

PROLOGUE

DURING THE NIGHT, BACK at the Montana ranch where I grew up, I dream the air is full of iridescent blue and green fish. They don't dart back and forth like the tiny ones you find in aquariums but glide slowly, magically, through the sunlight in stately lines: a fish parade. I watch them, run after them like a child, laughing, reaching out to touch them. But without turning they evade me, slipping smoothly by my fingers, their eyes revolving to watch me as they pass.

Suddenly I panic: Oh! I think, how can they breathe? They need water! I rush to find something, a pail or bucket, a large pot, anything I can fill and then put them in, to carry them to the river where they will be safe. But though I look and look, I can't find what I need. And meanwhile the fish keep gliding by serenely, watching me, smiling their secret smiles.

I wake up, my heart racing, sit up in bed, and switch on the bedside lamp. The room is familiar yet doesn't quite fit, as if I'm dreaming it instead of inhabiting it. The sky through the dirt-streaked window is a deep blue-black. Across the room stands the chipped wooden dresser my older sister Jess and I used so many years ago. I can see myself yanking open a drawer, riffling impatiently through piles of underwear, scarves, and socks to find the pair I want, Jess shouldering past me to get to the drawers on her side.

The soft too-whoop of an owl on its last round before settling into

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sleep sounds faintly in the distance. In reply, some tiny creature--a mouse, perhaps--rustles behind the baseboard next to the bed, instinctively scurrying for cover. I get up, throw on an old pair of jeans and a shirt I found yesterday in the closet, make myself a cup of coffee in the pale light of the kitchen lamp, and carry it through the parlor, down the dark hall, and into the tacked-on back room, the one Mom always planned to convert to a sewing room for herself but never did.

Now, as always, it's crammed with junk: three threadbare lumpy mattresses, a rocking chair with a broken cane seat, Mom's old black Singer, a small pile of moth-scarred deer and elk hides, cartons of canning jars and fabric remnants, stacks of dusty books, a rolled-up rag rug. And in the corner, the small black trunk with rusty metal edges, the one I've been meaning to open since I arrived, the one she's guarded from all of us as long as we've lived here.

From my pocket I slide the bunch of keys I found last night in Mom's treasure box and try several until the lock clicks open. Slowly I lift the lid, not realizing until I exhale deeply that I've been holding my breath. On top of piles of musty clothing lie several bulging manila folders, bundles of rubber-banded yellowing envelopes, and a collection of decorated metal and cardboard boxes, as well as some unidentifiable mounds covered with tissue paper and tied with cord.

From a manila envelope I pull out a faded photo of a very young woman--a girl, really--in a lacy summer dress and short veil, standing stiffly next to a grinning young man in a high-collared shirt, elaborately knotted tie, and dark suit: my parents on their wedding day. Then from its nest of tissue paper, a beaded, quilled multicolor leather bracelet falls into my lap: the one Mom's lost father guarded for her and that I brought back to her from the past.

Carefully I untie another bundle and unfold the paper: a child's sneaker, about the size that would fit a five-year-old, grimy white, dotted with faded pink and green circles like washed-out confetti. Lorrie's shoe. I open another: a lopsided ceramic clown Pete had made for Mom when he was six, and next to it, a blue plastic barrette, a tiny silver child-sized ring, and a dented Matchbox racing car. Underneath the bundle lies a black-and-white-spotted Composition notebook, the

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kind we used to use in school. I flip the pages, filled with Mom's rounded back-sloping writing, in navy blue ballpoint ink now faded to a reddish purple. It's a journal, one I never knew she kept. The entries are sporadic, each covering many pages. I catch a phrase here, a sentence there, and immediately I know I won't sleep again tonight, not until I've read it cover to cover and have met my mother in a place I've never seen her before.

Finally, at the very bottom, a flat square box. I open it to find a spooled reel of eight-track tape. I know what's on it: myself, at fifteen, playing Chopin. As I stare at the reel, lift it from its box, and turn it so the coppery rings catch the gleam of the lamp, I can hear in my mind the sinuous melody supported by the plangent chords, feel my hands find the phrases and shape the notes into a living, breathing world. In an instant, the space between now and then, a space I'd thought of as quiet and still, begins to move and vibrates like the air after the last gong of a cathedral bell.

CHAPTER I

IN 1970 WE WERE all living on our ranch on the eastern front of the Rockies in northern Montana: my mother, my stepfather Randy, my older sister Jess and I, and my little half-brother and -sister, Lorrie and Pete. The ranch was a half-starved, overgrazed outfit, ten miles outside Redmond, where we'd been living for six years, raising breed cows and selling the calves. Even in the good years, it barely supported us, with its sparse wheat and hay crops and the herd of scrawny cattle nosing its rocky acres for food. It took enormous amounts of work from all of us just to keep from slipping deeper into debt. Every spring, Randy would whip himself into a frenzy of optimism, and every winter he'd sink into self-pity laced with bitterness at the world for not having come through for him. Why did my mother tolerate him? All I could figure out at the time was that it had to do with money, and with a fourteen-year-old's certainty I pronounced this contemptible. It would be many years before I saw that my judgments of them, and of our life, were harshly simplistic.

But back then, all I wanted was to get away, to live somewhere else, to have a life totally different from the one I was living. The best I could do, though, was to escape to my favorite hiding place in the hayloft and read myself into another world. I could do this for hours if no one stopped me. On that particular early October afternoon, I'd only been there for what seemed a few minutes when I heard Jess' voice.

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“Win! Dammit, where are you?”

I could tell she must be standing at the back door, looking over the weedy yard towards the dilapidated barn. If I kept quiet, maybe she'd give up. I knew she wanted me to help her with one of our list of endless chores. She hated the ranch even more than I did, but at sixteen, at least she had friends who could drive out and rescue her on weekends. I was stuck out there under the enormous sky, trudging back and forth between the house and the clothesline, out to the barn or the chicken coop, lugging a ten-pound pail of oats or a sack of chicken feed, assaulted by the odor of manure and chicken shit, pushing through snowdrifts or slogging through mud, wanting to be anywhere but there.

“Win?” Jess stood in the barn door. By raising my head, I could see her slim body backlit by the warm sunlight. She knew where I was; she'd only stopped using my hiding places herself a couple of years before. So I stood up and put my book under my arm.

“I thought so. What are you reading?”

“Jane Eyre.” I held it up.

“Bet you're drooling over Mr. Rochester, huh? ‘Oh, Winona, marry me, I must have you!’” She clasped her hands together and wrenched her face into a parody of a entreaty.

“Oh, shut up!” I didn't want to share the world I'd mixed from images sketched by the story and filled in with my imagined desires. Besides, I was only on Chapter 4; I didn't know who Mr. Rochester was, and I didn't want her to give away the plot.

“Well, come on and bring in the laundry. I've got to get supper started before they get back.” She turned and walked out. I flopped back down and opened the book.

“And don't start reading again!” My skin prickled as it always did when she read my mind. I climbed down the ladder and crossed the stretch of pounded-down weeds between the barn and the clothesline. As I threw the sun-warmed sheets and towels into the clothes basket, inhaling their delicate smell, I looked back at the barn. The late afternoon light had turned the battered, colorless boards a golden bronze, the only time it looked beautiful to me. A wire fence marked off the barnyard behind it, and beyond stretched fields of yellow stubble, then

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the open rolling prairie, ending in a hazy range of bluish hills. A flock of crows croaked their way across the sky, lilac and gold where the sun was just dipping out of sight, darkening to sapphire at the far edge.

A few cows stared mournfully at me over the fence. I stuck out my tongue at them as I hoisted the basket against my chest, just under the small breasts I was still proudly self-conscious about, and lugged it into the big, high-ceilinged kitchen where Jess was wrestling with the rickety ironing board, coaxing it into the one position in which it wouldn't fall down. My heart sank.

“Jess, I'll do the potatoes if you'll iron.”

“Forget it.” She hated ironing as much as I did. “Come on. I warmed up the iron for you.”

She sat down at the table, pushed her long, sable-brown hair behind her ears, and began peeling. Her dark eyebrows pinched momentarily into a frown, then smoothed out over her green-flecked hazel eyes. She was the pretty contrast, I knew, to my plumpish, freckled, frizzy-red-haired self. My body had finished its last three years of awkward changes, but I was still adjusting to my newer self. I kept wishing I'd turn into someone who looked like Jess, but I didn't hold out much hope for it.

I sighed and crossed over to the board, detouring the fifteen feet to the counter to flick on the radio. Mom complained you could get five miles of exercise easy each day just by cooking three meals in our kitchen.

*“Oh bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the coyote howls and the wind blows free.”*

It felt like the coyote was wailing right there in the room.

“Put on something else.” Jess flicked a long snake of potato skin onto the table and dropped a naked lump into the chipped blue bowl in her lap.

I went back and twirled the dial. Hank Williams on one station; Lawrence Welk on another. I settled on Loretta Lynn and snapped a shirt onto the ironing board. Suddenly Jess marched out of the room.

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I didn't ask her why. In the last six months she'd become temperamental, her familiar easy-going self taken over by a touchy, eccentric witch who could be summoned by nothing more than an innocent question or an insignificant demand. I went on ironing. A few moments later, she came back, holding her portable phonograph. I let out a whoop and helped her set it up. The album she'd chosen unleashed a rhythmic subversive beat into the room.

*“Looking for a job in Memphis
Working for the man every night and day...
Rollin', rollin', rollin' on the river.”*

We both swayed in place, hypnotized, chanting the words with half-closed eyes, like ancient priestesses.

*“Heard it through the grapevine
An' I'm just about to lose my mind,
Honey, honey”*

Jess' feet began to form unfamiliar patterns as her body broke into a dance, turning one way, then another. I gaped at her.

“Want me to teach you?” She took my hands. I imitated her movements, slowly at first, then catching the pattern, slipping into the beat like a foot into a comfortable shoe. Touching my hand, then my shoulder, she guided me, approaching then receding. Giddy with movement, we laughed, jiggling our hips from side to side, tossing our heads, Jess' hair flickering in the light from the overhead bulb shaded by a pink glass half-globe.

“What the hell are you doing?”

We froze in mid-step at the clang of Randy's voice. We hadn't heard the front door open, and now Randy's flushed face stared at us from the living room, his eyes half-covered by the V of his frowning eyebrows. Behind him Mom peered anxiously at us, shaking her head warningly in slow motion. Lorrie and Pete held onto her dress, Pete's thumb in his mouth, Lorrie tugging nervously at her hair.

“You’re back early,” I stammered.

Without glancing at me, Randy crossed to the phonograph and snatched the arm away with a scratchy rasp that raised the hair on the back of my neck. Jess cried out as if she’d stepped on a piece of glass. I knew how many hours of weekend work that album had cost her, and I ached to scream insults at Randy, to punch him in the nose. Instead I clutched Jess’ hand. She pulled loose.

“Leave my record player alone!” She stared at him, eyes blazing. Randy’s gray-grizzled sandy hair seemed to rise from his head like electrified shavings.

“I told you not to play that trash in this house, didn’t I?” he barked. Jess said nothing. He took a step toward her. Immediately Mom crossed over to him and put her hand on his arm.

“She didn’t mean to upset you, honey.” I could feel her golden voice like a warm bath on my skin. “Did you, Jess?” Her eyes pleaded with Jess: Do this for me. Jess’ body stayed rigid as a taut wire.

“I can play my own record player if I want to!”

“Not in my kitchen, you can’t!”

Randy’s head jutted forward toward Jess, and his bared teeth glinted. Mom put her arm around him and gently tugged him toward her.

“Come on, honey. Let’s go in the other room. I’ll get you a beer, and the kids can watch *Gunsmoke*.”

At this, the Lorrie and Pete statues came to life and rushed past us into the hall. Randy’s shoulders began to drop slightly.

“Get that thing out of here.” His voice was still harsh, but his body had surrendered to her before he realized it. “And what about the cattle? They have to be fed.”

“The girls will do it.”

They moved toward the door and disappeared. I became aware that I was shaking with rage, as much at Mom as at Randy. At that moment, I hated the honey in her voice, her cowardly fawning on him, her craven disregard of his obvious injustice. Capitulation to a tyrant was worse than the tyranny itself, in my book.

I glanced at Jess, waiting for her signal: revolution or retreat? Her

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face was turned away toward the still-open back door. We could hear Mom murmuring to Randy over the crackly TV voices, and Randy's growled answer. Jess hadn't moved. Her cheeks were wet, her eyes hard, distant. I wanted to hug her, to put my hand on her shoulder like tough guys in the movies did when their buddies had lost someone they loved. Instead I switched on the radio.

"What do you want to hear?"

She sat down slowly at the table, staring at the half-filled bowl. When she finally spoke, her voice was firm.

"You choose." She picked up the knife and began to peel.

I bypassed KCOW, Randy's favorite station, and settled for a top 40s out of Billings, turning the volume so only we could hear it. Then I unplugged her record player and carried it back to our bedroom, centering it carefully in its place of honor on her side of the dresser. Through the window I could see the bright white fingernail-clipping of a moon hanging low in the blue-black sky, waiting to disappear.