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# Wonders for the Dead

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Wonders for the Dead

By

Sarah K. Cook

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”*

--Luke 1:47a, 49

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### **Prologue: 1913**

*Alice was soft and young and barely a widow when the tax collector walked onto the farm. He noticed her immediately, the way the full white undersides of her arms flashed in the sun as she hung heavy quilts on the clothesline. She had rolled her sleeves up almost to her shoulders, and sweat stained the brown linen of her simple shirtwaist. It gaped slightly at the chest and fit snugly around her slim waist. Her hips bloomed out and swung forcefully as she beat the quilts with an old broomstick. With each blow, dust rose up into the gray April day, pulled by the breeze to the far end of the clearing. She was barefoot.*

*He stood still for a moment, watching. When she finally looked across the dirt yard towards him, she paused in her motion and set the broomstick on the ground, propping herself up on it. Her fine blonde hair stuck to the dampness on her temples and neck.*

*With a swift scrape of his thumb, he slid the wedding band from his ring finger and dropped it in the front pocket of the battered black satchel he carried.*

*Clearing his throat and removing his hat, he walked towards her and nodded slightly, setting his bag on the ground so he could extend his hand in greeting.*

*"Good afternoon, miss," he said.*

*She slid her own hand down side of her skirt before shaking his. "Good afternoon," she answered. Her voice was slow and southern and as full as her figure. Her eyes darted from his face to the sky and back again as she stepped away from him.*

*"I'm here to collect the taxes," he said. She didn't respond, so he motioned to the farmhouse, "I'm looking for a Mr. Hoyt Mersy? Is he your husband?"*

*She shook her head, "Father-in-law."*

*"I see," he said, his tone even.*

*"He's in the house now," she said, wrapping her hands around the broomstick again, "Go on up if you like."*

*He nodded again and licked his lips, "Pleasure to meet you, miss." His blue eyes roamed down to her bare feet and back up again. When his gaze met hers, she looked away suddenly. He slipped his hat on, angled around her, and walked towards the house. As he climbed the porch steps, he heard behind him the steady rhythmic sound of the broomstick hitting the quilt. He turned back to see her standing in the middle of a cloud of dust, the fabric of her shirt stretched between her shoulder blades, her small feet squared against the motion of her arms.*

## Chapter One: 1937

Tom Mersy woke with his face pressed hard against the coarse hotel mattress, a pool of spit slick beneath his cheek. He sat up, squinting, and wiped his face with the back of his hand. The nameless girl he'd picked up the night before lay on her side next to him, one lean arm flung over her face. In the morning light she looked younger than he remembered.

As he stood and looked for his pants, he felt a low, rumbling cough rising in his chest. He coughed deeply, closing his eyes and bending over, burying his mouth in his elbow to muffle the sound. He rested his other hand on the edge of the bed, his blocky fingers curling around the yellowed sheets. When the cough subsided, he looked up at the bed. The girl stirred but didn't wake. Tom pulled his arm away from his mouth to reveal a thin line of blood and mucus shining on the worn cotton of his shirt. He stood, picked a flimsy black stocking off the bureau, and wiped it away.

He dressed in silence, his eyes fixed on the dust motes that floated in the green light filtering through the shade. He pulled his boots on, stretched a dark jacket over his broad shoulders, and threw the rest of his belongings into his small, blue suitcase. He paused before he left the room, looking at a second suitcase that stood leaning against the nightstand.

It was Isaac's.

He sighed as he picked it up. It was heavier than he expected.

The narrow hallway outside his room was littered with crumpled newspapers and empty bottles. He paused at the front desk and looked around for the clerk. A large mirror hung behind the desk; it was warped and faded, and it threw a twisted image back at him. He swept his eyes up over the version of himself hanging on the wall, noting the greasy brown hair and the dark circles under his brown eyes.

He licked his hand and tried to slick his hair back. He pulled slowly on the lapels of his jacket to straighten it, but it was no use—the once-crisp fabric had relaxed and settled into permanent wrinkles. When he lifted his eyes to meet his own gaze, he flinched.

Turning from the mirror, he looked once more for the clerk. The room was empty. He drummed his fingers on the counter for a moment, thinking. Then he turned and walked out without paying. He'd leave that to the girl. He walked with his shoulders hunched, moving swiftly towards the railroad tracks and a run-down diner a few blocks away. The sky was an even blue, and the November sun glared back at him from the corners of the shop windows. He lowered his eyes and leaned forward even more. He needed time to think. He needed to find Ephraim Fairfax.

\*\*\*

As Tom walked towards the tracks, the buildings grew taller, the sidewalks cleaner. The tracks ran right down the middle of Main Street, and he crossed over towards the restaurant, which was attached to the rail depot. When it was first built, the new pine of the diner was a soft, golden color that enhanced the crisp brick of the depot. The wood had faded with the years, transforming the place into a shabby gray building

that looked like an afterthought. The walls pitched dangerously towards the tracks, and the roof was patched over with rusted tin sheets.

Tom pushed the door open and nodded to Mary, the owner's wife. She nodded back, but her eyes narrowed as she traced his path through the diner. She was one of the few people in town who knew him well enough to be wary. The town had grown so much since his childhood that few people still remembered the Mersy name, but Mary Toole hadn't forgotten it. A few customers sat at the counter, eating and talking in low voices. For the most part, the restaurant was empty. Tom found a stool near the end of the counter and sat down stiffly, fiddling with the frayed sleeve of his jacket.

"Coffee?" Mary asked, placing a gray mug down in front of him.

He grunted.

She poured thin, brown coffee into the mug and lingered for a moment, holding the pot out to the side and planting her other hand on her hip, "Long night?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

"I seen you come from across the tracks, Tom."

He turned the mug around to grab the handle and spoke, his voice rich and thick like new honey pouring over the lip of a jar. "You ain't my wife," he said.

She rolled her eyes, "Ain't that the truth, praise God. I bet twenty dollars you been with some floozy last night, and Isaac not even cold in his grave! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

At the mention of his brother, he jerked his head up to glare at her, "Hush up now, Mary Toole. You ain't seen twenty dollars in your life, so don't go sticking your nose where it oughtn't go."

She stared at him, shaking her head suddenly, as if to clear the sound of his voice from her mind. "What do you want to eat?" she asked, her ragged yellow teeth flashing between pale lips.

His nostrils flared, and he gripped the mug tighter, muttering, "Eggs and bacon."

She turned up her lip and moved towards the kitchen. He sat staring blankly at the flecks of white in the dark Formica of the countertop. When she came back with his food, she dropped the plate in front of him and walked away again. He barely looked up as he lifted his fork and started eating. When he finished, he pushed the empty plate away and drained the last drops of coffee from the mug.

He knit his fingers together and rested his forehead on them, pressing his elbows down into the countertop. His shoulders crept up towards his ears, and he breathed slowly, trying to relax them.

His mind raced in spite of his attempts at composure. The events of the last four days rushed through his mind, scattered images and fragments of conversation floating in and back out. He grasped at each one, trying to remember how everything had happened, but each splintered memory slipped away just before he could examine it.

Shouting in the alley. His brother Isaac lying face down in the street. A smell of gunpowder and iron. Blood pooling under Isaac's throat. Smoke rising from a distant fire.

His brother's last words, garbled and unnaturally loud.

Nothing made any sense anymore. He couldn't think straight, couldn't talk straight, couldn't remember who he was.

It had been the same last night, with the girl. He'd stumbled along with her to the hotel, half-drunk, ready to forget everything that was plaguing him. When they got to the

room, he slammed the door so hard that the thin walls shook around the frame. Neither one of them bothered to turn on a light. She leaned against him and fumbled with the buttons of his shirt.

When he looked down at her, he sprang back with a jolt of unwelcome recognition.

Her eyes were two shining pits in the greater darkness, and he saw reflected darkly in them his brother's blood, his brother's face, twisted in pain. "Get away," he said thickly. He shoved her aside and left the room for more booze. When he got back, she was asleep. He didn't dare wake her—the thought of looking into eyes like Isaac's made him shudder.

A clatter of silverware called him back to his surroundings. He opened his eyes and looked across the restaurant. Mary was staring at him, her arms crossed in front of her. He laid some money on the counter, stood slowly, and walked out.

\*\*\*

Tom turned right out of the diner and walked up the street towards the funeral home. He'd left his brother's body with the undertaker two days before, and yesterday he'd planned and paid for a simple service before he'd gone across the railroad tracks to spend the night. The funeral had cost him everything he'd been able to save over the last few weeks, but he'd handed the money over without complaint or hesitation. Isaac deserved a proper funeral.

He looked around as he walked. The Depression had hit River Gap, Georgia, hard. Many of the storefronts he had known as a boy were empty, the windows boarded over with faded planks. Somehow, though, people still found enough energy to run their

Saturday errands. He knew the families passing him had scraped together their nickels and dimes to buy bread for the next week. He knew, too, that even with the pinching and the scraping, many still wouldn't be able to afford it.

He moved awkwardly down the street, his broad shoulders and the two suitcases he carried bumping against the people he passed. As he drew closer to the funeral home, his steps slowed. He felt his pulse quicken and his shoulders rise towards his ears. He paused on the corner and closed his eyes, taking several shallow breaths to keep himself from coughing.

He opened his eyes and walked on, cutting his own path through the current of people.

When he arrived at the small funeral home, he saw a rusty hearse waiting out front. The black curtains were pulled shut on the back windows. He could just make out the printed words on the back: *Dolley Funeral Home*. Mr. Dolley himself, the undertaker, was standing next to the hearse, holding his hat in his hands.

"Mr. Mersy," he said, pulling the driver's side door open with a violent jerk, "Thank you for being prompt. I'm sorry that we've had to hold your brother's service this way." The undertaker's round face glistened in the November sun, beads of sweat forming along his upper lip.

"It's fine," Tom growled, his eyes fixed on the back of the hearse.

Mr. Dolley simpered and wiped a gray handkerchief across his forehead, "Lucky you came by two days ago, Mr. Mersy. Otherwise you mightn't have found a funeral home for your brother's service." He leaned over the hood of the car, his belly pressed against the metal. Tom could see how his hair thinned against the wide expanse of his

forehead. "The wife and I are taking a vacation tomorrow. Going to visit my in-laws in North Carolina. They're—" he raised his eyebrows and looked at Tom in a conspiratorial manner, but Tom cut him off sharply

"You mentioned that." He walked around the front of the car to the passenger side.

"Would you like to stow your luggage in the back?" Mr. Dolley asked, "There's plenty of room back there."

"No," Tom said forcefully as he opened the door to the hearse.

"Ah, well—"

"Where's the preacher?" Tom asked.

"He'll meet us at the churchyard," the undertaker said, clearing his throat. Dolley lowered himself into the driver's seat and Tom sat down next to him, folding himself into the car and piling the suitcases on his lap. With a jangle of keys, the undertaker started the engine. It turned over a few times before clattering to life, and Dolley offered Tom an apologetic smile. With a lurch, the hearse left the funeral home and moved towards the churchyard. Tom leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes.

\*\*\*

The funeral was a simple affair. No flowers, no guests, no casseroles; nothing but the preacher and the clear sky. Now Tom was alone, standing in the jagged shadow of the church he'd attended as a boy. Tom leaned over the grave and dropped a handful of dirt onto his brother's coffin. He crouched down on the edge of the grave and let his eyes linger on pine box he had just helped lower into the earth.

It was strange, he thought, how just last night he'd wanted to erase all memories of Isaac, but now he was reluctant to leave. Tom hadn't seen Isaac's body since he left it with the undertaker, and now he wondered. Did his brother still look the same, or would Mr. Dolley's handiwork have emptied Isaac of more than just his natural fluids? Would any man be recognizable after having his insides emptied and rearranged?

Tom imagined himself dropping with a thud into the grave and using his hands to pry open the simple coffin. He imagined his brother lying there with folded hands, his eyes wide open and black as oil, the wound on his chest still leaking life.

Tom shook his head to clear it. He stood up and balled his fists, shoving them deep into his jacket pockets. His right hand brushed paper and he pulled out a faded photograph and a scrap of newsprint.

The thick paper of the photograph was creased and worn. He placed it on top of the newsprint and smoothed down the edges. From its grainy black and white surface three sets of eyes stared back at him. The three men in the picture stood outside a movie theater, smiles plastered across their faces. Tom himself stood on the left, the shortest of the three. His smile spread in a wide arc across his face. Isaac stood in the middle, his light hair a pale smudge in the photograph, holding his jacket over his shoulder with a thin arm. Isaac had never showed his teeth when he smiled, not even as a boy, and the stretch of his grin made his eyes crease at the corners. Gently, Tom ran his thumb over Isaac's face. He looked at the other man in the picture. Ep stood on the right, tall and strong. His smile was a flash of white in the middle of a dark beard.

Tom flipped the photograph over. There was an inscription on the back written in rounded, childish print. It read *Tom, Me, and Ep. Atlanta.*

The corner of the photo was stained with blood.

He turned his attention to the scrap of newsprint. It was an advertisement for a job he'd hoped to land several weeks ago. Smoothing it, he stared at the address penciled in the margin. It was Ep's--or, more accurately, Ep's father's. Tom knew the place was a homestead hidden away on the other side of Sourjohn County, ninety or so miles from River Gap as the crow flies. He couldn't imagine Ep would run home after all that had happened, but this address was a start. His eyes flicked from the photo to the grave, and he began to run through the names of everyone he knew in town, trying to remember if any of them still had a working car.

He placed the address back in his pocket and looked once more at the photograph. Isaac stared up at him from the paper, healthy, alive. Tom tried to remember his brother, but his memory was already clouded over with smoke and haze. He choked back a cough.

The empty graveyard around him seemed to buzz with a growing intensity. He looked up at the thin clouds scattered above him and down at the yellow grass waving in the churchyard. The sound grew in his ears until it drowned out the sound of his own breathing, his own heartbeat. The November sun cast a watery light around him, but in it he seemed to see the shadow of the church shift, stretching and looming towards him, a three-dimensional darkness devouring the graveyard and the tombstones. He blinked rapidly and tried to calm his breathing.

The ground spun, and he fought to stand still. He put his hands on his knees to steady himself, pressing the photograph into his thigh, wrinkling the newsprint with his grip. He felt the shadow reaching out to cover Isaac's grave, to cover his memory, and Tom heard a strangled cry escape from his own lips. The shadow seemed to retreat at the

sound, its dark edges receding into their normal shapes, flat black lines pressed against the ground beneath his feet.

He stood up and took a step closer to the grave, holding the photograph out in front of him. Ep's light eyes stared up at him, wide and kind. With a scoff, Tom shook his head. He cleared his throat and spat off to the side, the rust-colored phlegm landing among the dry grass without a sound.

Slowly, methodically, he folded the photo in half. With steady hands, he tore it into pieces and let the shreds of paper fall into the grave. He wiped the dirt from his hands and picked up his bags as he walked towards the street. He needed a car, and he knew just where to get one.

## Chapter Two: 1937

Ep turned left at the broken turnpike and walked up the trail. This path had always been one of his favorite stretches of road, but he didn't let himself stop to admire the waving pines that stood tall on either side. Instead, he craned his neck around and looked behind him, a motion that had grown all too familiar over the last few days.

Ephraim Fairfax was tall, with a narrow frame that belied his strength. He carried himself with certainty, never slouching, but today his blue eyes tracked side to side over the path in front of him, searching out the terrain. His beard was rough and unkempt from two days of hard walking, and his dark hair was wet with sweat under the band of his hat. The dry November breeze did little to cool him. He'd walked almost twenty miles yesterday, and with each step a dull pain crept from the ball of his foot up to his shin.

Ahead of him he saw the familiar bend in the trail that meant he was close to Pengry's cabin. Pengry Nations, Ep's oldest friend, lived a near hermit's existence out here in the woods, and for the first time Ep was glad for the isolation.

He rounded the bend and saw the old Nations homestead, a long, low cabin in the middle of a tiny clearing. A thin thread of smoke trailed up from the chimney. The late afternoon sun threw long shadows out into the yard. He looked over the yard and the house and felt the ache of nostalgia welling up in him. The wave of emotion took him by surprise.

Ep stopped walking and took a deep breath. A tall, lanky man was standing on the porch, holding a long-handled broom. He stopped sweeping when he saw Ep.

"Ep Fairfax, is that you?" the man asked in a voice gravelly from disuse. His wide mouth opened in a smile just under a long, pointed nose.

"It might be," Ep said, his voice shaking.

Pengry took several long steps towards him, closing the distance and wrapping Ep in a warm embrace, "It's been too long." he said.

Ep exhaled sharply and wrapped his arms around his friend.

"What are you doing here?" Pengry asked, stepping back and brushing his long brown hair away from his face.

"Headed home," Ep said slowly, "Francis wrote to say that the old man died."

"Your dad?"

Ep nodded, looking up at the cabin's chimney, "Yep."

Pengry let out a low whistle, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Ep pursed his lips.

"Oh, come on, Ep. You're sorry, too. I know you ain't that heartless."

Ep ran his fingers over the rough edges of his beard. "I am sorry," he said. "Just not sorry enough."

Pengry put a reassuring hand on Ep's shoulder, "You were a good son, Ep."

"I hope so."

"So you're going back--does Francis know?"

"I haven't had a chance to write."

A smile played across the corners of Pengry's mouth. "I'd pay good money to see his face when you walk in the door. I bet your brother'll be in rare form."

Ep laughed ruefully, "Oh, I'm sure. I'm the last person in the world he wants to see."

"I imagine you need a place to stay for the night. Looks like you been rode hard and put up wet."

"Thanks, Pen. I've been walking for days."

"Well, you're welcome here." Pengry turned toward the cabin, "Truth is I'm glad for the company. It's been too long since I had someone around here to talk to."

Ep started to follow his friend but paused and looked behind him up the trail.

"You alright?"

"What?" Ep asked, turning halfway back. Pengry was looking at him with a puzzled expression. "Oh--I'm fine," Ep said, turning sharply.

Pengry shook his head and turned slowly towards the house, "Well, then, let's get you cleaned up and fed."

They walked in together, but as they crossed the threshold of the cabin, Ep couldn't help taking one last look over his shoulder.

\*\*\*

That evening Ep bathed outside by the pump, splashing down his hair and his tired feet, using a rough bar of soap to get as much dust off as he could. He shivered as the cold water ran over his exposed skin. His eyes never left the edge of the clearing.

Pengry watched him from the kitchen window, his long fingers wrapped around a tin cup.

After dinner they sat in silence at the kitchen table. Their conversation hopped and fluttered, bird-like, from family to work to the weather, never resting or roosting on

anything consequential. Ep was thankful when the talk ceased, but in the absence of conversation the sound of the fire in the fireplace seemed impossibly loud. Every crack and pop of the settling logs made him squint and flinch. He needed to sleep.

A few minutes passed before Pengry broke the long silence.

"Who you running from?"

"What?"

"I know you, Ep. You're running from someone."

"I told you, Pengry. Got a letter from Francis that the old man had died."

"That may be, but there's more to it than that. I've known you for ten years, Ep. I can tell when you're in trouble."

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you thought. It's been a while since you've seen me last."

"Few years, but I still know the way you look when you're feeling desperate."

"Not desperate, just tired."

"You been looking over your shoulder ever since you walked on my property, you can't sit still, and you ain't told me anything substantial about what you've been up to the last two years. Talk to me. Maybe I can help."

Ep sighed and ran his fingers through his dark hair as he spoke, "I told you how I've been working a ways north of here."

"You said they got you building dams and lakes and God knows what else for the government."

"It's good work. Gave me a chance to earn something with my own two hands instead of sitting at home waiting to starve like the rest of the country. Taught me how to be disciplined—how to really work at something, you know?"

Pengry nodded. The silence lengthened between them again. Ep knew his friend wouldn't be the one to break it.

Clearing his throat nervously, he said, "Spent most of my time up in Blairsville. Just a few of us from Georgia working there at first. Then a whole group of men from Carolina signed on. One of 'em--two of 'em, actually--" he sighed and cracked his knuckles. He'd tried for years to break the nervous habit, but it stuck with him.

Pengry sniffed and rubbed the side of his thumb against his long nose. His fingernails were red and ragged around the edges. He spoke in a low, calm voice, "So you are in trouble."

"Depends on who you ask."

"I'm asking you."

Ep closed his eyes for a long moment, pressing his index fingers against his eyelids. When he opened his eyes again, they were rimmed in red. "Yes," he said, "I am."

"Can you tell me more?"

"I don't know."

"It's that bad?"

"It's pretty bad."

Pengry sighed and reached for Ep's plate. He stood and began clearing the table. "Ain't nothing so bad that it can't be undone. I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding."

Ep watched his friend, noticing the way Pengry stretched over the sink with an angular grace, his long fingers swirling the simple dishes in the warm water. He noticed the frayed edges of Pengry's blue jeans, the hole in his thick-knit socks. He looked around at the walls of the cabin, hung with hunting trophies and shelves of field guides and almanacs. There was the rusty tin kettle on the gas stove, the shotgun with the dented barrel hanging over the door. There was the coon-skin cap Pengry's father had always worn when he took the boys coon hunting. It lay draped over a candlestick on the mantle, dusty and worn, its striped tail curling softly around the burnished brass of the candlestick. It reminded Ep of his childhood, of his visits here and his time with the Nations.

"Gotta let 'em know who's boss," old Mr. Nations would say as he put the hat on, "God gave us dominion over all the critters. And that's all a coon is—a critter." Pengry and Ep had laughed, but secretly their little boy hearts came alive when Mr. Nations woke them up in the dark to hunt, an excited twinkle in his eye. The Nations family lived patient, unhurried lives, and even as a boy Ep had envied how his friend took each minute, each hour, each day in stride.

Pengry put the plates away and turned to look at Ep, "Right? Ain't nothing so bad it can't be fixed."

Ep smiled softly even as his heart sank, "I hope so."

\*\*\*

The next morning, Ep tried to persuade Pengry that there was no reason to drive him to the Fairfax land, but Pengry had insisted. Secretly, Ep was glad for the ride. After about an hour of Pengry's slow driving, they reached the turnoff towards the Fairfax land.

Ep got out of the truck and closed the door, drumming his fingers on the roof and peering through the open window at his friend.

"You sure you don't want me to come?" Pengry asked.

"No, brother. Thanks for the ride. You shouldn't have."

"Least I could do." There was silence between them again, and Ep looked up at the empty branches that stood motionless over his head. "What are you going to do, Ep?" Pengry asked, crooking his elbows around the steering wheel.

"I don't know, Pen. All I know is I'm going to stay for the funeral and plan from there."

"You ain't got a plan?"

Ep turned to look at him, "Haven't had much time to think it through, that's all."

"You can stay with me for a while if you want."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"Don't have to ask."

"It's only a matter of time before Tom Mersy shows up. No doubt he'll bring trouble with him, so it's probably best if I leave everyone here out of it."

"You really think that he'll come after you? You said yourself that whatever happened was just an—"

"Doesn't matter what I say, only matters what Mersy believes."

He said the words aloud before he realized their truth. Tom would come looking for him, and he only heard and saw what he wanted to. There would be no convincing, no pleading, no persuading with Tom Mersy. Ep shuddered a little and looked back at Pengry. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

"Well, guess I'll go up and announce my presence," Ep said. He rolled his eyes and forced a grin.

"Good luck," Pengry said slowly, "With everything, Ep." He paused, and his mouth turned up at the corners, "I mean it."

Ep cleared his throat and nodded. He tapped his hands on the roof of the truck and watched as it sputtered away. Shaking his head, he turned away from the road. The drive led up the hill towards the house. He stood still for a moment, thinking.

Then he removed his hat and stepped off the path into the woods, letting the last autumn leaves brush his forehead like a blessing. He moved cautiously, trying to avoid the long, tangled roots he knew lay hidden beneath the drifts of fallen leaves. When he reached the old stone wall that marked the edge of his father's land, he stopped. Resting his hand on the cool, gritty granite, he looked at the house through the tangled branches of the hardwoods.

His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the property. Visitors to the homestead always commented on how the cabin was surprisingly large to be so remote from any glimpse of civilization, but Ep's eyes were used to the sight of home. Now he looked with surprise at the front of the house. Time and the Depression had taken their toll. The cabin sat nestled into the hillside, surrounded by outbuildings half shadowed by the trees. The dirt yard in front of the house was swept clean, and smoke from the chimney plumed up and settled down, drifting hazily over the yard. The roof needed mending, and all the shutters but one had fallen off. The split rail fence he'd helped build around the garden still leaned crazily to the left; he wondered if it would ever fall. A breeze kicked up around him, and he tilted his head back to look up at the dry leaves quivering on their delicate stems. One fell and

twisted down through the air, landing on the wall beside him. He touched it gently with a calloused finger. It was nothing now, a burned-out husk of what it once was.

When the breeze stopped, he put his hat on, and turned back towards the drive.

He walked up the hill slowly, taking deep breaths and rehearsing what he would say when he saw his brother. *I'll apologize*, he thought, *I will ask about Ava and the children. I will tell him how sad I was to hear about Father's death. I will--*he lost his train of thought when he saw the group of men standing on the front porch of the house. They all turned to stare at him as he came into the clearing.

One of them, a slight, blond man with a face like a hatchet, stared at Ephraim and slowly made his way down the porch steps. Francis.

"Well, I'll be," Francis said, walking stiffly forward. "If it ain't the prodigal son home from whoring." He stopped just ahead of Ephraim and spat into the dry ground.

All of the civil thoughts Ep had rehearsed fled in disarray. His hands clenched involuntarily, and he blinked his eyes rapidly. "Francis," he said drily.

"I will say, brother, I never expected you to show your face here again," Francis said coolly, glancing over his shoulder at his guests.

Ep also looked at the men on the porch, knowing his brother wouldn't cause a scene with guests present. "And why shouldn't I come back to visit my thieving brother and his wife?" he asked, his mouth twitching under his dark beard.

Francis swallowed hard and leaned in closer to his brother, "If you can't keep a civil tongue in your head, we don't want you here."

"That's funny," Ep said, "because I got a letter right here that says different." He tapped his coat pocket angrily.

Francis spat again. "Just wanted you to know that Father died. Don't remember begging you for a visit."

Ep smiled, "Don't need to beg, brother. This is my property. Or at least it should be."

"Already back to that, are we?" Francis said, his neck reddening under his shabby collar, "I should have known better than to send you word. You ain't done nothing for us since you left."

Ep raised his eyebrows and leaned forward, "Is that a joke, Francis? Twenty dollars a month ain't nothing to you and Ava? And it's been more than that lately. I just wonder," he said in a near whisper, gesturing to the fallen shutters and missing shingles, "What you been using it for if it ain't to keep up the property." He started to speak again, but caught himself. He swallowed and raised his hands towards his brother, "You know what? Keep the money, keep your wife, keep the house. I'm here for the funeral and nothing more. I'll leave as soon as he's buried."

Francis smirked and crossed his arms in front of his chest, "Good. Funeral starts in an hour."

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Once all the guests were assembled, Ep, Francis, and the other pallbearers carried the casket from the house to the family plot. The preacher, who had arrived looking dusty and tired, stood in front of the gathering and lifted his eyes to heaven.

"Dear friends," he began, "we are gathered here today to say our goodbyes to Edward Fairfax, a man of great faith and renown in these parts. I myself am a beneficiary

of Mr. Fairfax's generosity." He gestured to Francis and Ephraim, who stood stiffly to the left of the casket, "His legacy will live on in his two sons, Ephraim and Francis."

He looked out over the somber gathering and swallowed grimly. "The text today comes from the Psalms, those holy prayers and supplications of King David and so many others. Today I will read to you from the eighty-eighth Psalm, which may seem like an unusual text for a funeral," he looked up and swallowed again. The crowd stood attentively, waiting. A cold, dry breeze lifted a puff of dirt from the pile behind him. Somewhere in the gathering a baby started to whimper.

Ep looked towards the sound and saw his brother's wife, Ava, standing near the front, balancing her daughter Carrie on her hip. Ep's eyes scanned her face, but when she looked towards him he blinked and turned away. He frowned a little. She was too thin. Her narrow hands and slender wrists looked fragile, as if they could snap at any moment. There were dark circles under her eyes; her dress hung loosely where it once fit. He shook his head. She wasn't any of his concern anymore. *She might have been*, he thought to himself, nodding halfheartedly at the point the preacher was trying to make. *But she chose him. Remember that. She chose Francis over you.*

Ep turned farther away from her, focusing on the sermon. He imagined each of the pastor's words as the man sounded them, conjuring the letters like smoke rings and watching them gather outside the pastor's full lips. With each new sentence the pastor spoke, Ep could almost see the previous phrases float up into the clearing, hanging over the assembled crowd, until he imagined himself surrounded by smoky consonants and hollow vowels, the last fragments of earthly praise his father would receive.

"Here," the preacher was saying, "The psalmist asks why he has been afflicted by God. He asks God to show him why he has been afflicted and why his prayers have not been answered. This Psalm is a lament of all our conditions, it is a cry for help. The psalmist asks, desperately, whether the dead can see God's wonders, whether his love can be preached to them in the grave.

"Today we have laid Mr. Fairfax in the grave, and we ask ourselves if he will see those wonders again. Friends, we can be sure of one thing. Departed souls surely know the righteousness of the Lord and all his deeds, though their dead bodies do not. This body that we lay here beneath the earth is but a shell of Mr. Fairfax. He is now united with our Lord and Savior, and reunited with all those he loved who have gone on before us."

He paused to clear his throat, and shifted his gaze from one side of the crowd to another. "Let us learn this day that we should admire all God's wonders now, while we have breath in our physical bodies. Brother, sister, heed these words: Honor God while you live lest when you die you find yourself stranded, staring at the wonders of God from a great distance away, helpless to save yourself from the land of oblivion."

Ep saw oblivion roll out of the pastor's mouth in a dusky cloud, saw the letters bumping and tangling with each other as they jostled for space over the mourners. He shook his head.

The pastor closed his Bible and laid a long hand over his chest. He said, "Let us remember that it is God who tests us to see if we are faithful. For the man of God, these tests and afflictions are always accompanied by deeper joy. The man of God knows that where sin abounds, grace runs deeper still."

He paused for effect, drawing his eyebrows together, "The man of lawlessness, however, knows no comfort. He is overwhelmed by the growing knowledge of his own sin. Without grace, without the hope of God, he is driven out forever to eternal darkness. Which man are you today? Will you reach out for God and seek his grace, or will you turn to your hatred and willful ways?"

His sermon completed, he turned to the two brothers. "Now we will return Mr. Fairfax's body to the earth from whence it came." He nodded to Ep, whose face was an ashy gray color. Ep and Francis lifted the casket together, and Ep's hands trembled as they lowered it into the grave.

### Chapter Three: 1937

After the funeral, Ep stood in the front room of the cabin, a plate of cold chicken in his hands, talking to the guests who stayed for the meal. He looked across the room at his brother. Francis stood with one hand on the edge of a chair and the other holding a cup of coffee. Ava stood next to him. She was taller than her husband, thin, with dark hair that was almost black. Her tanned skin and dark eyes made Francis' pasty complexion and blond hair seem even more sallow. Ep willed himself not to look at her, but failed. He was drawn to her, and no amount of time could change that.

She was too distracted to notice him, bouncing back and forth between Francis and Carrie, who sat on a blanket nearby. Ep looked around for a cradle or bassinet—Ava's last letter had hinted at the arrival of a new baby, but Ep hadn't seen the child yet. He pulled his eyes away from her and laughed halfheartedly at something the distant relative in front of him was saying. He lifted his fork to spear a few soggy green beans, trying to focus all of his attention on his plate, and not on Ava.

It was no use. He looked over at her again, and she looked up. Their eyes met and she gave him a little smile. He looked away, but he couldn't be fascinated by green beans or family anecdotes. The air in the room was hot and stifling.

"Would you excuse me, please?" he said to the cousin standing in front of him. Without waiting for a response, he set his plate of food down on the table and walked out of the house.

Outside, he took a deep breath to clear his head. The sky was a pale blue, the blue that only comes when the world hangs on the wire between autumn and winter. He could hear the call of geese overhead. He walked down the porch stairs and turned towards the creek and the little springhouse his father had built so many years ago. The bottles of milk they lowered into the creek stayed cold and crisp thanks to the mountain water running through the property. On the bank was the bench he had built his mother as a teenager, a sacred place to him now that she was gone.

Sometimes, as a teenager, he had stolen away from work for his father, and sat on this very bench with Ava. He still remembered the first time she slid her thin, brown hand into his.

Shaking his head to clear away the thought, he sat and rested his elbows on his knees. Even in that posture, his thin frame gave off the appearance of lean vitality. He never reclined and hardly slumped; he sat forward, listening, ready to move. When he moved, he did so with studied self-confidence. In conversation he was neither arrogant nor self-deprecating. He was himself at every turn. Now he sat silently, his eyes focused on the stones in the creek bed. The clear water bubbled over them, wearing them down day by day.

A soft noise behind him caught his attention, and he turned to see Ava walking towards him, carrying his forgotten plate of food. He looked away and cracked his knuckles. His eyes were dry and tired, and he didn't trust himself to speak.

She sat next to him on the bench and handed him the plate without speaking.

"Thank you," he muttered, taking the plate from her and lifting a biscuit to his lips.

"It's been a while, Ephraim," she said lightly, not looking at him.

He chewed and nodded, "It has."

"Are you well?"

"Well's I can be."

The silence between them grew. From the corner of his eye, he could see the way she twisted her hands together. He knew she was searching for something to say. He realized suddenly that he'd missed the sight of her hands. It was a small thought, but it opened up in him the old familiar jealousy that had done so much to drive him from this place. Her hands, he realized, were never still, had never been still. They fluttered and gestured and twisted and turned.

"Where all you been working?" she said, a little too loudly.

He swallowed the food in his mouth and looked up at the trees lining the opposite bank. "Oh, you know," he said, "Up to Blairsville, down to Atlanta. Been in the Carolinas a bit, too."

"Ep, I'm so sorry—" she began, turning to him. Her bright, round eyes were full of tears.

He shook his head. "Ava," he said, "I can't do this with you right now. You want to talk, that's fine, but talk about regular things."

"Regular things?" she said, "Like what?"

"You know—the house, Francis, the little ones. Normal things. Not things that are over and done." He took another bite of the food.

"Well," she said, brushing a hand at her cheek and pausing to gather her composure, "The house is the same. We've had some problems with the porch supports, and Francis had to rebuild most of the chimney a few months back."

"So that's why it looks like it's bent in the middle."

She laughed, "You know he's never been much good with things like that."

"I know," he said. He grinned, and things were almost the same. He looked down at her hands and saw the thin gold band on her left ring finger. She noticed his gaze and twisted at the band softly. He wished he could rip it from her finger and fling it into the creek.

"He's almost hopeless, actually," she said, and the casual tone of her voice bubbled with a hidden grief, "I asked him to hang a shutter and somehow he broke the windowpane."

Ep rolled his eyes, "That explains a lot about the house," he said. There was a long pause. "How are you? How are the children?"

"I'm fine, but—" she exhaled and looked down at her fingers.

"What?"

"I'm guessing Francis didn't write to tell you."

"He's almost as bad at correspondence as he is at home repair."

She smiled softly but didn't laugh.

"Tell me what?"

"We lost the second baby," she said softly, still twisting at her wedding band.

"Oh, Ava-bird" he said, falling without realizing it into his old ways, "I'm so sorry." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and she leaned towards him. For a

moment she rested her head on his shoulder, and he was transported back in time. She smelled the same, and she fit back into his arms just like she always had.

Then, remembering herself, she sat up. "It was a little boy," she said, "He was beautiful."

"Did you name him?"

"Francis didn't see a reason to," she said quietly, "Seeing as he was stillborn." She rubbed at her thumbnail with her index finger, "Baby Fairfax is all he would say."

"But what did *you* call him?"

She looked up at him and smiled, "Noah," she said.

He nodded quietly and watched as a leaf caught in the current floated by, another husk, another shell of once-green life dulled by time and frost.

"A good name," he said, squeezing her shoulder before removing his arm. "Was Francis upset?"

"Well, he was," she said slowly, "but he's not worried. Told me he knew we'd have a whole bunch of little ones roaming the place before too long."

"But—"

She nodded, "But that was a while ago."

"Are you well?"

"Oh, yes. We've been trying, but it's just not working. I'm starting to think little Carrie is the only child we'll ever have."

"Are you sure you're not sick? You're looking awfully thin."

"Times are hard, Ephraim," she said, "You know that better than most, but we've been doing the best we can."

"And the money—"

"The money you send helps," she said, "And Francis and I are both so grateful."

"Doesn't seem to be enough if you're near to starving."

She smiled up at him, "It's enough. It's more than enough and so generous."

They sat together and stared at the creek, the sunlight still and warm around them, though the air was cool. After a minute, they heard Francis coming down the path. Ep laughed, "He couldn't sneak up on anyone if he wanted to, could he?" She smiled and scooted away from him a little.

"Ava, Brother," he said, nodding to each of them, "When you didn't come back, I figured I'd come to check." He looked at them, judging the space between them on the bench, "Got a lot of guests up there who'd like to talk to you both."

"I'm coming, dear," Ava said, looking over at her husband, "Just wanted to make sure Ephraim here didn't starve."

Francis nodded, standing awkwardly apart, "And then you've just been talking?"

"Just talking, dear," she said, "I was telling Ep about the baby."

"Ah," Francis said, "My Ava is strong, brother, you'd have been proud of her."

Ep nodded silently, his attention focused on his plate, trying to ignore the emphasis his brother had laid on the word *my*.

Francis cleared his throat. "Well, let's go back on up to the house, Ava," he said, stepping forward and placing his hand on her narrow shoulder.

She looked up at him, "I'll be along in a minute. Just want to collect this plate from Ep."

"Hurry," Francis said, "You've neglected the guests long enough."

"I know, darling," she said, placing her hand over his and gently stroking his fingers, "Just let your brother finish eating, and we'll both be right up."

Francis looked at the almost empty plate in his brother's hands and nodded. "Don't be long," he said stiffly. His blue eyes were cold.

When he disappeared up the path, she sighed and turned towards him, on the verge of tears again.

"Don't start, Ava," Ep said slowly, "I'm here for the funeral and that's all. I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"But we—but you just got here! You need to stay a little longer."

He tried to keep his tone light, "I have work, Ava. I'm leaving in the morning to go back to work. Someone's got to pay for that broken window." He cringed a little as the lie slipped from his lips. He wouldn't be going back to work. He didn't know where he would be going. He didn't have time to think about that now, though, he realized. She was still talking, still trying to convince him.

"You should stay," she was saying, "I know that's selfish of me, but I miss you."

He snorted a little, "I miss you too, but I can't stay—he won't let me stay."

"He might! He's gotten a little better. He's mellowed a bit since you went away."

"He hadn't mellowed when he greeted me at the house this morning. You'd have thought I was here to rob the place."

"Well, he was just surprised to see you. He's better, I promise. I think it's Carrie, or maybe just marriage in general."

"If that's true," he said, rolling his eyes, "It's only because I went away. He doesn't have to worry about us being together if I'm not here."

"But you would never—we would never—"

"He doesn't know that, and he doesn't trust me around you."

"I can convince him."

"He won't be convinced. And it's not just that, Ava."

"Well, what, then?" she said, raising her voice and pointing her chin at him.

He looked at her and shook his head.

"What is it? Why can't you stay here and be with your family?"

"Whenever I see you with him—" he ran his hands through his hair and stood up from the bench, coming to stand in front of her. It was all he could do to look her in the eyes. When he'd left home, he thought he would be bound in bitterness forever. He thought he would never recover from the betrayal he'd felt when she told him she was marrying Francis.

Instead, his thoughts towards her had only grown gentler. He had cherished her in his mind as something holy, untouchable. Now, standing before her, he let himself look at her. It had been so long since he'd seen her. It was the same delicate face, with round eyes and a small, pointed chin. He loved the way she stuck her chin out when she was angry, the way her dark lashes swept over her eyes when she closed them. Her hair was tied back in a bun, but if she untied it, he knew it would fall in thick sweeping waves past her shoulders. She was so different from the other women he'd met—the other women who chopped their hair short and let the Depression drain them of their youth. She was still as graceful as a girl and as gentle as the current of the creek behind him.

In all their time together, he had memorized her, every curve and line. He knew the shape of her fingernails and the sound of her breath. He had learned the way she spun around to look up at him when he addressed her, he knew every movement of her face, every furrow of her brow and every changing motion of her lips. He had lived in the memory of her soft voice and soothing demeanor, willing himself to be angry, trying to find a way to move on, but it wasn't possible.

"I wanted to hate you," he said.

"You should hate me," she said. She was crying now.

"I can't," he said, "And you know that, don't you? You know that I could never hate you."

"I never meant to hurt you."

"That's a lie," he snapped. "You knew that marrying him would hurt me more than anything, but you did it anyways."

She lifted both hands to her face, the tears falling faster now.

"I did," she said, "I'm sorry that I did this to you." She sobbed into her hands, "If you only knew how much I wish—"

"You can't change it, Ava," he said loudly, balling his fists, "I don't want to hear about your regrets. God knows I got enough of my own to deal with!"

"I just wanted to apologize," she said looking up, "I've been waiting so long to tell you how sorry I am."

"Well, now you've told me."

"Is there anything we can do, any way we can change things?"

When he spoke, his voice was quiet and resigned. "No. This was your choice, Ava."

"I know, Ephraim—"

He lifted a hand to stop her, "This was your choice, and we've both got to live with it."

"I know," she said, dropping her hands, "It was my choice, but—"

"Please," he said, "let me finish." She looked up at him, her eyes wild and nervous, her hair slipping from its bun. He looked away and stared at a tree trunk rising tall and strong behind her. He focused on the bark, how it grew like thick woody skin over the core of the tree. He noticed the specks of lichen that lay white-green among the darker streaks of moss. His eyes were burning, but he blinked the tears away and said, "I don't blame you. I can't. So go live the life you've chosen. Be here, be with Francis and Carrie. But don't expect me to live here or to enjoy your choice," he said.

"Ephraim, I—"

"Just stop," he said slowly, "Stop trying to convince me. It won't work." He moved up the path towards the house.

"Ephraim!" She called from behind him.

He stopped walking and looked back at her, his eyes dry and his shoulders slumped. "You know," he said, "you're the only one who still calls me that. Everyone else just calls me Ep."

She lifted her shoulders in resignation, the slim tracks of fallen tears still shining on her face. "It's your name," she said simply, her hands still.

He nodded thoughtfully, turned his back, and walked up the hill to the house.

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He found the preacher standing in the yard, looking forlornly at a gray horse wearing a weather-beaten saddle.

"That your method of transportation, Preacher?" Ep asked, walking over to shake the man's hand.

"Unfortunately, it is. My old car just won't cut it anymore, I'm afraid."

"These are hard times," Ep said.

"Indeed."

An awkward silence closed around them.

"Your father—"

"Oh, well—" Ep said, interrupting him and pausing. He motioned for the pastor to continue.

"He was very generous."

Ep snorted.

"He provided funds for me to travel around the county on more than one occasion. That's a unique kind of generosity."

"He did?"

"Oh yes, he bought gas and food and put me up in hotels so I could travel all over Sourjohn County preaching the word," he fiddled with the horse's harness while he spoke.

"I never knew that about him."

"Well, I hope it gives you at least some comfort in your grieving," He looked up from the harness and allowed his lips to thin in a small smile.

Ep nodded. He tilted his head and scratched his neck. When he spoke, his voice was halting and hesitant, "Pastor, earlier you said something about a man of lawlessness--"

"I did indeed."

Ep didn't respond. He looked off over the clearing.

"Did you have a question about that?" the preacher asked, stepping away from the patient horse and facing Ep square on.

"What? Oh, no--well, I don't know," he shrugged and took a step back from the other man.

"Mr. Fairfax, are you a religious man?"

"I used to be," Ep said with a smile, "but now I ain't so sure--I'm *not* so sure."

"Do you believe the Bible is true?"

"Do you?" Ep said, with a laugh, still looking away.

"I do."

Ep frowned and looked up at the pastor. He was standing, calm and steady, his gray eyes fixed on Ep's face. Ep spoke again, "I used to believe it."

"Used to?"

"Back when my mother was alive, I believed it," Ep said, running his hands through his hair, "When she was alive I could believe anything good. But now that she's dead and I've seen how men go about their lives, I don't know if I want to believe it anymore."

"Ah," the pastor said, nodding, "But you still do—"

"Do what?"

"Do believe."

"How do you know?" Ep said, growing defensive, "You can't say what I believe and what I don't believe."

"No," the pastor said thoughtfully, "That's true. But just now you said you don't *want* to believe it. Sometimes our beliefs grab ahold of us, and even though we kick against them, we can't escape. Just because you don't want to believe what your mother taught you anymore doesn't mean you can stop acknowledging what you know to be true."

"So you know it to be true—all this—all you said at the funeral?"

The pastor nodded again and smiled. When he spoke, it was with a soft but strangely resonant voice that startled Ep. "I believe because I've seen with my own eyes how the Blue Ridge mountains rise up from nowhere and fill the sky. And I believe because I've seen men's lives change by a wind they can't see."

"Changed how?"

He looked at Ep for a moment before speaking again, "Changed from men of lawlessness to men of God."

Ep spoke, slowly at first, and but picking up speed as his thoughts began to flow, "My father, he was a man of great...conviction."

"That's what I've heard."

"Well, he—my father, I mean—he was also a hypocrite. He said one thing on Sundays and a different thing the very next morning. His convictions were harsh and bitter—almost as if he'd found the only right way and we all had to follow."

"And your mother?"

Ep's voice cracked, "She wasn't like him."

"What was she like?"

"She was kind, and too good for him. She was fooled by him at first, I think, but she soon found out what he was hiding underneath all that talk. So it always seemed to me that God was either harsh like my father or gentle like my mother, they were two separate things, and two separate people." Ep cracked his knuckles.

"I see," the pastor said. He didn't speak again.

"So which one is right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Which God is the real God?"

"He's both."

Ep shook his head in frustration, "I hear you talk about condemnation and I hear you talk about grace." He was surprised to find his eyes filled with tears. He shook them away and continued, "I feel my deeds pressing down on me, and I don't know how to stop myself from doing the things I hate—I don't know how to kill the man of lawlessness."

"And so you are living in fear of punishment; you're thinking that your father's view might be right."

They stood for a moment in silence, the late sun sliding over their faces and striping the clearing. Ep's shoulders slouched, and he rubbed his hand across his face. A woodpecker took up his daily task on the tall pine across from them, and they watched it hop up and down the tree trunk, hammering away.

"I wish I had an answer for you," the pastor said, "but it's not my job to change your mind for you."

"And if I can't find the way on my own?"

"I think it's safe to say that you're well on your way to something."

Ep shook his head again and held out his hand, "Well, thanks for talking to me, Pastor."

"Did it help?"

"No," Ep said with a shrug, "but then maybe we're all fools who try to understand God."

"Amen," said the pastor, lifting himself up into the saddle. He tilted his head and nudged the horse, saying as he went, "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try." He gave Ep a final nod farewell and rode down the trail. Ep looked back up at the woodpecker, whose red head bobbed and swayed in the dying light.

### Chapter Four: 1937

The reception lasted well into the late afternoon, and Ava cleaned up after the guests while Francis and Ep sat in uneasy silence on the front porch. Francis' old hound dog lay underneath the porch, and Ep wished he could crawl there with him to escape his brother's silence.

"You miss a lot of work to come up here?" Francis asked, pushing his feet against the porch and starting to rock back and forth in his rocking chair.

"No," Ep said slowly, looking up from the piece of wood he was whittling.

"Seems like you'd miss quite a bit," Francis said, turning towards his brother and narrowing his eyes.

"My two years is up," Ep said, "We always knew this day would happen—two years is all you get in the CCC."

Francis nodded and stuck his tongue between his teeth and his cheek. He kept nodding and looked down at his hands, "So that's why we haven't seen a check come through the mail here lately?"

Ep looked up in exasperation, "Only been out a week or two, Francis, you should have gotten the last check."

"I'll keep lookin' for it, then. What're you going to do now?"

"I'm going to find another job."

"And you'll still—I mean, you know we've come to rely—"

"I'll still send you whatever I can."

"I know it seems selfish of me to even ask, Ep, but truth is you don't have a family to keep up with, and ever since—"

"You don't have to explain yourself to me Francis. I know you well enough by now."

Francis' eyes narrowed, "You say you're leaving tomorrow morning?"

"I'll clear out soon as I can, Francis, I already told you that."

"Just double checking," Francis said coldly, "We can't afford to stay on here without what you send us."

"I'm going tomorrow. I'll send you what I can."

"You walk up here?"

"Pengry drove me."

"You been with Pengry all this time?"

"No, Francis," Ep said, looking up again, "I went to Pen's on the way here, and he was kind enough to give me a ride."

"What'd you need to see him for? That old bachelor's practically a hermit. Can't imagine he'd welcome you with open arms to his hideaway."

"In case you didn't know, brother, Pengry Nations is my oldest friend." Ep tried to reign in his frustration, "And I needed his advice. That's the only reason I went to see him."

The last light of the afternoon was almost gone, and the shadows stretched towards them from the corners of the porch. Francis absorbed Ep's comments quietly, still rocking back and forth. The only sound was the scrape of Ep's knife on the piece of wood in his hands.

"You in some kind of trouble?" Francis said, finally breaking the silence.

Ep looked up suddenly, "What makes you say that?"

"You went to see Pengry for advice, you're out of work, you're leaving tomorrow at daylight—"

"I'm my own man; I keep my own hours. And I'm not out of work, you know, I just have to move on and find something else," Ep said quietly, "And besides, me visiting Pengry, me leaving early—none of those things are strange."

"They're none of them strange on their own," Francis admitted, rocking faster in the chair and drumming his fingers on the arms, "but all together they just seem a little odd is all."

Ep sighed and looked up at the dark sky, weighing his options. He set the little piece of wood on the porch floor and knit his fingers together before speaking. "Listen," he said, his voice dropping an octave.

Francis stopped rocking and leaned towards him, "I knew it!" he said triumphantly, "You are in trouble."

"You going to listen or keep gloating like that?"

"Go on, then," Francis said, rubbing his chin.

Ep closed his eyes and spoke, "There's a man named Thomas Mersy,"

"He a buddy of yours?" Francis asked, scoffing.

Ep snapped his eyes open and glared at his brother, "Francis, just listen, it's important."

"Alright, Thomas Mersy. Keep going."

"He's got a brother named Isaac. Isaac's a little slow, well, at least, slower than most men our age," Ep paused, uncertain how to continue.

"Well?"

"Well, I been working alongside the Mersy brothers for a while now. We all signed up with the CCC together in thirty-five."

"So they're friends of yours."

"Well," Ep said, squinting, "Thought so. Except for the last time I saw them—which was only a few days ago—we had an argument."

"An argument."

"Yes."

"About what?"

Ep stared off into the deepening twilight. He weighed his words carefully, "I found out some things about Tom that I didn't like so much. When I told those things to his brother, it got a little out of hand."

"Things like what?"

"Not important."

"Well," Francis said, "What happened after this little argument?"

Ep cracked his knuckles; his eyes shifted from one direction to the next. He leaned forward, uncertain how to continue. "It wasn't a 'little' argument," he said, "It was terrible. I—" he cleared his throat, "I shot him."

"You shot Tom?"

"No," Ep said, close to tears, "I shot Isaac."

"You shot him?" Francis said, his voice rising in disbelief, "You killed a man?"

"I don't know!" Ep said, thankful for the darkness. He was crying, "I ran, Francis, I ran because I didn't know what had happened. I didn't plan to shoot him, but he pulled a gun on me and I didn't have a choice."

"You ran?" Francis rolled his eyes in astonishment, "You mean you don't even know if he's alive or dead?"

Ep buried his face in his hands. "I don't know. I don't know, and I can't live with myself, Francis."

Francis snorted, "Well, I should think not," he said, "You of all people—wasn't it you who swore you'd never drink or smoke or sleep with a woman before marriage? Didn't you promise Mama that you'd be a saint among men?" Francis laughed derisively, "My brother, the murderer."

Ep slammed his hands down on the arms of his chair, "I don't know that for sure, Francis!" He stood up, whirling to face his brother, "Why I ever told you is a mystery to me."

"And me, Ep," Francis said coldly, "You know you can't stay here anymore. I won't have lawbreakers in this house."

"I didn't kill him in cold blood, Francis—I don't even know if he's dead."

Francis shook his head, "You're a good shot, Ephraim. Can't imagine you'd miss on purpose."

Ep inhaled sharply and let the breath out in one blast, "For once in my life, can't you help me with something instead of turning on me and making everything worse?"

"Seems like this is about as bad as a thing can get, brother," Francis said, standing up. "The thing of it is, I won't have you here endangering my wife and daughter with your presence. You've got to go. Now."

"I can't leave now, Francis," Ep said quietly, "I've got to sleep. I ain't slept in three or four days."

Francis shook his head and turned towards the house, "You can stay until dawn," he said, "but if you're not gone by then you'll have me to answer to."

"Will you tell Ava?"

"Why should it matter to you what I tell my wife?" Francis said, without turning around.

"Francis, please, she doesn't need to know."

"She'll find out sooner or later," Francis said, turning towards him.

"Not if I don't come back—not if she never has to see me again."

"Is that what's going to happen tomorrow? You're going to leave and never come back?"

"I don't know, Francis, I don't know. What should I do?"

"Same thing you always done, brother," Francis said, his voice a whisper in the dark, "Run away."

Ep heard his brother open the front door and let it slam behind him. He stood there in the darkness, listening to the familiar sounds of his childhood home. He categorized each one, the last leaves, the creaking of the gate on its hinges, the call of an owl. He wiped his eyes and went inside.

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Ep lay on the low cot in the loft, stretched out under one of his mother's old quilts. His conversation with Francis played through his mind. What if Francis told Ava tonight? What if he had to see her again before he left? He shivered in the cool air and stretched out his hands in the dark to find his knapsack. While he was rummaging around in his few belongings to find his extra shirt, his fingers brushed against the cold metal of his pistol. A dark, insistent fear pulsed at the back of his brain. He tried to reason with himself. He was safe for now, and in the morning he would find somewhere else to go.

He put on the shirt and lay back, motionless, his fingers spread behind his neck. He could trace Francis and Ava's movement through the house. Ava had put Carrie to bed, and she was in the kitchen, humming as she finished her tasks for the evening. Francis slammed the back door as he went out to check something in the yard.

Without warning, all of the memories of his childhood flooded over him. He remembered countless nights just like this one—the cold, dry air still against his skin. Now his Father's angry voice was replaced with his brother's, and his mother's gentleness with Ava's.

He ran his hands over the faded quilt that covered him and thought about his mother. She was the only one who could smooth away the hurts of his troubled relationships with his father and his brother. It wasn't just his jealousy that had driven him away, it was her absence. Without her, this place wasn't a home. He closed his eyes and thought back to his childhood. If he listened hard enough, he could almost hear her soft tread on the ladder. He drifted off into dreams colored by memory.

"What's the matter, my love?"

Ephraim rolled away from his mother and turned to face the wall. His small, eight-year-old body was curled tight under the colorful quilt. The stars and triangles held together with tiny stitches moved in waves as he turned. He squinted his eyes closed and didn't speak.

It was silent for a moment. Ep wondered if she had left the room. He peeked over his shoulder. She was still there, kneeling by the edge of the bed.

"Ephraim, dear, what's wrong?" She laid a long, cool hand on his forehead. She smelled like the autumn sky.

"It's not fair."

She removed her hand and stood up, edging her way onto the bed. Her young face shone in the last light of the sputtering candle, a smile playing around her lips, sadness hiding in the deep darkness of her eyes. She gently wrapped her hands around his shoulders and pulled him towards her.

"Let's talk about it."

"Don't want to," he muttered as he moved away from her.

"Well, I do," she said softly. She lay down beside him, not touching him, waiting for him to start the conversation.

He opened his eyes and stared at the wall. He could hear her steady breathing, and her nearness soothed him. "It's not fair that Papa whipped me."

She nodded in the flickering light. "Your feelings are hurt."

He sighed, unable to explain the deep sense of injustice he felt.

"Well, Ep, you did let the pig loose."

"Only because Francis told me too."

"Don't you think that's a little silly? you're the one who opened the gate."

"But I ain't the one who chased the pig from the pen!"

"I'm *not* the one," she corrected gently, allowing her hand to touch his tiny ear in a motherly caress.

"Francis did that. He's the one that got in there and scared it out. He laughed when it ran and squealed." He rolled over to face her. "He did laugh, Mama. He laughed when the pig ran out."

"And what did you do when the pig ran out?" Her eyes were very serious.

"I tried to get it back."

"That was very noble of you."

"I knew we couldn't lose another pig--not after the one that died last week, so I tried to get it back."

"And you're upset that your father punished you and not your brother."

Tears filled Ep's eyes, and he buried his face in her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry out all of the confusion and hurt of the day. His little frame curled against her as he cried, and she rested her cheek on the top of his head. She didn't speak, just let him be. When his breathing slowed and the sniffing stopped, she sat up and pulled him to a sitting position. She used her fingers to wipe away his tears, and she smoothed his mussed hair. "Can I tell you a secret?" she said, whispering.

He nodded, blinking. His eyelashes were thick and dark with tears.

"Sometimes your papa makes mistakes."

He looked at her blankly.

"I'm not saying that he was wrong to punish you. You did a very irresponsible thing today, Ephraim. You let our last pig out into the woods, and, unless a miracle happens, we probably won't get it back."

He looked down at his hands and another tear fell—a dark spot on the swirling pattern of the quilt.

"But that's not to say that he was completely right. Your brother was also quite careless today. He encouraged you to do something foolish and then he laughed at the result."

"He ought to have gotten a whipping, too," Ep said angrily, scrunching the quilt between his fists.

"Perhaps," she said, smoothing his hair again, "but is it kind to wish that he had been punished?"

He looked up at her, bewildered.

"What I'm saying, dear, is that your father only focuses on things he can see. He saw you open the gate, and he saw the pig run away. Whether it's right or not, he didn't see Francis laughing. He didn't see what happened before, and so he didn't punish your brother."

"He can see fine."

She laughed a soft, low laugh. "Yes, he can see just fine. But sometimes he only sees what he wants to see. He only sees the things that cause the biggest problems."

"So he didn't realize Francis started it and laughed at it?"

"I don't think so."

"So I shouldn't be angry."

"You can be angry, but don't spend too much time with your anger. Don't lay here in bed and stew over it."

"So what should I do?"

"Feel it and move on."

"Is that what you do?"

"Yes, darling." She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "Now, let's go to bed."

He stretched out underneath the quilt, and she smoothed the quilt up around his collarbone. He grabbed her hand as she brushed it over his shoulder and kissed it, "I love you, Mama."

She blinked in the darkness, "I love you too, dearest. Sweet dreams." With a soft breath, she extinguished the candle on the nightstand and stood up to leave the room.

Ep woke suddenly, his heart racing. The loft was cold, and his mother's quilt was tilted sideways; he must have kicked it off in his sleep. He gathered it with his hands and pulled it towards him. He cocked his head and listened, trying to gauge the time by the sounds he heard outside. Everything was still, no birds, no breeze, nothing. There was still time to sleep. His fingers traced the edges of the quilt, and he breathed deeply. He tried to feel his anger, tried to let it go and exhale it into the night, but he couldn't. It had settled in the hollow of his chest, right behind his sternum, and no matter how he tried, he couldn't call it to the surface of his mind, it was too deep. He fell into an uneasy sleep, hoping against hope that he could dream his mother back into existence, dream his old life back to reality.

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In the morning, Ep woke before the sun. He folded his mother's quilt neatly, setting it on the edge of the bed and letting his fingers linger over the faded seams. He grabbed his knapsack and climbed down the ladder. He crossed the short hallway silently and slipped out the front door. The sky was half-filled with dark clouds, making the sunlight strangely yellow against the autumn trees. He walked slowly towards the family graveyard at the edge of the clearing, the small plot where just yesterday he'd helped to lay his father's coffin in the ground.

As he stepped in the little gate, he looked at the graves. How had he not noticed the small grave in the back corner at the funeral yesterday? A tiny wooden marker was the only sign that this was little Noah's grave. He knelt in front of the small hill in the grass and opened his bag. He pulled out a wooden cross tied roughly together with twine. He'd etched the baby's name on the vertical piece and surrounded the letters with an intricate design of ferns and hearts. He stuck the cross into the ground and straightened it so it stood tall over the little grave.

He waited there for a while, letting the watery morning sun fall over his shoulders onto the tiny cross. Then, slowly, he stood and straightened his knapsack on his shoulder. He could feel the weight of the gun in the bag as it rested against the base of his spine. He looked at the house one more time, the low roof, the porch supported by piles of rocks gathered from the hills, the leaning fence, the small garden. He cracked his knuckles, pulled his hat down low over his brow, and walked off the property.

### Chapter Five: 1937

Tom left the churchyard and walked back to Main Street. He walked past the depot and the restaurant, turning down Oak Lane. He stopped at the door to a pawn shop.

When he pushed the door open, a small silver bell tied to the knob clanged. The store was a maze of shelves and counters. Knick-knacks and books cluttered every available surface, and the glass counters were full of long-forgotten family heirlooms sold off to buy bread. The clerk behind the counter looked up, his eyes hidden behind thick glasses with filthy lenses. Tom walked to the counter and set both suitcases down in front of it.

"How can I help you, son?" the clerk asked. He was old, and his knobby fingers twitched on the buttons of the cash register.

"Got some stuff to sell, if you'll take it," Tom said.

"Can't make no promises," the clerk answered, "But let's have a look."

Tom bent down and opened Isaac's suitcase. He pulled out Isaac's neatly folded clothes and a pair of work boots. "You take clothes?" he asked, his voice rising up from the floor.

The clerk didn't bother to look at him, "No. But there's a donation bin in the back that the Ladies' Aid women brought. You can put 'em there."

Tom nodded. He moved Isaac's clothes to the side. There on the bottom of the suitcase were the rest of his brother's worldly goods: a pocket Bible, a shaving kit in a

leather case, a battered red alarm clock, a watch, a lighter, a brass cigarette case, and a faded black wallet.

Tom stood and lifted the suitcase up to the counter. He showed the man what was left in it, his voice was quiet when he spoke, "Any of this worth anything to you?"

The clerk stretched out his hands and rifled through the belongings. He tossed the Bible to the side, "These are two a-penny," he said with a sniff, "and this," he held the wallet up, "is in such poor shape that I don't think I can take it."

Tom nodded quietly. He took the wallet from the clerk and opened it. It was empty except for a stack of water-stained gospel tracts. Isaac had collected them on their travels. For some reason he had loved to listen to the street-corner preachers. Tom ran his thumb over the edge of the wallet. He pulled the tracts out and carefully tucked them into the Bible. He slipped the Bible into his jacket pocket.

"Rest of this is pretty useless, sir," the clerk said. "Only thing I can take is the cigarette case." He was holding it up to the light, peering at it through the smudged lenses that sat perched on the end of his nose. The case was brass, and it was engraved with a sketch of an octopus. The creature's eight legs swirled around its head, stretching towards the edges of the case. "Give you two dollars for it."

Tom grunted, "Hold on, I got some more stuff here."

He knelt down again and opened his own suitcase. He stacked his clothes with Isaac's and rifled through the bottom of his suitcase. His own shaving kit lay in the bottom of the bag, identical to Isaac's. Next to it was a wide leather case, shaped like a square envelope. He ran his fingers over the smooth, supple surface.

"What's in that?" the clerk asked. He was leaning over the counter now, his glasses glinting.

Tom lifted the pouch and stood at the counter. He flipped open the top flap of the case, and the clerk gasped.

There, in the case, lay a collection of knives of all shapes and all sizes, burnished brass knives with tortoiseshell handles, gleaming silver blades, leather-bound handles, all shining and clean, all sharp.

"Those are beautiful, son. Bet I could give you a lot for them."

Tom closed the case up, "They ain't for sale," he said, his musical voice rising an octave. He tucked the flat case into the waistband of his pants and covered it over with his shirt.

"You said two dollars for the cigarette case?"

"Yessir."

"Nothing for the bags? Nothing for the shaving kits?"

"Fraid not, son."

"Well, then, that's alright," he took the lighter and put it in his pocket and he wrapped Isaac's watch around his wrist. He knelt down to look through the inside pockets of his suitcase. They were empty. He stood up. "Guess I'll take the two dollars, then."

The clerk nodded and filled out a ticket, writing a description of the case in old-fashioned, looping script. He opened the cash register and pulled out two wrinkled bills. Tom took them from him and folded them neatly in half before placing them in his own wallet. He turned to leave, taking a last slow look at the suitcases, clothes, and other

items that now lay scattered on the countertop and the floor. "Thank you," he said, as he placed one hand on the door knob.

"Wait—what am I to do with the rest of this stuff?" The clerk was rummaging through the pile on the counter, placing everything into Isaac's opened case.

"I don't care," Tom said stiffly, "You can throw it away if you want, but it's weighing me down."

The bell clanged again as he stepped out of the dusty shop and into the street.

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He spent the rest of the afternoon on a park bench, trying to decide what to do with his two dollars. Directly in front of him was the gate to the cemetery where Isaac was buried. He coughed into his elbow and pulled out Isaac's faded pocket Bible. He flipped through the pages, looking for nothing in particular. The tiny words flashed by as he ran his thumb over the edge of the book, turning the pages quickly.

He remembered Isaac sitting across from him at a restaurant somewhere in Atlanta, laboring over the pages. His brother knew how to read and write, but Tom could never be sure if Isaac had understood anything he read. He did know that this little Bible always helped calm Isaac down. Whenever Isaac was agitated, he flipped the pages just like Tom had done, running his thumb along the book to feel the breeze puffing out from in between the holy pages.

When they'd worked in the CCC and shared a tent, Tom had always read to Isaac from this same Bible before bed. Tom would read some passage at random until Isaac fell asleep, soothed by the rise and fall of Tom's voice.

As far as Tom could tell, the words on the page were just words.

There was no magic in them.

He sighed and put the book back in his pocket.

It was almost dark when he stood up again. He walked towards the park entrance, trying not to look at the graveyard. He lowered his eyes and bent forward from the waist, walking quickly down the dim street. He brushed past couples with children returning home from their errands; he strode past the shop windows, catching only the merest glimpse of his own reflection in the dark glass panels.

His pace slowed as he recognized familiar buildings around him, and he came to a stop when he arrived in front of his final destination--the funeral home. The clapboard building had two stories, and the roof of the front porch was supported with square columns whose dignity had faded with the years. They were covered with dried yellow vines, and the paint was cracked around the edges.

Tom ducked into the yard across the street to watch, moving silently despite his large frame. He crouched down behind a low hedge and angled himself so that he could see the front and the side of the funeral home. A short gravel drive led from the street to an open-sided shed behind the main building.

There were lights shining in the funeral home's front parlor, and he could see two or three people milling about, dusting and tidying. Jim Dolley, the undertaker, was one of them. Tom didn't know for sure, but he figured that Dolley and his wife lived in the rooms on the second floor. At least he hoped that was the case.

He crouched down behind a low hedge and glanced at the house behind him. All of its lights had been extinguished. He turned again and looked at the funeral home through the empty branches of the hedge.

Tom sat back on his heels to wait, his eyes flicking back and forth to follow the movements of the people inside. His breathing was steady, but each inhale carried a wet rasp that rose from his lungs unbidden.

Only once did he move. He looked up into the clear November night and studied the stars, raking his eyes from one side of the heavens to the other as if searching for something. When he was younger, he had learned the names of the constellations and the old stories of the warriors and great monsters of the sky. But Tom had merely nodded during these lessons. The great patterns of the heavens confused him--he couldn't see how the disjointed points so far above him fit together; he didn't understand how the stars sparked stories. All his life he'd tried rolling the names around on his tongue, hoping that repeating them would help him see the lines in the sky. He knew that Cassiopeia shone all year and so did the Great Bear. He should see, in this season, Andromeda and Pisces. It didn't matter how hard he searched. All he saw was a mass of stars shining out of reach, their lights pale, cold, unforgiving. With an exhale, he blinked away the stars and opened his eyes on the familiar things of earth. The door to the funeral home opened, and the front porch was illuminated.

Dolley stood silhouetted in the doorway, bidding good night to one of his employees. Tom could see Mrs. Dolley standing in the parlor, turning off the lights.

The employee waved his hand and crossed the street, heading directly for Tom, who held his breath. When the man reached the opposite sidewalk, he paused, checking his pockets and rummaging around in his briefcase. Tom could see his cracked brown shoes through the hedges.

"You forget something, Ellis?" Dolley called in a cheerful voice from the funeral home steps.

Tom saw the shoes turn back towards the funeral home and Ellis answered, "Might have left my wallet," he said, still rummaging in his briefcase. He got halfway across the street before calling out "Nope! Got it right here! Night, Jim!"

"Night, Ellis," Dolley called. He waved a hand and retreated inside the funeral home.

Ellis crossed the street again, pulling his threadbare jacket a little closer around his shoulders. He walked past Tom without noticing him.

It was almost three hours before the Dolleys went to bed. Tom sat silently, tracking their motions through the windows of the house. For a while they disappeared to the back of the house, where Tom assumed they were eating their dinner. His own stomach growled at the thought.

Later he saw Dolley leave the kitchen door with suitcases in hand. Tom watched as the undertaker opened the back of the rusty hearse and deposited the luggage inside. He watched as they finished closing up shop downstairs, and he saw when they lit their bedside lamps in the little room above the main parlor. He couldn't see much beyond the hazy light shining through the white curtains upstairs, so he sat patiently until all the lights were off.

When the entire street was dark, he moved to the edge of the yard and sat on the curb. There were no cars, no people passing; he was left with only his thoughts and the breath that left his lips in a dusty cloud. He marked off another hour, watching the slow turn of his luminescent watch dial, never looking up, even when the moon appeared

wearing a smoky robe of early winter light. The beginnings of a plan were unfolding in his mind. He looked from the shed back to the house, calculating the distance. He looked at the windows on the front of the house, wondering if any would be unlocked.

Once he was sure the Dolleys were asleep, he crossed the street and made his way to the back of the lot.

He walked softly towards the shed, walking in the soft grass along the path to avoid making a sound. The hearse he'd ridden in to Isaac's funeral sat at the front edge of the shed, but behind it Tom could make out the dim outline of another car, too, either a Cadillac or a Studebaker—he couldn't tell which in this light. It was newer and sharper, with elaborately carved side panels.

He circled back in the starlight to the older car. It was built on to a Ford Model A, clearly bought before the crash. The brown wood paneling on the sides was faded and worn. It might have been a delivery truck but for the black side panels and the name of the funeral home painted on the back. *Have to do something about that*, he thought to himself. While he considered his options, he stumbled over an oil can. The sound carried across the backyard, and he froze.

When no lights appeared from the direction of the house, he resumed his slow movements around the car.

He twisted up the silver handle on the back door of the Model A and peered inside. He pulled a battered brass lighter out of his pocket and flipped the cap off, flicking the igniter to illuminate the space. There were the Dolleys' bags, stacked neatly for their getaway tomorrow. In the middle of the open space was a black pedestal, long enough and low enough for any of the caskets in Dolley's display room to rest comfortably. Tom

reached forward with his free hand and felt the black cloth that draped pedestal. It was a thick black wool, worn at the corners where the coffins slid in and out. Tom moved his hand down the side of the pedestal and felt to see if the base was solid. He lifted the fabric and saw that it was a low table built on four legs bolted to the bed of the hearse. A soft smile stole across his face, and he extinguished the lighter.

He opened the other door and placed the heels of his hands on the bed, lifting himself inside the hearse. It dipped with his weight. He crawled forward and slid under the long wooden table, concealing himself. It was dark and stuffy underneath, and the tabletop was only inches from his face. He fumbled to arrange the fabric around him and was still for a moment, wondering how long he could remain here before claustrophobia set in.

He slid to the side slowly, and emerged from under the table. The cool November air surrounded him, and he sat still for a moment, staring through the open doors and out into the night. The stars glimmered blankly above the funeral home, and closed his eyes to be rid of them.

He opened them again with a sigh and slid forward, pushing himself with his hands, until he was on the edge of the hearse. Standing up, he leaned the doors against each other, afraid to close them all the way for fear of making too much noise.

His stomach growled, and he turned his attention to the house. He stole over the path, listening for any signs of stirring upstairs.

A strange thrill filled him. He paused on the back stoop and rolled his head in a circle to crack his neck.

"I'm glad you ain't here, Isaac," he whispered under his breath. "You wouldn't have approved of what I'm about to do."

Gently, he laid his hands on the door and felt the mesh screen bend underneath his fingers. He tried the handle; it was locked.

He walked to the kitchen window and tried lifting it. It slid open an inch and stuck. He held his breath and pushed harder, waiting for the tell-tale beginnings of a squeak that might wake the sleeping couple upstairs.

He struggled with the window, sliding it an inch at a time until it was open wide enough for him to enter the house. He placed his hands on the sill and hoisted himself up and over the ledge, landing with a soft thud inside the kitchen.

He opened the icebox. There was nothing good; the Dolleys had already eaten all the perishables.

He closed the refrigerator and turned in a circle, trying to find the pantry. There were two open doorways, each leading to a dark hallway. One led towards the front of the house, and the other led to a spare side room. He pulled his lighter out again and flicked it open. The flame created a dim circle of light around his hand, and he moved slowly towards the only closed door in the kitchen. It swung open silently and brought with it a blast of cold air, stale with the smell of chemicals. The lighter flame wavered and blinked, and Tom saw through the gloom a stairway leading down to the basement. He shuddered.

The sight of the stairway reminded him suddenly that he was standing in a funeral home, that Dolley was an undertaker, and that beneath of the house there must be a room full of the mysterious fluids and instruments needed to stop decay long enough for a

viewing. He shuddered. What if there were bodies here, under the floor? Turning quickly, he stepped out of the kitchen. He tried to shake away the thought of the stairway, of the darkness, of the cellar, but each step he took now sounded hollow. He could feel his steps echoing down through the bowels of the house, down into the spaces below where Isaac had lain, where Mr. Dolley's fat hands had prepared his brother for burial.

He paused in the hall, feeling the familiar tickle in his throat. He closed the lighter and let the darkness close around him. He bit his lip and felt his eyes begin to water as he swallowed over and over again, trying to force enough saliva down his throat to halt the coughing fit. The need passed, but barely.

Perhaps the pantry was along this way. He ran his hands along the walls, feeling for a door, but the hallway was short, and in only a few steps he had entered the front room of the house.

He froze.

There were two narrow windows on the opposite wall framed in gauzy white curtains. The weak moonlight washing through the blinds seemed trapped behind the drapes, illuminating the fabric from behind with a strange, greenish light. Standing between the windows was an open casket. The light issuing from behind the curtains reflected dimly on either end of the veneered paneling, but the middle of the coffin was shrouded in darkness. Tom could only tell that it was open because the moonlight glinted softly on the tufted silk padding.

A small shiver ran down his spine.

He narrowed his eyes and peered through the gloom to see if there was a body inside, but it was too dark to tell. *Surely they wouldn't just leave a body out in the open*

*like that*, he thought, trying to calm his racing thoughts. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

When he opened his eyes, Isaac was sitting tall in the coffin, watching him silently with his round, black eyes and innocent face, the moonlight glowing on his light hair.

Tom felt cold beads of sweat form at the small of his back.

"You ain't here, Isaac," he whispered, "You're dead and I watched you die. This ain't you." His voice was low and hoarse. Did he imagine it, or did the curtains on either side of the casket stir?

The figure in the coffin opened its mouth to speak, and Tom's eyes widened. A strange gargling noise issued from his brother's mouth, and Tom clenched his fists, closing his eyes.

When he opened them, the coffin was empty. Tom tried to breathe, but suddenly the air in the room was unbearable. He imagined the fumes from the basement, the odors from the coffins rising through the floorboard, alcohol and astringent and formaldehyde. Decay and decomposition painted and arranged into an image of life. He imagined dead bodies like wax dummies, their limbs, their hair carefully displayed to trick the mind into forgetting the abrupt realities of death.

Forgetting the pantry, he turned and walked rapidly towards the kitchen. He stumbled out the window and into the cold night. He closed the window quickly, trying not to slam it, and stumbled into the light of the moon and the mocking stars.

He crossed the yard in a few steps and rested against the bumper of the hearse. He raised his arm and coughed into his elbow. When the cough subsided, he sat down and

leaned against the hearse's tire, breathing in ragged gasps. He tried to close his eyes and rest, but Isaac's ghostly face was seared into his mind, and his wide black eyes filled his thoughts.

Tom slid down and lay on his side in the undertaker's shed.

The cough rose up in him again. This time, when he lifted his hand to cover his mouth, he found that his cheeks were wet.

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He slept uneasily on the concrete for a few hours, waking every now and then with a start. When the first light of dawn began to show in the East, he sat up and stretched, his mind empty. There was a painful crick in his neck.

At the first signs of stirring from the house, he stood and opened the doors of the hearse.

He lifted himself inside, and pulled the doors shut. They wouldn't close completely since there was no handle on the inside. He hoped Dolley wouldn't notice.

Slowly, he crawled under the pedestal and let the black wool fall over him. His breath soon warmed the space, and it grew stuffy and hot.

He waited, closing his eyes and willing himself to be calm.

It was an hour before he heard the Dolleys leaving the house, making final preparations for their trip.

He heard the undertaker's heavy step on the gravel path first.

"That's odd," Dolley said to his wife, who was walking up the path behind him with slow, crunching steps.

"What, honey?" his wife said, her voice thin and nasal.

"I could have sworn I shut these doors up tight last night," Dolley said, opening the door and peering into the back of the hearse. Tom held his breath.

"Well, is the luggage still there?"

"Oh, of course."

"Well then, no harm done, dear," she said.

"I suppose you're right."

"Here's the picnic basket," she said, "When do you think we'll stop for lunch?"

"Oh, I don't know. When we get out of town a ways. Maybe when we stop in St. John's Mill?"

"That sounds good to me."

Dolley set the picnic basket in the back, arranging it carefully so that it wouldn't fall over, then he closed the back doors with more force than he needed.

Tom lay still in the back, hardly breathing.

He heard the Dolleys enter the front of the car, heard the engine turning over, felt the jerky motion of Dolley pulling the car out of the shed and down the gravel drive.

Tom turned his face to the left and gently brushed aside the wool. He lay very still, waiting, his mind trapped in a coffin of its own making.

### **Interlude: 1913**

*He knocked on the door of the cabin. It was opened almost immediately by a tall, grim older man. He wore a faded shirt with no collar and brown pants that he tucked into his boots. His gray hair was long and gathered back with a simple black ribbon. His face was wide and flat; he gave the appearance of having no time for anything that savored of foolishness.*

*"Good morning, are you Mr. Hoyt Mersy?"*

*"I am. Who are you?" Hoyt asked, keeping the door halfway closed.*

*"I'm the Sourjohn County tax assessor, and I've come to collect your property taxes."*

*"What's that supposed to mean? I do 'em myself."*

*He nodded and launched without preamble into the speech he had memorized, "Yessir, but as of late the State Legislature requires three assessors in each county to make searches for hidden property and ensure that all taxes are being recorded and paid in an honest manner. Our aim is to stop under-reporting and ensure that each member of the county pays his fair share to avoid unwanted tax increases."*

*The man was staring at him through slitted eyes. He still held the door halfway shut, "So you're sayin' that I'm to pay you my taxes?"*

*"That's right."*

*"I don't know you from Adam. How do I know you ain't just here to steal my money and disappear?"*

*He tried not to sigh in exasperation. He'd answered these same questions from suspicious, penny-pinching farmers across the entire county. "I have here," he said, rummaging in his bag, "a signed letter of introduction from the county tax commissioner and the governor." He pulled the paper out, unfolded it, and handed it to the old man.*

*Hoyt looked at it and handed it back; he didn't speak.*

*The tax collector cleared his throat, "Sir, I assure you the process is quick. I'll only need to look over the property and make sure that everything here gets reported and paid for. That's all."*

*Without speaking, Hoyt opened the door and let him into the cabin. It was spacious and scrupulously clean. An older woman was sitting at the kitchen table stringing beans. A small boy was sitting next to her, banging his heels against the legs of his chair.*

*"Who is it, Hoyt?" she asked, without looking up. He removed his hat and ran a hand through his blond hair. It hit his collar at its longest length, and he smoothed it back towards his shoulders.*

*"Tax man," Hoyt said, allowing the door to slam shut behind him. "Although why on God's green earth I need a county man to come up here and tell me how to pay my taxes is surely a mystery." He walked over to a small desk in the corner and pulled out a faded green ledger book. "Mabel," he said, looking at his wife and turning his head sideways, "Last time you checked, was I a grown man capable of takin' care of my own affairs?"*

*Mabel looked up at her husband, but her hands kept moving in the bowl of beans. She had a round, brown face like an acorn, and her brown hair was streaked through*

*with gray. She spoke in a whining, childish voice, "Why, yes, Hoyt, I believe you was. But I sure can't tell it from the way you're acting right now. Just let him look over the books and be on his way." She turned to her unwelcome guest, "Did you bring a horse with you? I can get Alice to feed it if you want."*

*The visitor raised his eyebrows, "Oh, no ma'am. I walked. I prefer to travel on foot." He smiled a thin smile at her.*

*The boy at the table stopped kicking and looked at the stranger in the kitchen. "On foot?" Mabel said, her voice raising an octave, "Why, that sounds like foolishness if I ever heard it. You're the tax assessor for the whole county?"*

*"Yes, ma'am. Well—one of three."*

*"And so why do you walk the whole way? Ain't you got a horse?"*

*"Oh, yes ma'am, I do. I just prefer to walk. It's a peculiarity of mine." He smiled again, and this time his gray teeth were visible.*

*She shook her head, "I hope you are prepared to meet all types of people up here in this county. We've got some real troublemakers." She leaned conspiratorially forward, "And I ain't meaning just farmers, you hear? There's some immoral people up here in this neck of the woods. That and Indians to boot. They said they got them all, but I know for sure there's some Indian women livin' with white men over in River Gap."*

*"I haven't been to River Gap yet," he said, "I'm heading there tomorrow."*

*"You from these parts?" She said, looking back down at the beans. She handed some to the little boy and said in a loud voice, "You string these, Isaac."*

*"No—I just moved here for the job."*

*She looked up again, "You don't sound like you're from the mountains is why I asked. You got that real nice Atlanta accent—is that where you're from? Well, I warn you, this is an evil age, and there are evil people about. I ran into our nearest neighbor, Mr. Turner--His name is Steven, but they all call him Shamrock on account of he's from Ireland. Do you know him?"*

*"Yes, I was at his place last night, as a matter of fact," the stranger confessed, moving towards Hoyt, who had crooked at a finger at him to beckon him over to the desk.*

*"Well, was he drunk as a skunk when you was there last night?"*

*"No'm, I don't believe so," he took another few steps towards Hoyt, who was tapping his foot impatiently.*

*"Well," she said, dropping the beans she was holding and lifting her small, brown hands towards the ceiling, "That is a true blessing for you, young man, because the last time I saw him, he just about fell over out of his saddle he was so intoxicated." She whispered the last word, as if saying it out loud would make her guilty of the same offense, "I truly do not know how his wife puts up with him and his wicked ways."*

*"Maybe she drinks, too," he said drily.*

*Mabel's eyes narrowed, "Do not laugh at me, young man, I have seen how these people and their immoralities lead to destruction. Isn't that right, Hoyt?"*

*"Mabel, shut your mouth and let me talk to this man. It's bad enough he's up here meddling in our private affairs, it's no help to me to hear you listing out the sins of all our neighbors."*

*Mabel closed her mouth in a pout and went back to stringing beans, "I was just tryin' to be helpful," she said.*

*Hoyt sighed and looked at the tax collector, "What she says about Shamrock is true—he's a drinker if I ever saw one. If he was my son," he said firmly, his face hardening, "I'd surely not tolerate those acts in my house."*

*Mabel lifted her chin proudly, "We surely would not."*

*The tax collector nodded and said, "Well, then, I imagine that you two's house and affairs are all in order. I can't forsee this taking too long." He sat down at the desk and bent over the books Hoyt had arranged for him.*

*Hoyt stood and looked out the window. He drew his eyebrows together and said, "Mabel, go tell that girl that it's fixin' to rain. She'll get all them quilts ruined if she don't bring them back inside now."*

*Mabel stood up and helped Isaac down from his chair, "I warned her about the rain this morning, Hoyt," she whined, grabbing the mushy beans she had given Isaac a few minutes ago. "Come on, darlin', let's go tell your mama to stop acting so silly." They left, and the two men bent back over the books.*

*A few minutes later, Alice burst into the kitchen, her arms full of the heavy quilts. One was trailing on the ground, and the others were piled so high she could hardly see the door.*

*"Silly! Silly!" Isaac was chanting as he walked in behind her.*

*"And another thing," Mabel's shrill voice continued, as she followed Alice inside, "We both warned you two separate times about the rain, and you still insisted. And look! Here you are dragging mine and Mr. Mersy's quilt on the ground." She bent over and yanked the trailing edge of the quilt off the floor. It threw Alice off balance, and she almost dropped the whole stack.*

*The visitor jumped up and walked towards her, "Here," he said, "let me help you with those." He took two of the quilts off the stack and placed them in a kitchen chair, while she dropped the others on the table.*

*"Thank you," she said, looking up at him. Her eyes were very dark, and two bright pink spots shone on her cheeks. Outside, a rumble of thunder rolled through the clearing.*

*"I told you it would rain, Alice," Hoyt said slowly, standing with his arms crossed by the desk, "When will you learn to listen?"*

*Alice pursed her lips, and the pink spots on her cheeks turned red, "Well, Hoyt, considerin' that I got the dust off the quilts before the rain, I'd say I was right. I told you this mornin' I'd get it done before the rain came, and look," she motioned to the quilts, "I done it."*

*"Do not speak to your father-in-law like that!" Mabel hissed, grabbing the back of Alice's arm and pinching her.*

*Alice jumped and slapped her mother-in-law's hand away, "Get your hands off me!"*

*Mabel raised her eyebrows and looked at Hoyt, "See what I have to put up with, Hoyt? Little Miss High and Mighty here won't mind me--"*

*"Mabel," Hoyt said, his voice low and threatening as the thunder in the distance. The room grew still when he spoke, "Let's not forget that we have company with us." He turned towards the tax collector, "I apologize for these women's behavior." He turned towards Mabel and Alice, "Mabel, I'd like you to start dinner, and Alice, I'd like you to take Isaac to the back bedroom for a time. We don't need him getting in the way while we do the taxes."*

*Alice reached down and grabbed the boy's hand, "Come on, darling, let's go."*

*The two of them walked towards a door in the back wall of the common room. Before she could leave, Hoyt walked towards her and laid a broad, flat hand on her shoulder.*

*"And don't think I didn't notice your insolence today, girl," he said in a low voice, "We will discuss it tomorrow."*

## **Chapter-by-Chapter Outline**

### **Prologue: 1913**

In the opening scene of the book, we meet Alice Mersy, a young widow who lives with her mother- and father-in-law. A tax collector visits the Mersy farm, and he is immediately attracted to the young and beautiful Alice. He removes his wedding band before speaking to her, and he is drawn to the way she speaks.

### **Chapter One**

The chapter begins with Tom Mersy waking up next to a nameless girl in a third-rate hotel. He leaves without paying for his room, eats a quick breakfast, and finds his way to the funeral home in River Gap, Georgia. We learn that Tom's brother, Isaac, has been killed. Tom attends Isaac's simple funeral and makes plans to find a man named Ephraim Fairfax, who is somehow connected with his brother's death.

### **Chapter Two**

In this chapter, we meet Ephraim Fairfax, our protagonist, for the first time. Ep is walking towards his old friend Pengry Nations' homestead. Ep has been on the run for a few days, and he retreats to Pengry's house for a respite. We learn that Ep's father, Edward, has died. Ep is on his way home for the funeral, but he knows that his trip home will only be a short visit, as Tom Mersy is on his trail. The next day, Ep arrives at his childhood home, which is now owned by his brother, Francis. Francis welcomes Ep coldly, and Ep announces that he's staying for the funeral and nothing more. The two

men attend Francis' funeral, where Ep struggles with the preacher's teaching about the man of grace and the man of lawlessness.

### **Chapter Three**

After his father's funeral, Ep escapes to the woods for a break. His sister-in-law, Ava, comes to speak with him. We learn that Ava and Ep used to be romantically involved, but Ava chose Francis over Ep. After their argument is interrupted by Francis, Ep returns to the house and speaks with the pastor about his troubling message during the funeral.

### **Chapter Four**

Ep confesses to his brother that he is the one who shot and killed Isaac Mersy, though he claims it was in self-defense. Francis is furious, and demands that Ep leave at once. Ep convinces Francis to let him stay for the night. Ep remembers his mother's gentleness and help in smoothing over troubled family relationships. The next morning, he leaves, but not before stopping one last time at the family graveyard.

### **Chapter Five**

Tom Mersy leaves the churchyard where his brother is buried and heads to a pawn shop, where he sells everything he can and leaves the rest. He then waits for the sun to set before returning to the funeral home. He breaks into the funeral home to steal food and money, but leaves quickly when he sees a phantom version of his brother sitting in an

open casket. He stows away in the back of the hearse, as he has overheard that the funeral home owner and his wife are going on a vacation the next day.

### **Interlude: 1913**

The tax collector enters the cabin and discovers that Alice Mersy lives in an unkind environment. She has one young son, Isaac, who is doted upon by his grandparents. Alice's in-laws, however, mistreat her in spite of the Christian values they espouse. The tax collector offers to help her in a small display of kindness.

### **Chapter Six**

Tom hides in the back of the hearse until the couple stops for a roadside picnic. He surprises them and manages to threaten Mrs. Dolley with a knife. He instructs Mr. Dolley to put the keys in the ignition and crank the motor. He also steals all the cash Dolley has in his wallet. He instructs the funeral home director to sit by a tree 100 yards away from the parked car. After Dolley complies, Tom deftly stabs Mrs. Dolley in the thigh with his knife, creating enough time for himself to get to the car and drive off, stranding the two on the roadside. He drives towards St. John's Mill.

### **Chapter Seven**

Ep walks from his father's property to St. John's Mill. As he does, he thinks back to the first time he met Tom and Isaac Mersy, when they all worked together on a CCC project in North Georgia. The description he paints of Isaac is one of a simple-minded

man. He characterizes their relationship as one of co-dependence, and Tom, he realizes has always been bent on protecting those closest to him, no matter the cost.

### **Chapter Eight**

Tom stops for gas, but, true to form, refuses to pay for it. He hits the gas station attendant with a paint can before driving off again. When he arrives at St. John's Mill, he books a cheap hotel room, and begins asking the attendant if he knows of the Fairfax homestead. He learns that Ep grew up in the area, and hears secondhand stories from bar customers about the relationship between Ep, Francis, and Ava.

### **Chapter Nine**

Ep stops at the bank in St. John's Mill and withdraws his money and a few items from his safety deposit box. He spends the night at the church in St. John's Mill after hearing that Tom has already arrived and is looking for him. He reminisces about his relationship with Tom and Isaac, recalling stories of the two that, in retrospect, are concerning. A sound in the middle of the night wakes him, and he reflects on the pastor's sermon from his father's funeral. He wrestles in the night with his conscience, and replays Isaac's death in his mind. In the morning he decides to lay low until he can go to town and buy a bus ticket.

### **Chapter Ten**

Tom spends the next morning in St. John's Mill, asking for Ep and learning all that he can about the Fairfax family. He is sneaky in his line of questioning, and he seems

most interested in the relationship between the two brothers. He learns that there is a rift between Ep and Francis that started when Francis went off to college and Ep stayed home to work for his father. The chapter ends when Ep walks into the bus depot. Tom spots him from across the street and heads towards him to confront him.

### **Interlude: 1913**

That night, the miserly and inhospitable Mersys do not invite the tax collector to share their dinner. Alice brings him a basket of provisions, and in the course of their conversation we learn about her late husband and her young son. The tax collector convinces her that she is unhappy enough to sleep with him, which she does. The next morning, he promises to take her away with him, but when she returns to the barn where he spent the night, he is gone.

### **Chapter Eleven**

Ep sees Tom heading towards him across the street. He tries to run, but there is nowhere to go. Tom confronts him with a knife in the bus station, and the two men argue loudly. A physical altercation begins, and Tom injures Ep, stabbing him several times in his left arm. The local sheriff shows up on the scene before Tom can inflict any more damage, and both men are arrested. Ep is bleeding heavily, and he is taken to a doctor's house to have his arm looked at. Tom is taken to the local jail.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Tom spends the night in jail, and his surroundings make him recall other nights he has spent in jail, mainly for stealing or fighting to defend his brother. He also thinks back to the biggest crime he has committed, but he does not reveal exactly what the circumstances were. We see hints of the rough childhood he and his brother Isaac shared, and this chapter shows us that the relationship between the two brothers was unhealthy and codependent, although Tom does not see it that way.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Ep's arm causes him pain, and he spends the night at the doctor's house so that his dressings can be kept fresh. In the night, he dreams about Ava and wakes feeling guilty. The dream reawakens all of his old jealousies, and we see from his perspective how he was treated by his brother and his father. This chapter references the fact that his father went away to fight during WWI, and the time during the war was some of the happiest of Ep's childhood. In the morning, Ep has a conversation with the doctor about why he needs to avoid the law's interference, we hear for the first time the story of Isaac's death from his perspective. The doctor reveals that he has already contacted Francis, who is on his way to St. John's Mill.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Tom spends the next day in jail as well, and he is interviewed by the sheriff. His cough is noticeably worse, and the doctor is sent for. The doctor tells Tom that he is very ill and should probably be hospitalized since he has been coughing up blood. Tom refuses

medical attention. He breaks out of the jail and he makes his way to a store where he uses the last of the money that he stole from Dolley to purchase a gun.

### **Chapter Fifteen**

Francis arrives, furious with Ep for dragging him into this trouble. The two brothers have it out in the doctor's office while the doctor and the nurse observe silently. Ep's jealousy gets the better of him, and he reveals to Francis that he has been obsessing over Ava since he left home. Francis takes this badly and threatens Ep. Ep reminds Francis that the Fairfax property should be his, but he was skipped over for Francis. The two hash out the details of that transaction, neither man being completely up front about his desires. Ep tries to calm the situation down and ask for help, but Francis refuses to see reason. He abandons Ep to his own devices and claims that he never wants to see him again. Ep resigns himself to that fact and gives Francis his last remaining mementos of their father, which Francis takes reluctantly before returning home. The Sheriff arrives to tell Ep that Tom has broken out of jail. Pengry arrives to take Ep back to his cabin to recuperate.

### **Interlude: 1913**

Alice Mersy discovers that she is pregnant by the stranger. She tells her in-laws, and they unleash their wrath on her. They threaten to send her away after the baby is born, but they demand that she leave Isaac, their real grandson, with them. They tell her the tax collector is, in fact, a married man with two children. Heartbroken, she takes Isaac and runs away from the Mersy farm, determined to find the father of her child and

confront him over his actions. This interlude shows the true cruelty with which Alice was treated.

### **Chapter Sixteen**

Tom hears from a man in town that Ep has gone to Pengry's cabin, so he takes his gun and sets out walking. He falls into a fever as he walks, and his memories are fragmented. He remembers his childhood and his adolescence, his brother's relationship with Hoyt and Mabel. Towards the end of the chapter, as he is drifting off to sleep in the woods, he remembers his mother and her death.

### **Chapter Seventeen**

Pengry and Ep discuss all that has transpired. Ep remembers his mother's warning about his father and about his brother's relationship. He asks Pengry for advice, and Pengry tries to offer some words of wisdom, but Ep, who is tired and in pain from his ordeal, doesn't listen. At the end of the chapter, Francis Fairfax arrives at Pengry's cabin, carrying with him the ledger books and other mementos that Ep gave Francis. The two brothers sit down at the kitchen table and open the books together because Francis has told Ep that there's something he simply must see. As they pore over the books together, Pengry, who is standing at the kitchen window, looks up to see Tom walking up the trail.

### **Interlude: 1913**

Alice finds her way to the tax collector's cabin. When she knocks on the door, it is opened by Charlotte Fairfax. Hovering around her skirts are young Francis and

Ephraim. When Alice sees the life she has disturbed with her presence, she is distraught. She leaves the farm in a rush, meeting Edward on her way out. He tries to convince her to calm down and see reason, but she will not. She never tells him that she is pregnant. She flees back to the Mersy farm in disgrace, where she is ridiculed and mistreated.

### **Chapter Eighteen**

Tom walks towards Pengry's house, uncertain whether or not he will find Ep inside. He is feverish and plagued by his illness after his night in the cold jail and a second night spent out in the open. Half delirious, he remembers his teenage years when he stumbled down a path much like this one on the Mersy's property. He remembers in a vivid flashback the day that he tracked Isaac's grandfather to the creek and killed him for mistreating his mother. It is with the same violent body language that he moves up the path towards Pengry's cabin.

### **Chapter Nineteen**

Inside the cabin, Ep and Francis both realize who Tom's father is at the same moment, due to a note in an old ledger book and a letter from Alice to Edward written near the end of her life. They sit to try and absorb the information, but they have no time. Tom has raised his shotgun and shot out the kitchen window. Pengry reveals that he only has one working firearm. The men decide to give the gun to Ep, who is the best shot of the three of them. They agree that they will try to talk to Tom first and tell him what they have discovered about his parentage.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Tom enters the cabin, where he is dizzy from his sickness, but the memory of his brother fills him with a blind rage. He hits Pengry with the butt of his rifle and Pengry is knocked unconscious. Ep and Tom both point their weapons at each other, and Ep tries to explain to Tom that they are half brothers who share the same father. Tom, who is so feverish that he is swaying on his feet, doesn't understand. He thinks that when Ep says the word brother, he is referring to Isaac. Enraged that Ep would be taunting him about Isaac's death, Tom points the gun at Ep, but he is distracted by a vision of Isaac floating behind Ep. Tom starts suddenly at the sight, throwing off his aim. When he pulls the trigger, it is Francis, not Ep, that he shoots.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Ep watches as his brother falls to the floor of the cabin. In a moment of stunned silence, he aims Pengry's gun at Tom and shoots, killing him. He kneels between both men, both his brothers, both relationships fractured by jealousy and greed. He is overcome by his own sense of helplessness. Pengry kneels with him and helps him say the Lord's Prayer over both of the men. Francis and Tom both die staring up at Ep.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Ep walks slowly up the hill towards his father's homestead. Ava and Carrie are waiting on the porch for him. When he tells her the news, Ava is devastated. Several days pass in uncomfortable silence. They are visited by the sheriff and by the pastor who

preached at Edward Fairfax's funeral. The pastor tells Ep that his father felt guilty for his actions, and spent his later years trying to make up for it. When Ep shares this with Ava, she confesses that she too has felt guilty for her betrayal of him. Neither of them want to address their relationship or the feelings that still lie so close to the surface. Ep expresses to Ava that he has learned to forgive his old jealousies, but that he struggles now with more guilt than he faced after Isaac's death. They realize that they have the complex emotion of guilt in common, as well as the hope of days without the strain of broken relationships and bitter jealousy. The novel ends with the two of them sitting on the porch, Carrie on the bench between them, their hands barely touching, as Ep tells Carrie about how her father rebuilt the chimney and repaired the shutters of the house.

## Curriculum Vitae

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### EDUCATION

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA  
Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
December 2017  
GPA: 4.0  
Capstone Project: *Wonders for the Dead*

Auburn University, Auburn, AL  
Bachelor of Science in Secondary English Education  
May 2013  
Honors Scholar, *summa cum laude*, GPA: 4.0

### PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS

Alabama Initial Certification: English Language Arts Grades 6-12  
Georgia Teaching Certificate: English Grades 6-12  
ACSI Standard Certificate  
PRAXIS Test 0041 Score 200 out of possible 200

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

*North Cobb Christian School, August 2016-Present*  
*Ninth Grade English Teacher*

- Created new and innovative units of instruction on *Fahrenheit 451*, *Great Expectations*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Julius Caesar*
- Worked individually with students in paper conferences to improve writing skills
- Mentored a group of twelve young ladies in spiritual and character development
- Wrote curriculum guides for Intro to Literature and Honors Intro to Literature
- Introduced new educational technologies into the classroom

*Kennesaw State University Writing Center, July 2015-August 2016*  
*Graduate Writing Assistant*

- Worked one-on-one with graduate students writing their theses and dissertations
- Created workshops and presentations on topics pertinent to graduate writing
- Tutored both undergraduate and graduate students in collegiate-level writing skills

*Smiths Station Junior High School, August 2013-May 2015*  
*Seventh Grade English Teacher*

- Implemented new curriculum, including Common Core Standards (Alabama CCRS)
- Differentiated instruction for students with special needs
- Managed RTI aimline graphs and interventions for special education students
- Led faculty-wide training on scaffolding for EL Students
- Member of the AdvancED Accreditation Interview Team

## **OTHER EXPERIENCE**

*SPI Global, October 2017-Present*

*Freelance ALT-Text Writer*

- Wrote alternative text descriptions for digital textbooks, including graphs, charts, decorative images, and math expressions
- Independently completed large-scale projects on time

*Writing for Social Media*

*Personal Blog*

- Wrote book reviews, poetry, and other reading-related content for my personal blog, [www.bookfifty.com](http://www.bookfifty.com)

## **INTERNSHIPS AND SERVICE LEARNING**

### **Student Teaching**

*Smiths Station High School, Spring 2013*

- Taught three classes of twelfth grade A.P. Literature and Composition
- Taught three classes of twelfth grade College Preparatory British Literature
- Designed and implemented units on Shakespeare, poetry, drama, and fiction
- Integrated technology into the twelfth grade classroom

### **Interactive Field Experiences**

*Opelika High School, Fall 2012*

- Created and taught successful lessons on poetry to twelfth grade students

*Loachapoka High School, Spring 2012*

- Worked collaboratively to create lessons for eleventh and twelfth grade students

- Created lesson plans for a class with ELL and Special Education students

### **Service Learning**

*Sanford Middle School, Spring 2012*

- Assisted a seventh grade math teacher with daily routines. Kept records and graded papers
- Tutored lower level students in basic math drills

*East Alabama Mental Health Center, Fall 2010*

- Created activities for a group of adults with mental disabilities.
- Prepared food for consumer meals and special events

### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

*Southeastern Writing Center Association (SWCA) Annual Conference, February 2016*

Exploring the Extracurricular: The Merits of Moving Beyond Assignment-Motivated Writing.

### **STUDY ABROAD**

University of Georgia at Oxford Program: April-June 2011

- Studied English Literature for a full term at the University of Oxford, UK
- Attended seminar and tutorial style courses
- Wrote in-depth analytical essays weekly