hand in the bucket of water, getting most of the blood off, though not the dark matter stuck deep under her nails, and wiped it dry on her jeans. Her left hand throbbed, and she wondered if the bandage was on too tight. Her skin felt greasy with sweat. She stripped off her thick sweatshirt. Underneath she wore a tank top. Lucy sniffed at her armpits, wrinkling her nose, and then quickly sluiced her upper body. Now that the waters were rising, she'd be able to bathe again. It had been far too long. Weird how she hadn't noticed the odor of stale sweat and grime that permeated the shelter. Time to change the bedding grasses and air out the rush mats she had pieced together during the long nights. Lucy had ended up with cuts striping her palms and fingers and looking as if she'd lost a fight with a bramble bush. She would light some sage bundles later to clear out the musty stink and the smell of dead turtle.

She pulled her sweatshirt back on. Her neck felt tight, her hands shaky, and the wound beat in time with her heart. She wrapped a shawl and then her sleeping bag around her shoulders and sat as close as she could to her

small fire. The smoke burned her eyes. She was procrastinating. There were things to do before nightfall, but she had checked the calendar notches she had cut into the bark of one of the four support trees and knew the moon would be full, which would give her more light than usual. She could get a later start, and a few minutes' rest would do her good.

Beyond the cracks in the interlaced willow screens she had made to disguise the small clearing where she lived, she could see the huge, red sun setting above waters that looked as thick and black as molasses.

Lucy dreaded this time of day, when there was a pause and her thoughts rose up and threatened to submerge her. As long as she was busy doing, she could keep the loneliness at bay. She drew the edge of the sleeping bag up around her ears, the shawl over her head, and nuzzled into them, smelling the nose-tickling mustiness of leaf mold, ground-in dirt, and the dried grasses she slept on. Her mind buzzed at her like an annoying mosquito.

She needed to walk the circumference of her camp, check the snares she'd set, the trip wires, the bundles of grass she had laid down on the ground that would show her if anyone heavy-footed had come near. Lucy groaned. She was so tired. Her days were always long, but sometimes it seemed as if it didn't matter how early a start she got.

She thrust the sleeping bag aside, bundled up the shawl, and got to her feet, popping her neck and shrugging her shoulders up and down a few times to work out the tightness. She checked a few more things off her mental list: She needed drinking water, so she'd have to make a wide arc and pass by the lake, and she needed as much wood as she could carry, now that the rains were gathering force. There'd been two torrential downpours lasting ten or twelve hours already, and it was only the beginning of June by her rough monthly calendar. She'd been less than careful about keeping track of the days and nights. The Long Wet brought monsoons, riptides, flash floods, and sudden lightning fires — the worst of them falling roughly in the middle of the cycle, but if anything was true these days, it was that the weather was erratic.

She'd check her snares, of course, hoping for a ground squirrel or rat, and her fishing lines, although during the Long Dry the lake waters had receded, leaving about twenty feet of dry, cracking mud before the first dribbles accumulated in shallow pools. A mudskipper maybe, a newt, or a salamander, though she didn't like the gluey taste much. It was too dark to go digging for shellfish by the sea. She'd plan on doing that tomorrow.

First she listened. But there were no noises except for the rhythmic hum of insects. Next she peered through a hole in the mesh of supple willow limbs that screened the front entrance to her camp. Lucy knew every tree, every bush, every grassy hump silhouetted in the gathering dusk. It was a landscape she had peered at and studied night after night. She had counted the weird hummocks carved out of the earth after the last quake — there were twenty-three of them standing guard like silent sentinels.

Nothing seemed different, but lately she'd had the unsettling feeling of eyes on her. She checked for movement. The air was so still, the grasses didn't stir. She pulled up the black sweatshirt hood. Then she picked up a couple of plastic gallon jugs for the water, looping a length of rope through the handles, slung a woven grass bag over her shoulder, checked that her knife was snug against her hip, and lifted the front door screen out of the way.

A long puddle of water lapped against the piled sticks and brush she'd stacked against the outer walls to keep the rainwater from seeping in. She splashed through, feeling the cold wetness through the thick leather of her boots and a double layer of socks, ducked her head slightly, and replaced the screen. She backed up about five feet, making sure her small fire pit was invisible from the outside. It was. *Good*. She'd spent a lot of time stuffing most of the larger chinks with moss and dried grass recently. Plus, now that the rains were coming, the willow

sticks she'd shoved into the ground to make thicker walls would begin to grow and leaf-out. Willow was amazing! A cut stick would take root easily. The four slender, flexible trees she had bent down and bound together at the top to make the sloping roof were already bushy with new growth.

If you didn't know the camp was there, it was almost invisible against the surrounding foliage and shrubs, like the snug, domed nests the field mice made themselves out of grass stalks. She glanced at the sky. The moon was beginning its rise, full as she had hoped. Purple clouds boiled; the wind had suddenly picked up and the scent of rain was heavy. It would mask the smells of smoke and cooking turtle, she thought. Taking one last look around, she set off toward the lake, her nerves stretched tight and jumping.

The terrain was already changing. There were splashes of green leaves within the dusty gold. And the ground was spongy underfoot, treacherous with puddles and sinkholes. There were pretty much only two seasons now — drought and flood.

Her boots squelched a bit, but so far they were not leaking too badly. It was so quiet — save for the scritch of small claws scrabbling up tree trunks and the angry, explosive noises of disturbed squirrels. She always thought they sounded as if they were cussing her out. On the way, she inspected various snares she'd concealed under bushes and by likely holes, crossing back and forth along the narrow spit of land, her senses in hyperdrive. They were all empty. One showed signs that a predator had gotten there first. Tufts of silver fur snagged in the branches, a few dribbles of blood. She kneeled down, touched the soft, downy clumps. Rabbit, she thought, rather than squirrel. Too bad. Rabbit was a delicacy these days, but she couldn't help but be glad that there were still foxes and coyotes around. So many animal species had been wiped out in the plague.

As if to echo her thoughts, a howl rent the air. She stiffened. She knew the clear belling and crystal sharp barks of the foxes and coyotes as they called to one another. This was deeper, urgent — the sound of a hunting pack of dogs. Her head swiveled in the direction of the baying. She thought it was at some distance yet. But behind her. She shuddered, fighting the urge to break into a panicked run. Not just behind her, but between her and her camp. Most predators were still scared around humans; her smell was enough to keep them at a distance. But the packs of feral dogs were large and hungry, and they had no fear of people.

She considered. She'd work her way to the lake and circle around, giving them wide berth. The land rose slightly just beyond the water's edge, and she'd be able to get a better look. And she could check the water levels at the same time. There was the tarnished bronze statue of a girl sitting on a large toadstool surrounded by an assortment of strange characters, and Lucy used this to keep track, scratching lines into the metal every second full moon. The last time she'd looked, the water had been barely lapping at the girl's toes, but by the middle of the Long Wet it would be up to her shoulder level. Lucy couldn't remember the girl's name now, although when she was a child her mother used to bring her here to climb on the statue. She recalled jumping from toadstool to toadstool, feeling the smooth, sun-hot metal, playing king of the castle with other kids. The bravest of them leapt from the hare to the man in the top hat or perched on the girl's head, gripping the long locks of her flowing hair. That wasn't Lucy, though. She never made it higher than the girl's lap — broad and solid and safe.

Now she moved quickly. There was no cover but scrubby grasses and spindly bushes. The ground underfoot had changed from loose, sandy earth to cracked, oozing mud. The lake was to her left. It had dwindled over the hot season to a series of small, murky pools surrounded by rings of soft, slippery sludge. A larger expanse of water lay far beyond her reach, as smooth as glass. Her fishing lines were marked by twists of bark. Lucy pulled them up, and, finding the hooks empty, tossed them back into the shallow water. All around her was the

plopping sound of frogs, as they woke to her presence and alerted one another. The splashes they made sounded like a string of tiny firecrackers going off. She needed her spear to catch frogs. They were too quick, too alert.

The dogs had stopped barking. The night was silent again except for the small animal noises. Lucy crouched and submerged her water bottles to fill them. The flow of water gurgled gently. Her eyes darted around, her head lifted. She pushed her hood back so that she could see better. The quiet was unnerving after the cacophony of howls and barks. The hairs on the back of her neck rose. She was being watched. Slowly, she got to her feet, capped the jugs, and hung them from her neck, easing the rope into position so it lay across her shoulders. Then she loosened the knife in its sheath. She strained her ears, listening hard. Suddenly there were small, ominous noises coming from all around. A rat snake rustled past, its heavy black body as thick around as her wrist. There was the squeal of something just caught.

Lucy pulled her hood back over her face, trying to blend into the inadequate shadows. She froze. Directly across from her, at the edge of a pool of fresh rainwater, belly flat to the ground, was a cougar. So close she could see the pink tongue lap. They locked eyes. Lucy barely breathed. She tried to remember if the manual said she should play dead or make a racket. The cougar didn't move. Lucy's fingers fumbled at the hilt of the knife, trying to prepare herself for an attack if it came; quietly telling herself to slash a volley of cuts; reminding herself that the blade was broken, that stabbing would have no effect. But behind that voice, the knowledge that she'd be helpless against two hundred pounds of lithe muscle and bone, a natural killer, and the hope that death would be quick and the pain numbed by fear and shock. Maybe she shouldn't be making eye contact? Perhaps that was a threat? She closed her eyes and murmured a quick prayer. Her thigh muscles quivered. She ducked down, trying to move smoothly. Her feet slid awkwardly in the mud. She slipped and fell backward, the weight of the water bottles pulling her off balance. Quickly she was back up on her feet, knife in her hand. Her jeans were so coated in mud, they looked like a statue's legs. The cougar was gone, soundlessly, no movement of grasses even to mark its passing. And now Lucy realized that the dogs were yelping again, an excited chorus of barks, much closer, and she heard the crash and thud of many paws trampling the earth.

There was an ominous rumble overhead. Immediately, as if the sky had ripped open, the rain began, a torrent drenching her to the skin and plastering her hood to her skull. The ground was instantly hammered into soggiess. Lucy looked to her right. She saw hillocks of flattened grass too low to conceal a ground squirrel, and the tossing sea beyond. To her left was a series of muddy pools fast expanding and the shifting sludge that would slow her down, sucking at her boots, and beyond it the rain-shattered lake. She could make out the silhouette of the statue. The rainwater had already pushed the level up above the top of the toadstool, much higher already, she thought, than at this time last year. Directly in front of her, past a patch of soggy scrubland and up a slight rise, was a thick stand of trees, shadowed and dark. Behind her, she saw the first dog loping in her direction. Its muzzle grazed the ground, plumed tail up, fur raised in a spiky ridge over its back. Through the sheets of rain it looked like an illustration from a children's fairy tale cut out of black construction paper. Wolflike.

Without hesitation she sprang forward toward the grove, dodging around the hummocks of slick, sharp grasses, running, like a panicked rabbit, in a crooked line, until she was pushing through dense and prickly bushes, ignoring the barbs that caught and tore her skin and snagged her clothes. She secreted herself behind the nearest tree — a pine, wind-battered and salt-poisoned, with rough, shaggy bark, and no branches low enough or strong enough to hoist herself up on. The rain drove into her eyes. She wiped a streaming hand across her face. Her water bottles tugged at her neck. She lifted the rope over her head and hurriedly stowed the bottles

under a nearby shrub. Her grip on her knife was slippery, and she rubbed her hand uselessly on her wet pants to dry the moisture from it. She tightened her grasp and leaned her forehead against the tree, trying to catch her breath. She had a cramp in her side and she kneaded it with one bunched fist. Pressing her body against the coarse bark, she squinted her eyes against the drizzle to make out the shapes of the dogs.

The throng broke apart, dozens of dogs fanning out and then coming back together as they caught a trace of her along the lakeshore. The moonlight made shadows everywhere. They had definitely found her trail. The rain might slow them down a little, the puddles she had sloshed through would mask her scent, but they were serious about tracking her and unlikely to give up. She could hear the heavy panting and excited bursts of barking as they called to one another, like the high-pitched yelps of puppies scuffling over a bone. They were so close.

Lucy forced herself to leave the comforting solidity of the tree and move backward, as quietly as she could, sliding her feet through the mush of wet leaves. She took shallow breaths, darting quick glances over her shoulder, making for the place where the trees grew thickest. Black shapes wove back and forth, just beyond the pines in front of her, as the dogs tried to pick up her scent on the wet ground. She crept toward a cluster of pine, elm, willow, and leggy maples. The tall trees stood trembling; water cascaded down from their branches. She backed against the smooth trunk of an elm, the biggest tree in the glade. Too high overhead, wide branches spread out against the dark, fractured sky. The moon was directly above her. She hunkered down, listening to the sounds of the dogs coming ever closer. She held her knife in both hands, the blade pointing straight out in front of her. She'd kill at least one or two before they savaged her. The cramp was back again, jabbing into her side with a ferocity that made her wince; her lungs felt starved of oxygen; her heartbeat echoed in her ears. Then the crack of a branch snapping, loud as a gunshot, made her look up.