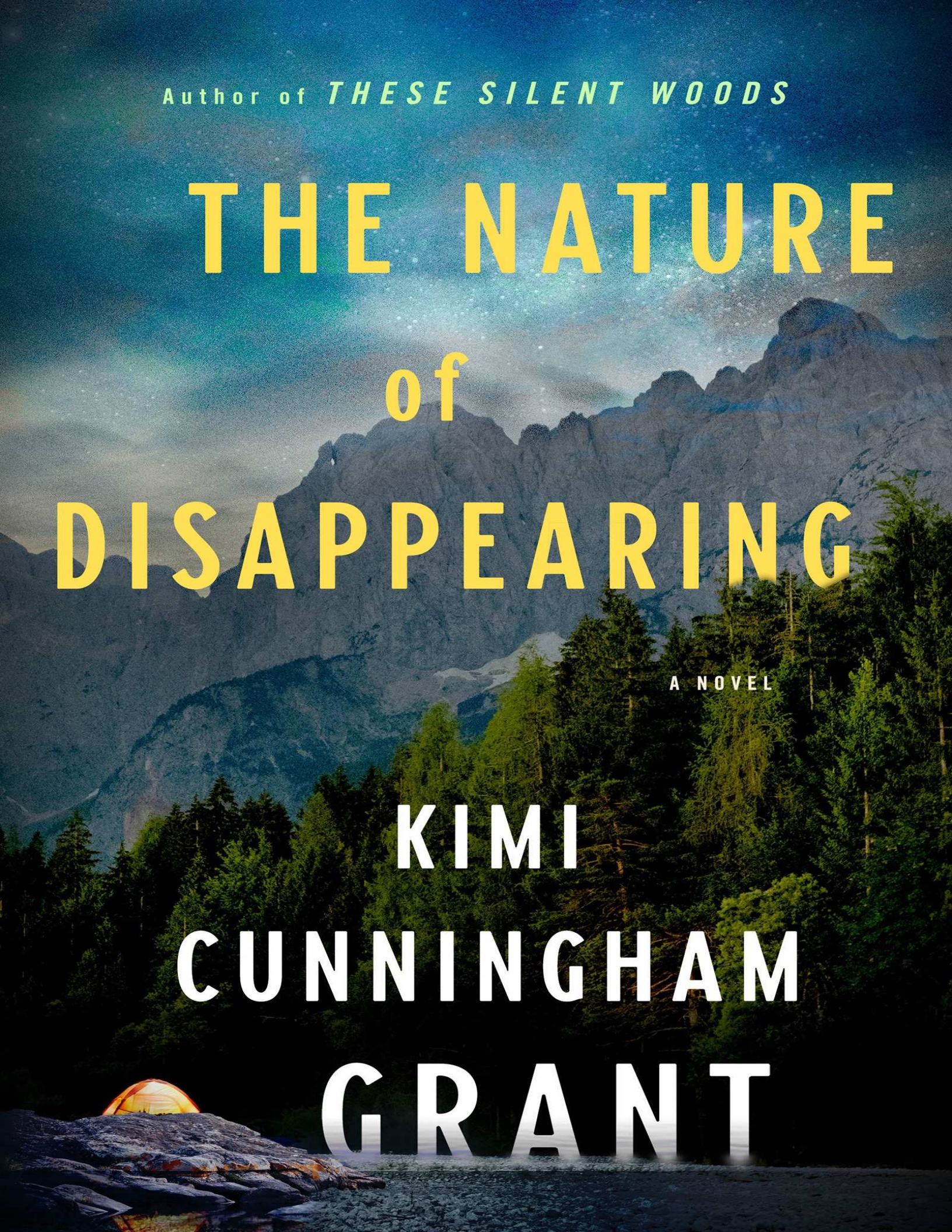


Author of *THESE SILENT WOODS*

THE NATURE
of
DISAPPEARING

A NOVEL

KIMI
CUNNINGHAM
GRANT



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MINOTAUR BOOKS
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For those of you who are in a wilderness

*He found him in a desert land,
And in the howling waste of a wilderness;
He encircled him, He cared for him,
He guarded him as the pupil of His eye.*

—DEUTERONOMY 32:10

The National Wilderness Preservation System is a network of over 111.7 million acres—more area than the state of California—of public land comprised of more than 803 wilderness areas administered for the American people by the federal government. These are special places where nature still calls the shots. Places where people like you, with an appetite for adventure, can find a sense of true self-reliance and experience solitude.

—THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE ON ITS DESIGNATED WILDERNESS AREAS
(SEPTEMBER, 2023)

ONE

SMOKE tinges the world white. It swallows the spired treetops and narrows the canyon ahead. It erases altogether the majestic gray faces of the Obsidians, shrouds the valley, slips up the ravines. Emlyn stands midstream, the river lulling at her thighs, pressing her waders tight.

A shadow overhead, a flash of dark. In a moment it swoops to the water, hard and fast. A bright splash as it hits the surface, then it lifts, flapping higher, its catch secure in its talons. Osprey. Emlyn looks at the client, clambering ahead and sloshing upstream, and wonders if he sees it. Some people, they feel the trout in these waters belong to them and not the birds, and Emlyn has a feeling the client is such a person.

John Thomas is his name, and he seems to hold it against her that the wildfires in California are ruining the cerulean Idaho skies promised on the company website. Earlier, as they'd loaded gear into the truck, he'd waved his hand toward the gray-white space in the distance where the Obsidians hid, veiled in smoke, and, frowning, said, "I thought there were mountains."

He'd arrived fourteen minutes early in an Aston Martin Vantage, teal with a yellow pinstripe down its hood. Emlyn had tried not to stare, which is exactly what a car-loving person like herself was wont to do, and exactly what a person who drove such a car expected people to do. She'd tried not to eye the handcrafted Oyster bamboo rod, which she knew carried a price tag of forty-six hundred dollars, though, in the end, she couldn't keep herself from commenting. And she'd tried not to look too hard at him, John Thomas, maybe ten years her senior but glowing with good looks and vigor, a shining example of how money could prolong youth. He'd climbed out of the Aston Martin, extended a smooth hand, and flashed her a winning smile. "I've heard

great things about you,” he’d said.

To her relief, she’d delivered. Well, that and they’d been lucky. Luck was always part of the story. She’d set him up with a hopper-dropper—the hopper peach with Sharpied dots on its underside, the dropper a zebra nymph, both of which she’d made herself—and the man had caught a fat, glimmering brown trout in a public stretch of the Salmon, early in the day. Later, and to his great delight, he’d taken a small bull trout in a tributary on the Henning Ranch, where Emlyn had permission to fish. She’d cited statistics about the odds of such an accomplishment and snapped a slew of photos before returning it to the cold water.

This is good work, guiding, and she knows it. Spending day upon day where she feels most at ease, in the wild, in a place she is sure is the most beautiful stretch of land in the country, if not the world, and most of the time, she loves it. On the river there is no humdrum, no watching the clock. There’s splendor, there’s variety. Clients of all sorts come to her. Some have never held a fly rod and, enamored with all those gorgeous descriptions in books like *A River Runs Through It* and *The River Why*, want to give it a whirl. She remembers that initial impulse herself, watching her father wade into the water as she sat along shore, knees tucked. Seeing him squint and lean and then set the hook and begin to reel it in. How the fish fought, how her dad didn’t rush, but took his time bringing it in. “Can I try?” she’d asked, and he’d grinned and waved her to the stream. The water cold and soaking through her tennis shoes. She was a girl, then. Eleven. But still she remembers the desire, the sense that she could not just sit on the bank any longer.

And so, when these clients with their intrigue and curiosity pay the shop their mind-boggling fee to spend the day learning, Emlyn gladly accommodates them. She drives them up 75 in her truck, past Selborne hot springs, where the thermal water rises from the earth and spills hot down a golden hillside into the Salmon. She swings left to the dredge ponds, where the client has plenty of room to learn a backcast, and where the trout have been stocked so thickly they swim fin-to-fin, darkening the clear water. She doesn’t mind those days. She doesn’t mind the days when the client is an equal, someone who simply wants knowledge of the area, access, some

recommendations on which flies to try. Sometimes, though, there are John Thomases: entitled jerks who are simply checking off a locale from a list someone posted on the internet. People who don't really love that feeling, how the rest of the world can blur and disappear when you are on the water, but who are after something else, something less. And today is one of those days.

All morning she's been trying to find a word for him. It is something she does, identify one word to summarize a person—one solid, shiny word that really captures someone's essence. Deep down she wants to believe that people are much more complicated than a single word, that perhaps a person doesn't really have an essence at all, but rather essences. Or that maybe a person could be one thing, but then change. Even so, it's a game she plays. But, try as she might, she has not yet come up with John Thomas's word.

★ ★ ★

HE insists on lunch at the Sunny Creek Lodge, which is fourteen miles south of where they are now. Emlyn doesn't want to eat lunch with John Thomas, but unfortunately, this is part of the gig. Schmoozing, chatting, making the client feel like he is sharing a day with an old friend. It's the one part of the job that Emlyn really considers work, and the one part she is not particularly good at. More often than she wishes to admit, this is noted in the survey that clients are asked to complete after their day with each guide. She's aloof, she isn't friendly, she is awkward. She can't really deny any of those things, but still, it stings to read them, and on more than one occasion Oliver, her boss, has asked her to try just a little harder, please. And she does try, she really does, but that tendency to hold everyone and everything at arm's length, to view the world through a lens clouded with suspicion, is so deeply ingrained in her that she isn't sure she will ever be any different.

In the zip pocket of her chest waders Emlyn keeps three things: her Dr. Slick offset nippers; a bottle of Gink; and the emergency flashlight her dear friend, Rev, gave her for Christmas her first year in the valley. Now, she runs her palm over the pocket, feeling the shape of each item beneath the nylon. A habit. She drops her hands to the river, grazing the water. Like always, her left ring finger tingles in the cold. An old wound, a reminder of the past.

Though she is finally in a place where she doesn't think much about that old life, sometimes the finger will remind her of all that she had, once. And all that she did not.

Upstream, John Thomas has managed to reel in yet another fish, and he is struggling to hold it in his left hand, the right hand gripping a phone out at arm's length, taking a photograph of himself. When he releases the fish, she raises a hand, and he starts making his way back downstream to her.

The air quality is poor today, "unhealthy" in the words of the National Weather Service, and on days like this Oliver requires his guides to keep a close eye on the clients, who can easily feel the effects of not only the smoke but also the elevation. "We don't need anyone keeling over on the river," he has told the staff, "not with the closest hospital eighty miles away." She's had John Thomas out on the water for hours now, since dawn, and it is nearly noon.

He splashes closer.

"Cuttie?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says, grinning. "Big, probably twenty-five inches."

Oliver's words scuttle through her mind. *Try a little harder.* "Nice," she says, forcing a smile. She swings her long braid over her shoulder. Even from fifty yards away she could tell that the fish had been much smaller than that.

★ ★ ★

THE Sunny Creek Lodge doesn't take reservations, but there is a tiny booth on the south corner that Roxy, the owner, is usually willing to save for Oliver's guides, if they call ahead. It's an ancient, run-down place that leans to the side, its log and chinking still hanging on from a previous century.

Even on a weekday, lunchtime in summer means a line is snaking its way out the door and into the gravel parking lot. Roxy and two seasonal employees are bustling their way through a dining room crammed with too many booths and tables, red trays propped on their shoulders. Two more employees are in the back, grilling burgers and slicing French fries from big brown bags of Idaho potatoes.

For lunch John Thomas orders a veggie burger topped with jalapeños and figs. He snaps a photo of the plate with his phone and then asks Emlyn to

take one of him as he grins, holding it between both hands. He scowls at her bison burger with a pejorative eye.

Emlyn excuses herself from the table and walks to the counter to pay the bill. She glances at the small television, mounted in the corner above the bar, muted during lunch hour. A fast-food chain alerting its patrons of a widespread *E. coli* outbreak. Summer storms pummeling the Midwest. A white headline at the bottom of the screen: MISSING? PAIR OF #VANLIFE STARS GOES SILENT.

Emlyn pulls her phone from her pocket. She messages Oliver and tells him they'll be back soon. She hands Roxy the check and two twenties, then dumps the change in the old mason glass tip jar. She tucks the receipt in her pocket to turn in later.

And then the television flashes a snapshot of a familiar, gorgeous blonde, leaning against a towering arch in Moab, smiling, a red beanie atop her head. Another photograph: the woman again in the same red beanie, huddled next to a thick, brown-haired man, both draped beneath a bright plaid blanket, the Tetons looming starkly in the background. Emlyn goes still. Then a final photograph, the woman, sunglasses on, standing in front of a gray Mercedes camper van, holding a cast-iron skillet brimming with a glorious array of vegetables.

A chill rolls up Emlyn's spine.

Janessa?

Just last week, her old friend had called while Emlyn was out hiking. They'd chatted for a few minutes—small talk, which was their custom these days—and then Janessa had shifted gears. “There's something I need to tell you,” she'd said, right as Emlyn had come to one of the many inevitable spots in the area that lacked cell coverage and the call had dropped. Hours later, when Emlyn again had service and called back, it had gone straight to voicemail. She'd left a message, but in the days since, she hadn't given it much thought.

The room hums with lunchtime din: forks scraping plates, a baby slapping her hands on the tray of a high chair, a woman laughing at the corner table. “Turn it up,” Emlyn wheezes to Roxy, though the news has trundled on.

Roxy frowns and leans closer. “Sorry, what?”

Emlyn flaps toward the television, hands shaking. “The news, can you turn it up?”

Roxy slings her towel over her shoulder and searches behind the bar, sliding glasses, clinking bottles. Now, on the screen: some senator, embroiled in a scandal. When Roxy finds the remote, she holds it toward the television, turning up the volume. A patron close by looks over his shoulder and hollers to turn that garbage down, please; he is trying to have lunch in peace.

“Did you catch the story?” Emlyn asks Roxy. “The missing couple. Did you hear, did you get the names, anything?” She lifts her Buff and dabs her neck.

Roxy dries a glass and flips it upside down. “Sorry.”

“How about earlier? Before lunch? The story about the missing couple.”

“No, kinda busy here,” she says, eyebrows raised. (Roxy’s word: *plucky*.) But, looking closer at Emlyn, she tilts her head. “You all right?”

“What?”

“Here, sit down a minute.” Roxy gestures toward an empty stool.

Emlyn waves her off, searching the scrolling ticker for details. It can’t have been her, she reasons. The pictures flashed quickly; she had maybe four or five seconds to look. And it’s been years since she’s actually seen her old friend. *Friend*. Is that the word? Yes, of course. In fact “friend” was almost too flimsy a word. They’d been more. Confidantes, allies, sisters.

And then they’d been less.

They’d drifted apart, Janessa had moved away, they’d had a falling-out. All of these things were true, and yet they didn’t really explain what happened. Nor has Emlyn ever been entirely sure of the order in which those events occurred. She has her suspicions, of course. She has her regrets. How many times has she lamented over the ifs: if things had gone differently, if Tyler hadn’t left her in the woods, if only she’d listened to Janessa from the start, if, if—

Emlyn had hoped the two of them could make amends; she wanted to rebuild. From her point of view, that’s what the two of them were in the midst of doing, now. After a period of silence, she and Janessa had started to call each other on occasion. They sent each other birthday cards and funny

Valentines. Janessa had mailed her a Christmas gift: lip balm, fancy tea, cookies in a beautiful tin.

But things had never been the same, since that summer, five years ago.

Emlyn reaches out and grips the red countertop.

John Thomas rises from the booth, scuffs his way toward her and stands far too close. “Ready?”

She blinks, struggling to reorient herself.

He flashes a wide grin at Roxy. “The burger was exquisite,” he says, and then checks his reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

“Patronizing,” Emlyn says aloud, the word swimming to her (“condescending; demonstrating a pompous attitude toward others”).

“What’s that?” John Thomas says, turning from the mirror.

Flustered, Emlyn points to the television. “That reporter,” she tells him.

★ ★ ★

ON the drive back to the fly shop, John Thomas scrolls through his phone and moans about the poor reception. He talks again about his bull trout and the enormous cutthroat with which he’d ended his day on the water. Emlyn tries to listen enough to seem decent, but her mind whirls and burns.

They were two separate stories, she tells herself. Janessa isn’t missing, Janessa wouldn’t live in a van, Janessa wouldn’t post pictures for the whole world to see all the intimacies of her life.

Well. Maybe she *would*.

There’s so much about Janessa’s life Emlyn doesn’t know anymore.

When at last they pull into the parking lot back in Heart, Emlyn climbs out of the truck and shakes John Thomas’s hand. He asks for a photo with her, which she’s sure he’ll post online, tagging the fly shop. Oliver lives for these moments—his business has boomed since a certain movie star tagged the shop two summers ago, a fact that the guides are reminded of every June. Emlyn wants to refuse. She’s never liked the notion of people documenting their lives (and, in turn, hers) for the world to see. But, remembering that there will be a client survey, that she will have an employee review next month, she agrees. She leans her head close to John Thomas’s and forces a smile while he snaps a picture, and then says, as sincerely as she can, “I’m

glad we could do this.”

TWO

AFTER what had happened with Tyler, after death had licked at Emlyn's door and she'd leaned close and then finally decided to pull back, the deal she made with herself was to break things off entirely. A clean, cold, shattering severance. There was no middle ground, no standing between that old life and her new one, a foot in each world. The only thing to do was to slough it off entirely, every last inch of it, and try to piece together some new version of herself. She did not tell Tyler where she went. She did not answer phone calls from him or any of their mutual acquaintances. She did not do any online searches of his name. She did not think of him or the life they'd had together at all. Well, she tried not to. She wasn't that far from where they'd lived together—an hour-and-a-half drive—and she was even closer to his family's cabin at Patten Lake, where they'd spent holidays and weekends. But if she wanted to build a new life for herself, the first step was setting boundaries, and those boundaries were strict.

With Janessa, Emlyn had made an exception. If it hadn't been for Janessa, Emlyn might be dead.

Now, as she sits in her truck in the fly shop parking lot, Emlyn unlocks her phone and types Janessa's name into a search engine. Immediately the headline from CNN appears, and she clicks on the story. The same images from the diner television fill her small screen. Emlyn stares at the photographs, absorbing the terrible reality: it is indeed her old friend. Dread lodges in her throat, the phone trembles in her hands. The story is brief. The "beloved social media starlet" has been silent for nearly a week, and friends and family have not heard from her. That's all. Emlyn dials Janessa. The call goes straight to voicemail. She hangs up and begins scrolling through her list

of recent incoming calls. Oliver, Rev, John Thomas, Oliver again. There. Janessa. She counts the days and realizes it's been exactly a week since that dropped call. Anxiety churns along her skin. She drops the phone on the seat beside her, starts the engine, and heads home.

★ ★ ★

HOME, for the moment, is six miles up a dirt road that begins four miles north of town. She has been here for a while, in her Airstream, and the truth is it's beautiful, and she'd like it if she never had to leave. She takes a very quick shower and then fills the kettle from a plastic jug. She lifts the front of the bed and pulls her Mathews bow from the storage compartment and hauls it outside. From the cabinet she plucks an enamel mug, blue with white specks, and makes a cup of tea. Is there something she should do? Call the police? Post her contact information in the comments on the CNN website? She turns off the stove, leaning against the small dining table, dunking the tea bag up and down and watching the colors bleed into the water.

At some point during the afternoon, a wind drifted in from the north, lifting the smoke and carrying it southward, and now the sun hangs bright in the sky. The Obsidians have reappeared: black, austere, rimmed in white. The colors emerge in the valley, green and gold, and the light catches the world aglow.

With her tea, Emlyn steps out of the Airstream. She scans the topography, searching. A habit. This is home, now, this wild and magnificent landscape, and there is little here that scares her. Wolves are around—she saw one once, on a trail camera she set up for hunting season, and she hears them often at night—but they are scarce and elusive and pose no threat. Black bears are not uncommon, but they can be spotted a long way off here in the sagebrush, and she is always careful not to leave any food out. Mountain lions, though, are a different story. Attacks are extremely rare, she knows that, but still.

The same breeze that swept the smoke from the valley now whips at the trailer's awning. She wraps her fingers around the mug, breathes in the sagebrush, and slumps into a collapsible camp chair. She picks up her phone and sends a quick message to Janessa: *Are you okay?* She clicks send, then

puts the phone and the tea on the steps of the Airstream. She takes her bow from the case. Twenty yards away, she has a target set up. She stands, feet shoulder width apart, and draws back. Her fingertips graze the side of her mouth. All summer she's been practicing, building up her strength to be able to pull the recommended fifty pounds. She's guided hunts before, but for the first time since she arrived in the valley, she drew a coveted elk tag, which means she can hunt them herself this year. Her heart is set on harvesting one, or at least being strong enough to give it a try. An elk could feed her and Rev for the year to come, and the idea that she could do that, that she could in some small way repay Rev for all she has done over the past three years, has motivated Emlyn to work hard since the snow began to melt.

★ ★ ★

SHE'S still on her first round when she hears it: the distant roar of tires crushing gravel, the heave of the engine as it climbs the ridge. A vehicle. She turns and watches as a cloud of dust lifts in the distance, billowing upward. Hikers, maybe. There is a trailhead a mile past her. Or possibly campers, looking for a good spot with privacy and a view. She nocks another arrow, pulls back, exhales, shoots.

At last a white Jeep emerges from around the bend, and it slows and pulls over in front of the Airstream. Varden. Hands on the steering wheel, he raises his pointer finger. *Decent* is Varden's word, and not in the sense of "passable" or "tolerable"—which does not suit at all—but "marked by goodness, integrity, and honor." That definition summarizes Varden perfectly.

"Emlyn," he says, climbing out. He is in his usual Forest Service attire: stiff dark green pants, stiff gray-green top, his name printed in gold lettering on a name tag fixed to his pocket.

"Varden," she says, smiling.

He leans against the Jeep and folds his brown arms across his chest. "How many pounds you pulling?"

"Forty-six. Not enough yet."

"That's good. Real good." He takes his hat off and sets it on the hood. "You'll get there, I'm sure. You set your mind to something, nothing can stop

you.”

Her heart hammers at the compliment. “Thanks.”

“You still doing your push-ups?”

“Sure. You?”

He nods. They started doing them together, last winter. “Looks like a good group,” he says, gesturing toward the target, where four of Emlyn’s arrows have landed in a tidy, tight circle.

She sets the bow in the case and picks up her mug of tea. “You want a drink?”

“Thanks, not today.”

“Well, I know you didn’t drive all the way up here just to say hello.”

Varden takes a deep breath and wipes his brow. “No.”

Emlyn knows the real reason, and she feels sorry to be doing this to him again, making him correct her. She knows it’s the part of his job that he likes the least—policing, enforcing—and she knows he feels especially awkward about it because it’s her.

“Been too long, Em.” He shakes his head. “Got people complaining.”

“Who’s complaining?”

“You’ve been here almost a month, Emlyn. Limit’s ten days now. You know that.”

She rolls her eyes. “Almost a million acres of wilderness, and still people can’t mind their own business.”

“Well, maybe if you’d picked some hard-to-reach place with no view, nobody would even notice. But this spot, it’s desirable.” He steps away from her and turns to look at the soft, rolling hills just below, and then the sprawling valley, gold with the setting sun, and the stark and startling Obsidians beyond all of that. “Which I know is why you picked it. I don’t blame you. Best view this side of the summit. But still. There are rules. How do you even stay out here so long?”

She shrugs and looks beyond Varden at the hill that rises higher and higher, the game trail that winds west and out of sight. Every Wednesday after dark she hooks up the Airstream and hauls it down to the national forest dump station to empty and fill her tanks. And no, she does not leave the required ten dollars in the little metal box next to the hose.

“I don’t like this any more than you do,” Varden says.

“I know.”

“Bring it down to Rev’s place for a while. She’ll always make room.”

Rev is what everyone calls her, though Emlyn knows her real name is Ruth, and she isn’t even a real reverend, just someone who’s always willing to listen and pray—at least that’s how she explained it to Emlyn, long ago. Ever since that first winter, Emlyn has spent the coldest months down at Rev’s, in one of the cabins that sit empty after tourist season.

“I’ll be down. Soon.”

“She misses you.” He kicks a stone. “So do I.”

Varden rents one of Rev’s cabins year-round, and Emlyn loves winters with the two of them. She loves how they took her in, no questions asked, how they folded her right into themselves, back when she was alone and adrift and nearly dead.

“Anyhow, you’ll move?”

She looks at her watch. “Tomorrow. Is that all right?”

Varden nods. “That’ll do.” He turns to go. “They stocked Tatum Lake a few days ago, with a helicopter. I might hike up, wet a line. You want to come along?”

Varden loves her, maybe. And she loves him, too, or wants to, but the truth is that she’s a mess, and she isn’t worthy of a man like Varden. From a distance, he cannot see this, but if she lets him get close enough, he will. And then he will leave her. In a kind way, yes. He would make it about himself, or some external detail. But she knows it would be because of her. If there’s one thing her twenty-eight years have taught her, it’s that there are people in this world who inspire loyalty and devotion, and there are people who are forgettable and leavable. She is the latter. A stepping stone, a place marker, a seasonal employee. This is what will happen. This is what always happens. And, though she can bear many things, Emlyn cannot bear to lose Varden, and then Rev, and this whole community that circled around her like matron elephants when she had nothing.

“I think I have to work,” she says, which is a lie.

“I’ll keep asking, you know,” he says.

“Will you?” Her voice sounds hopeful, she hears it. Maybe a little