

F O U R

COLD, WAS MY FIRST THOUGHT, AND IT CAME WRAPPED IN soft irritation. The sand beneath my head was cold. Rocks dug into my back, through my flannel work shirt, and they were freezing.

Because I'm on my back, I realized, and a worse chill shuddered through me. I was on the shore, flat on my back, my ears roaring louder than the river. I opened my eyes and the world unfolded above me, an empty stretch of blinding sky blue. My left hand felt twice its normal size. My left hand felt like fire.

I twitched, and the blue was split by Nat Blakely, her mouth a little open, braid swinging like a well rope. "Hallie?" she said in a high, tight voice that wasn't my unflappable Nat. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Mm," I mumbled, and wet my lips. They tasted like I'd licked a shovel. I'd passed out. I'd never passed out before in my life.

I lifted my head off the stiff, damp sand, and the roar in my ears became a waterfall. "No, wait," Nat said. Delicate hands lifted my arm below the elbow, and I shuddered.

“When did it touch you?” Tyler’s voice floated somewhere outside the cloudless edges of the world.

“This morning,” I said, and Nat’s eyebrows flinched together. The fingers paused a long second on my arm. “It hit me with its wing when I slammed—” I swallowed. That crunch of wings breaking; that was Papa’s way, too. The Twisted Thing hit me, and I’d hit back *hard*.

“I didn’t mean to,” I finished weakly, and rested my cheek on the sand.

Tyler’s fingers braced my wrist, tracing the edges of the burn. “It’s fevered,” he said, and set the arm down atop my belly. A sickly-sweet odor rose up from the wound: rot, and old violets. “We have to get back to the house.”

His face was strained and ancient, all sharp-shadowed hollows. *You came back old*, I thought, and lost the thought’s sleek tail. I *was* feverish. Every idea I dredged up scattered like a flock of birds.

“How?” Nat shot back. “I can’t get her back to the house *and* find Marthe—”

“No Marthe,” I mumbled from the world of birds and blue. She’d put her hand on her belly and pace, and I’d have upset her one more time.

“We don’t need Marthe,” Tyler said urgently. “I did this in the field, twice. Just get me bandages and hot water.”

Nat’s head came up. “There are bandages in the smoke-house.”

“Why in *there*?”

Because it’s dangerous on the road south, I thought, and looked away. Nat’s mouth crimped above me. Nat was the only living soul who knew about that packed bag, and she’d sworn in blood not to say a word.

“There’s strong alcohol, too,” she said blithely, and stood. “That’s better than water. Help me get her on her feet.”

“I still need to boil the knife.”

“What do you mean, *knife*?” I said, and struggled upright. The ground tilted like a sinking boat, and Nat’s arms caught me. Her touch traveled all the way down my bicep, down into the misery that was my wrist. Pain shot straight to my sour stomach.

“I’m going to throw up,” I said distinctly.

“Okay,” Ty replied, as calm as houses, and gathered my hair off my face.

My breakfast tasted worse coming back up. I retched, aching, onto the riverside stones, and Nat paced a circle in the sand while I coughed, my shoulders hunched, spitting bile and tea. *This is bad*, surfaced in the whirl where my head used to be. *I’m making her scared*.

“Ready?” Tyler asked, and I nodded tinily. He cleared every strand of my hair from his fingers and stood.

Nat stared at me helplessly for a second, fists clenched. And then her jaw set, and she crouched down beside me. “I’m lifting you up now,” she said, and slid both arms under my own. She hauled me onto her shoulder silently, her wool carder’s muscles holding me straight.

"I'm sorry," I said. It sounded too young: scared and small.

"Don't be. You're lighter than my brother," she said grimly, and her arm tightened about my waist as we dragged up the path to the smokehouse.

The smokehouse door had no latch. There'd never been a reason to bother. Before Heron and his privacy, there'd been nothing of value there for anyone but me, and I'd secreted those things away. Tyler pushed the door open with a *pop*, and Nat hauled me inside.

"Sit," she said roughly, and sped off into the maze of chairs and boxes, coughing: my stumbles had kicked the dust into gnatlike clouds. I sat. Everything was predawn dark inside, the gloom of rubbed-smooth memories and too many blurred nights.

Tyler turned a circle in Heron's scrubbed flagstones. "What is all this stuff?"

I ran my gaze over Oma's ancient spinning wheel, the legless kitchen chair beside it, full heaps and boxes of wax meltings never recast into candles. Uncle Matthias's ghost moved among them always, lifting each shard of our family tree and weighing it for the pack in his left hand. "Just stuff," I said. "Stuff that's broken."

Tyler cast his eyes through the dim-lit peaks and valleys. "That's not broken," he said, crouching beside a leather pack slumped against the stonework.

My breath caught. I knew its contents by heart: a bar of homemade soap, a bedroll, a striker for campfires, a bottle

for water, and a pan to heat it up. Space left, on top, for four changes of clothes that would be good in all weather, and strong winter boots. And bandages, because the road south was dangerous and long.

"That's Heron's," I lied quickly, and Tyler pulled back his hand. I leaned my aching head against the red velvet stool and sighed.

Nat swore under her breath and twisted out through the narrow debris trails. "Found it," she said, slammed the bandages down, and swept Heron's cookpot aside. It clattered into the wall, and I made a small noise of protest.

"I'll clean it up later," she sighed, and unwrapped cotton strips from around the alcohol flask.

Tyler slopped alcohol on the edge of his shearing knife. The fumes scorched my parched throat and I coughed, my gaze hooked on his short, sharp blade. There was no light in the smokehouse past the edge of sun creeping around the doorstep, but that knife shimmered like fresh water.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Nat said.

Tyler stiffened. His good shirt was soaked down the back with nervous sweat. "Cross my heart, Hal," he said quietly, and looked down at me through mussed, sweaty hair. "Let me see your hand?"

I untangled it from my shirtsleeve and held it out, trembling. Nat caught my left wrist much more carefully than before and pinned it precisely, fingers spread apart, on the cool flagstones. Her free hand laced through the loose fingers of

my right hand. “Squeeze if it hurts,” she said shortly. Papa’s voice rose, a furious echo, behind it. That knife hovered over my tendons, close as his sour breath in my face, bleeding violence onto my skin. My throat went dry as fireplace sparks.

“They’re your friends,” I told myself, breath hitched, arms shaking.

“Yeah, we are,” Tyler said, and pressed the tip of the blade to my skin. I shut my eyes.

The knife, coldly burning, dug into my swollen hand.

It wasn’t a knife; it was a live coal. It seared through my hand and exploded in my head, shaking all the little birds of my thoughts into nothingness. Pain kindled orange behind my eyes. I gasped, and my squeeze around Nat’s fingers tightened into a death grip.

Be brave, I thought raggedly. *Be brave. Don’t make a sound.* Tyler turned the knife, and all my courage drowned in the flood.

I yanked my hand away, but Tyler’s palm held it firm; Nat clamped down on my wrist. Tears leaked into my mouth. Thicker, rotten liquid seeped through my fingers—infection and curdled blood—and I let out a long, begging moan. “Just another second,” Tyler said tightly. His knife caught everything that ever hurt in the universe and *pulled*.

The world narrowed to a dark tunnel: my hand, the wet stone floor, the pain. My gasp hit the walls, echoed against the mortared rock. Nat flinched and dropped my free hand, and

I slammed it instinctively toward the wound. “No—” she said, and caught my wrist inches from a mess of bloody pus and swollen, black-edged flesh. I stared at it, speechless.

“Do *not* infect that again,” she said fiercely, and pulled my wrist back against her palm. “We’re almost finished. I swear.”

“We *are* finished,” Tyler said. The dirty knife drew out, from the spattered wound, a tiny wisp of brown feather. It smeared against Tyler’s shearing knife, bathed in thin, streaked blood that was already darkening from bright red to a reeking, rotten black. A bubble boiled up, rusted before our eyes, and burst.

I gagged. I had nothing left to throw up.

“That’s all?” Nat said, faint.

“That’s all it needs,” Tyler replied shakily, and dropped the knife into an empty wicker basket. The smell of death and violets rose out of it like a stain. “You did great.”

Nat passed my free hand to him. His touch was lighter, all fingertips and hesitation. “You ready for the next bit?”

I shook my head, breathing hard.

“It’ll only last a second,” Nat said conversationally, and poured the alcohol over my hand.

I had no more noise left in me. The world blacked out for a long, long moment, and then the pain faded, muttered its way down. There was air in my lungs again, drawing in, flowing out, all the automatic gestures of a body that was well.

“You’ll be okay,” Tyler said, small and oddly breathless.

“You’re okay, Hal. I promise.” He looked even ghostlier than before. His awkward hand squeezed my own, light as dandelion.

I looked down at the fleck of brown feather on his blade. My spilt blood had charred into black, ashy flakes. The metal beneath it was pitting with rust. “That was inside me,” I said unsteadily.

Tyler nodded.

I curled into a ball. I needed to get back in control. I needed to be invisible, untouched, contained. The battered table back in the dust was too small to hide under now, and Nat’s eyes were on me, Tyler’s eyes. My friends. They’d given me so much, and I had nothing to repay them: no tea on the boil or hospitality to even the ledger between us. As if tea or words would keep them from reacting just like Marthe if they saw me *truly*: Needy. Messy. Frightened. *Weak*.

“Hey,” Nat said. I looked up, and there were tear tracks on her face: thick ones beneath her fierce eyes. She put a hand on my shoulder, and I shuddered free. Nat’s fire retreated behind her eyes. “Tyler,” she said. “Bandages.”

Tyler passed the faded bandages without a word.

I wiped my nose on my shirttail—*forget laundry, and forget propriety too*. Anything to get the disemboweled strings of my emotions back into my belly. Nat’s touch came again, through the cotton fabric, and Tyler’s veiled eyes stared at us and then fled past to Heron’s jumbled belongings. Tyler was harder to

read now, without the color in his eyes. The two darting green blotches in his left eye, the three in his right were as good as a beekeeper’s mask.

“We should burn this,” he said, and shoved the wicker basket. It was blackening slowly, like the first frost over the fields.

Nat’s scowl deepened. “Right.” She snugged the bandage tight where my thumb met my palm. The pressure gave me something besides my own shame to think about. I almost wept again for the gift of *normal* pain. I inspected my tender, wrapped-up hand: still red, the wound seeping, the veins of infection already gone. “So fast,” I murmured.

Tyler got painfully to one knee. His balance wavered. I bit my lip hard. “It’s like that with the Twisted Things,” he said, out of breath. “Once they’re gone, you heal fast.”

If you heal, I filled in silently, and didn’t let myself shiver again.

I braced myself on the red brocade stool and got up to my knees. My legs were dangerously wobbly. The muscles above my knees felt like an earthquake each. I pressed down on the stool, and rotten old-cities stuffing gave beneath my palm—around something lumpy, ungiving, and hard.

Something that was not supposed to be there.

“What’s wrong?” Tyler asked.

I prodded at the stuffing. Something was hidden in the stool’s ancient cushion, and I hadn’t put it there. I dug two

fingers into the hole, pried through the yellowed wool in layers and chunks, and brushed something as cold as the January trees.

The shock of it went up my fingers, into my palm. I jerked it out and held it up to the light: a bundle of bunched-up leather wrapped around metal a handspan long. A ridge of old iron peeked out the top and faded into a mess of what might have once been leather binding. The shreds remaining were darkened and slick with sweat, in patterns that spoke of one owner, one hand.

I unwrapped it and dropped the leather strips to the floor. It was a hilt: the iron and leather pommel of the strangest hunting knife I'd ever seen.

The hilt was twisted, nearly wrenched off the line of the scarred-up metal blade. The blade swept down from it in a spiral, a hot-forged ringlet curl. I turned it with two careful fingers. Despite the nicks and use marks, the knife's blade shone like new forging.

"You couldn't cut a thing with this." I touched a finger to the edge. "But it's sharp."

Nat leaned forward, eyes narrowed. "Who sharpens a knife you can't use for anything?"

"Who sharpens a knife you can't sheathe?" I said. "Unless you carry around a stool."

"Oh, God," Tyler said, sudden and strangled, and he slumped against the wall.

"What?" Nat whirled. "What is it?"

"It's mine," came another voice, quietly, from the doorway, and this one I knew without seeing. Nat paled. I turned slowly to face long, lean Heron, standing silhouetted on the smoke-house step.

"Miss," he said, perfectly without emotion, "please don't touch that thing."

My throat prickled, and my cheeks: hot and ashamed. "We weren't looking to go through your things—"

"That's not the issue," he said, and took two long strides inside. The smell of bonfires followed him: sweat and the stink of feathers crisped to ash.

A ripple of slow tension ran up Tyler Blakely's back. "That isn't yours."

"Ty—" Nat started, high and scandalized. The tingle in my finger where I'd touched the knife's edge grew itchily stronger.

Heron smiled: a sick, sad thing. "I'm sorry," he said. "It is."

"You got it somewhere," Tyler snapped. He looked ready to burst into tears.

The hilt dangled between my fingers like the tail end of a snake. "Tell me what it is I'm holding."

Silence pooled across the floor like snowmelt. Neither of them looked at me. Tyler's fingers brushed once, twice, over John Balsam's sigil on his shirt.

"That," Tyler finally said, "is the knife that cut the heart out of the Wicked God Southward."