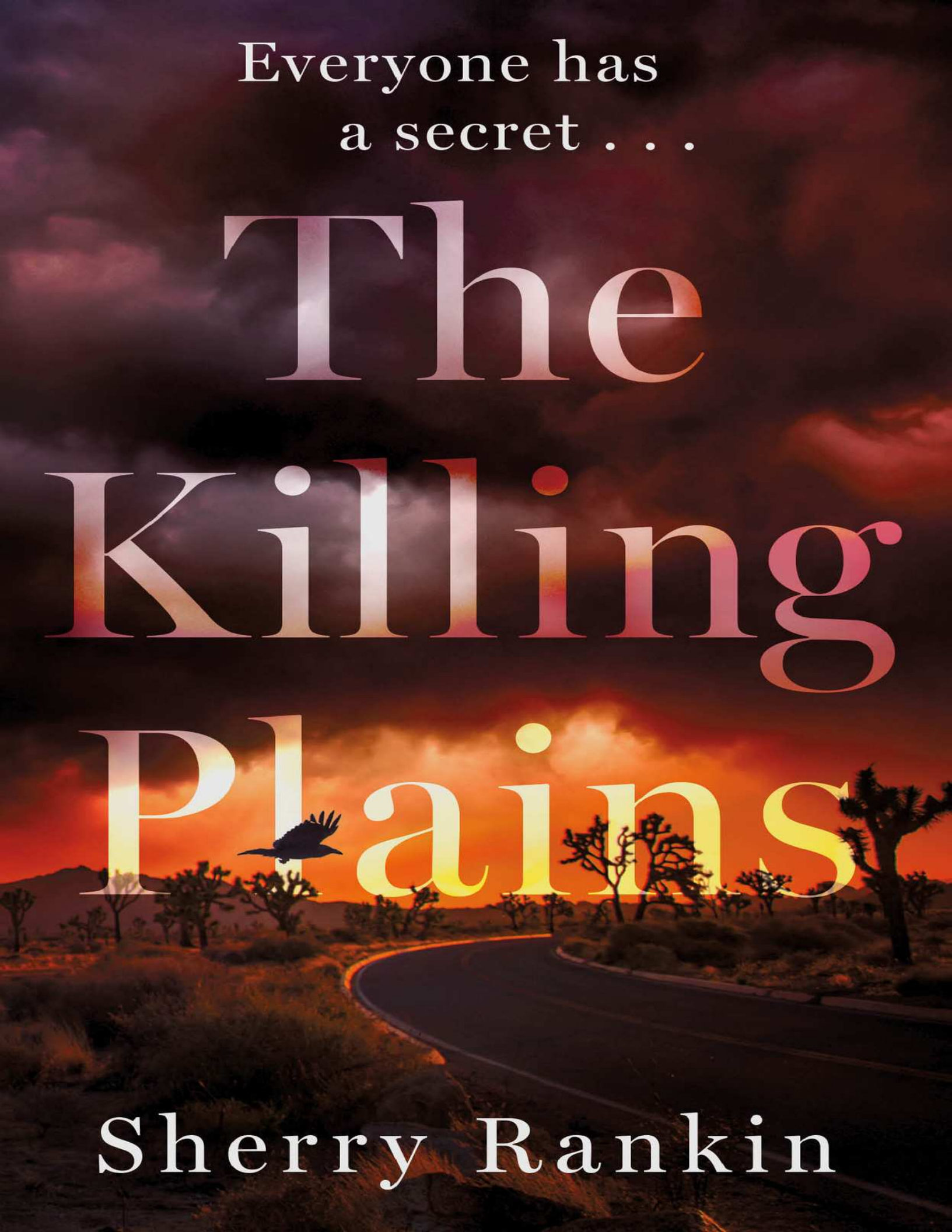


Everyone has
a secret . . .

The Killing Plains

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape at sunset. A winding asphalt road curves through the foreground. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, with a bright orange and yellow glow from the setting sun. Silhouettes of Joshua trees and a bird in flight are visible against the bright sky.

Sherry Rankin

The Killing Plains

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 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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For Emily

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Prologue

August 24, 1998

The vultures were waiting that evening—dozens of them riding the thermals high above his head, elegant and still as leaves on water, reflecting a ragged, wheeling crown around the dark form in the pond. Others had settled in the spindly cottonwoods that ringed the shore—so many that the branches sagged under their weight and the ground beneath the trees was painted white with their droppings. They were used to him now. As he emerged through the dry grass with the pack slung over his shoulder, they barely glanced his way but remained focused on their business, hissing and jostling one another for position, close enough that he could see the dust on their wings and the skin of their naked heads, as red and wrinkled as burned flesh.

The birds had been gathering for days. Unable to reach their prize and unwilling to leave it, they eyed him coolly, patiently, during his daily visits. But today was different. They sensed it. As he unzipped his pack and sat to pull on the waders, the vultures ruffled their heavy wings, and when he clambered back to his feet, fumbling to adjust the shoulder straps, a few let out hoarse, expectant croaks.

He picked up the bolt cutters and edged down the bank. In the hoof-pocked mud, dozens of coyote tracks, narrower and more delicate than a dog's, traced a complicated braid along the shoreline. Like the birds,

they'd been drawn to the water by the smell of death, which the breeze carried across the sprawling ranchland.

The gorge rose in his throat. Gripping the bolt cutters, he pushed through the reeds into the murky, waist-high water.

The corpse bobbed on its back in the center of the pond, the heavy chain around the torso inadequate to counter the buoyancy of decay. The buttoned shirt strained against the bloat, and the elastic of the socks cut deeply into the swollen, purple flesh. Small fish and turtles had been diligent in their work. He tried not to look at the face.

"It's not Adam anymore," he whispered to himself as he worked the bolt cutters.

Once freed of the chain, the body floated easily across the surface of the pond. The water churned with silt as he struggled up the bank, cursing and grunting, the blackflies rising like smoke from the thick, sucking mud. After falling several times, he managed to tow his burden into the grass.

For a while, he sat, exhausted, not looking at what lay motionless beside him, keeping his eyes fixed on the sun as it sank towards the distant bluffs. He had planned this for days, but now he felt a strange reluctance. It had been peaceful, somehow, the ritual of his daily visits.

Unhooking the waders' straps, he dug into his pocket to find the thing he had brought with him. He unrolled it and laid it carefully on his knee. It had gotten damp in his climb up the bank. He sat for several minutes, smoothing the velvety fur until it was dry.

Finally, from another pocket he produced a length of pale chiffon ribbon, shimmering and pink in the waning light. His hands shook, but he managed to roll up the small, furred object, tie it with the ribbon, and tuck it into the dead boy's hand.

He looked up. The sun had vanished behind the bluffs, and the light was fading fast. With a sigh, he clambered to his feet and walked quickly away through the waving grass. The hiss and squabble of the birds began almost at once behind him, but he kept his eyes fixed on the path ahead.

A few minutes later, as he stepped onto the road, he heard a distant coyote begin to wail.

Chapter 1

September 29, 2018

Pressing his forehead against the cool glass wall, Willis Newland squinted into the gloom of the enclosure. Delilah was playing hide-and-seek again. No matter. He would look till he found her. He needed her comfort tonight. And he could be as patient as she.

Willis wasn't sure how long he'd been standing in front of the herpetarium. Hours, at least. It was after nine o'clock—he knew that without looking. There had been no clocks in his cell, so he'd gotten used to telling time by the feel of the air. Every moment had its own distinct texture, smell, weight. Especially after dark.

“Yo, pervert,” Homer used to call from the top bunk. “What time is it?”

And Willis, lying in the gloom on the thin, hard mattress, always knew, which made Homer chuckle. “You the smartest dumbass I ever met.”

Homer hadn't slept well on the inside. And Willis hadn't either, for the first year or two, though eventually he got used to the close quarters and clamor and relentless sameness of the days. It was funny, though, how prison followed you home. Lately, he was lucky if he got a couple hours a night. The ranch seemed too quiet for sleeping, now—or if not quiet, the wrong kind of noisy, at least. Coyotes and crickets instead of shouts and clanging metal.

So much had changed. So much *could* change. With no one to tell him what to eat or when to sleep, no one to turn off his lights and lock him inside—the options were endless and disorienting. Like one of those choose-your-own-adventure books Momma had brought him while he was away.

Plus, everything was too big, somehow. The sky seemed vast enough to crush him into the dirt. And he got dizzy thinking of all that land, stretching in every direction outside his door. Nowadays, he stayed in the cabin with the curtains drawn to shut out the thousands of acres of tumbled rock and buffalo grass and mesquite—and most of all, the old stock pond, down at the southern tip of the ranch.

The pond. It was miles away over rough terrain. But Willis could feel it there, like a dark, liquid eye, watching him.

As a kid—back before the trouble—he used to like the pond. He remembered going there with his brothers to catch frogs and grass snakes. And when he got older, he'd go by himself to hide in the tall grass and peer down the hill at the boys from town who came there to swim. He didn't want to hurt them. He just liked to watch their white bodies flashing in the sunlight as they roughoused and splashed. Then, one time, they saw him.

“Freak! Pervert!” they screamed.

He went home that day with black eyes and two cracked ribs.

“What happened?” Momma asked over and over.

“I fell off the four-wheeler,” he said. But he could tell by the creases between her eyebrows that she knew he was lying.

“Willis, you have to be careful. Don't you remember, after last time—that time at church—how people talked?” Momma always referred to it this way. She didn't like to say the Carroway boy's name—didn't like to remind Willis, or herself, of what had happened.

Momma's fears proved justified. News of his encounter with the boys at the pond spread like a grassfire. When his father heard, the beating he gave Willis hurt worse than anything the boys had done.

Willis learned his lesson. For two years, he kept away from the pond, at least in daylight, though sometimes he'd go after dark, when he knew he'd have the place to himself. Until the night they came for Adam's body. Willis heard the sirens over the hill, saw the blue and red lights reflected off the low-scudding clouds.

"Stay in the cabin, Willis," Felix, the ranch foreman, told him. "Don't come out for nothin'."

Willis obeyed, slipping through the door into the dim, humid herpetarium. Delilah seemed to understand his terror. She came to him and slid into his lap, then up his torso, tickling the stubble on his jaw with her flickering tongue. But he couldn't hide forever. The police came the next morning. As they put Willis into the cruiser, his father watched through slitted eyes while Momma stood behind him, her face twisted into a grimace of fear that Willis never forgot, though twenty years had passed since that terrible day.

Willis remembered the time following his arrest as a series of rooms, cramped and windowless, some with tables and chairs, some with beds and medical equipment. All were painted the same cold gray, lit with the same cold light. There'd been a parade of police and lawyers and people in lab coats. He remembered lying still on a hard table while a machine somehow took a picture of his brain. In the cramped gray rooms, they asked him questions he didn't know how to answer. And at the end of that time, in a bigger gray room, a judge stared down at him the way people stared into the big pit of snakes at the Rattlesnake Rodeo.

After the sentencing, his father never visited. But Momma came to see him every week, and his brothers came sometimes, too. Of his three brothers, Willis looked forward to Randy's visits most. Russ and Lowell never had much to say. But Randy would talk to him like he used to, before the trouble. Was Willis getting enough to eat? Was anybody bothering him? Did he need anything? And he told stories about his job at the *Houston Chronicle*, and about his family—his wife, Colly, the detective. And their daughter, Victoria. And later on, little Satchel,

Victoria's baby boy, who was born with all the medical problems. Randy even gave him pictures to stick on the walls of his cell. He made Willis feel like he was still part of a family, one that would welcome him back if he ever came home.

But home wasn't like Willis remembered it. His father was dead. Randy was dead. And Victoria, too. Momma was an old lady, now. And Felix, though still ranch foreman, was too arthritic to do much anymore and had handed off most of his duties to his nephew Pete, who avoided Willis and spat in the dirt whenever he saw him.

There were nieces and nephews Willis had never met—never could meet, now, the court order said—though sometimes he caught glimpses of them splashing in the pool or playing on the tennis courts behind the big house. They were all there tonight—his surviving brothers and their families—for Momma's birthday party. Willis could hear the music drifting down the hill.

Tomorrow, when the children were gone, Momma would invite him to the house for leftover birthday cake. She would tell him all about the festivities, if the police hadn't arrested him by then.

On Willis's first day home from prison, Felix had told him to be careful. "Stay near the cabin—and keep away from that damn pond."

A needless warning. Willis's skin crawled at the mere thought of its dark water. For six months, he never went near it. Never went anywhere. And yet history was repeating itself, like a scary movie he'd seen once but was being forced to watch again.

He'd spent the day at the police station, answering the Rangers' questions, though they never seemed to believe him. Just like before, they hooked him to a machine that could tell if he was lying. They asked if he'd killed a boy and left him by the pond—though this time the boy's name was Denny, not Adam.

"No." He made his voice as calm and flat as he could. But the Rangers kept asking, using different words, trying to trick him.

Finally, they brought him home. “We’ll be back with the handcuffs, soon,” they said.

“Don’t worry,” Felix told him after the Rangers drove away. “That means they don’t got nothin’.”

But Willis knew it was just a matter of time.

There was only one thing to do, now. Only with Delilah would he find some final moments of peace. The herpetarium was quiet and warm—a few cubic yards of jungle transplanted as if by magic onto the plains of West Texas. A refuge. Inside it, nothing had changed in twenty years, except Delilah herself.

“Where are you?” Willis’s breath fogged the glass. She was always hard to spot, perfectly camouflaged in the leaf litter or concealed in the shadowy branches above. She could go days without moving. But Willis always found her in the end.

After prison, it had taken him a while to relearn the trick. On his first day home, he’d rushed to the cabin and gone straight to Delilah’s enclosure. But when he put his hand on the glass door, Felix stopped him.

“Best not, till she gets to know you again. I fed her a rabbit, so she shouldn’t be riled. But still . . .”

Willis frowned. “I don’t see her.”

“She’s there, in them leaves.”

But Willis stared for a long time before spotting her. He’d been looking for something too small. She was no thicker than his forearm when he went away. Now, she weighed more than he did, and he’d mistaken her at first for a fallen tree. She’d become a monster. They both had.

“She’ll remember me,” Willis said, opening the door.

He was right. She came to him immediately, sliding across the ground to brush against his leg almost like a puppy, tasting him with her tongue. He could see the lump in her belly where the rabbit was. He laid a hand on the cool, dry skin of her back, the muscles constricting beneath his palm with an unhurried power that sent a shiver up his arm.

“I’ll be damned.” Felix scratched his chin and smiled. “Just you be careful. Don’t never go in there when I ain’t around for backup.”

But Willis trusted her. He always had.

Now, as he wiped the fog off the glass with his sleeve, something caught his attention. In the pool near the back of the enclosure, half-concealed beneath the lily pads, two hooded eyes were watching him. The forked tongue fluttered out, testing the air.

Willis let out a long, slow breath. “Found you,” he whispered and opened the door.

Chapter 2

March 4, 2019

Colly Newland stood on the porch of the old farmhouse, cradling a cup of coffee and staring out across the fields. The sun was rising, huge and orange, through a sickle-shaped gap in the distant bluffs, glittering and flashing on the spinning blades of the wind turbines that lined the heights. Mist drifted above the fence line, and a rich, loamy scent of damp earth hung in the air, along with a sharp chemical smell—the ranchers spraying the winter wheat.

Colly shifted uneasily. Beneath the squabbling of crows in the field next to the house, a heavy, aching quiet thrummed in her ears. Accustomed to the hum and rumble of Houston, she found the silence unnerving.

Twenty-five years ago, when Randy first mentioned bringing her home to meet his family, he'd warned her: "West Texas can be a little overwhelming if you're not used to it—all the space and silence. And then there's my family."

"Crazy?" she teased. "I can deal with crazy."

"Complicated. I just want you to know what you're getting into."

"All families are complicated."

"Half of Crescent Bluff works for my father, so being a Newland there—you're under a microscope. Everyone's angling for something. And the family's like a spiderweb you can't escape."

“You escaped. So did Russ.”

“Our bodies got out, for now. But up here . . .” Randy tapped his forehead and shrugged. “At least Russ and I tried. Willis and Lowell will be stuck there forever.”

Colly hadn’t taken his warnings seriously at the time. They were both twenty-one, graduating from college. She was going to be an FBI profiler and Randy a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist. They’d get married, move out east—to Washington, or New York, maybe. Reinvent themselves. Back then, it seemed inconceivable that anything could stand in their way.

But life hadn’t followed the script they’d written for it. Colly remembered with painful clarity precisely when their dreams slipped through their fingers, though neither of them recognized the moment’s full significance at the time. She’d been twenty-six, standing in her patrol uniform in the kitchen of their first little apartment, stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce and holding two-year-old Victoria on one hip. They’d just given their landlord thirty days’ notice and were packing to move to D.C.

Randy came into the kitchen and sat down heavily. His face was bleak. He stared at the linoleum. “Colly, I can’t go.”

“What?”

He swallowed. “Momma’s going to need the emotional support. Willis, too. Prison’ll be tough on him. I’m sorry.”

Colly laid down the spoon and brushed her thick, dark hair away from her face, working to keep her voice calm. “Does it have to be you?”

“Dad’s no help. Russ is in South Korea, and Lowell’s a self-absorbed prick.”

“Are you saying you want to move home?”

Victoria began to fuss. Colly was gripping her too tightly. She set her down, and the child immediately began to toddle to her father.

“God, no. But I’d like to be close enough to get home on the weekends when they need me—just till everything’s more settled.” He stooped to pick up Victoria. “We both have good jobs. It won’t kill us to stay in Houston a little longer.”

He'd been wrong, though. *A little longer* became two decades, and staying in Houston *had* killed them—had killed Randy and Victoria, at least. And now here was Colly, on her own at forty-six and just as entangled in the Newland web as ever.

Behind her, the screen door slapped open, as loud as a gunshot. Colly jumped, sluicing coffee over her hand. A young boy in black pants and a rumpled t-shirt was watching her from the doorway with solemn blue eyes.

“Ow! Satchel, why?” Colly shook her burned fingers to cool them.

“Sorry.” The boy anxiously chewed his lip, a habit that had left one side of his mouth perpetually chapped. He was seven years old but small for his age, with white-blond hair and skin so pale it seemed translucent. A timid boy—so much like Victoria in appearance but so unlike her in temperament. Victoria had been fearless. “I’m ready to go, Grandma.” He squinted into the sunrise.

“Get out of the light,” Colly snapped. “What on earth are you wearing?”

He stepped back into the shadows. “My trilobite shirt.”

“You slept in that. Go get a fresh one from your suitcase.”

He shook his head. “It’s my lucky shirt.”

“Then you shouldn’t have slept in it.” They stared at each other. After a moment, Colly checked her watch and sighed. “Fine. Take it off. I’ll look for an iron.”

The darkened foyer of the house was cluttered with dim shapes that slowly coalesced into a jumble of half-unpacked luggage as Colly’s eyes adjusted. The boy was bouncing on his toes beside a large suitcase, his now-naked torso glowing in the dim light.

“Maybe the iron’s in here?”

Colly shook her head. “I didn’t bring one—Uncle Russ said this house was fully furnished. Go brush your teeth and get your sun-sleeves and hat. I’ll look around.”

The boy tossed Colly his shirt and raced for the stairs.