



## CHAPTER 1

### Late October 1972—Flagstaff, Arizona

The sorrel bay mare stood outside of the iron gate at the ranch house where Evie lived. Her winter coat had grown thick and shaggy in the weeks she had been on the run. The horse watched curiously as golden lights turned on from inside the home, while the chill from a starry sky began to settle in for the night.

She had followed the scent of water in the pipes for miles, carried by a North Wind until she was stopped by a fence. Her eyes widened, nostrils flaring, unsure of the soft voices, smells from a chicken noodle casserole bubbling in the oven, and the sounds of laundry whipping on a clothesline in the wind.

The mare paced. Memories of what fences had taken were still fresh. Suspicious of everything, the one thing she knew for certain was that there was water. Her breastbone pressed against the top rail, her heart pounding against the wood. She needed help and, more importantly, to look into another pair of eyes.





It was late October in northern Arizona, and the winds that never stopped blowing had stripped away what little moisture was left. Creeks and riverbeds had cracked open. The landscape cried out for water—even the high-country snows were late to arrive. The San Francisco Peaks were bare, something that the old barbers down on North Leroux Street couldn't recall ever seeing this late into the season. Tufts of brownish grass sprouted here and there, like hair from a crusty mole, and it felt like the Coconino Ponderosa Pine Forest could ignite from the embers of a single cigarette.

"Dat hor," eighteen-month-old Christopher pointed from his highchair to the backdoor, Cheerio in hand. "Dat hor."

The boy laughed in that free, uninhibited way that babies do and offered the Cheerio to whoever was outside of the yellow eyelet curtains.

Nineteen-year-old Evie tilted her head to listen, kitchen sponge still in hand. She noticed that the safety chain was off. Her stomach dropped. Shit. She had gotten sloppy. For over a year, she had cultivated the habit of checking and rechecking windows and doors, though one swift kick could have burst it open, safety chain or not.

"Dat hor," he insisted.

She raised a finger to her lips, listening.

"See hor." His blonde curls shook with conviction. Lips slick with milk, the toddler bucked in the highchair and lobbed the sippy cup onto the floor with a frustrated bellow.

Her eyes darted to the window, primed for Jesse's outline—a father the boy had never seen.

Christopher reached toward the door. "See hor."

There had been no gravelly tire sounds or footsteps. She knew Caleb's truck and Donna's, too—the only other residents on Fort Valley Road at the base of the San Francisco Peaks. Only a handful of strange cars had shown up over the past year, tourists who had missed the turnoff to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon.

And while Jesse wasn't sneaky, he was armed.

"Shit." She could barely breathe. It was only a matter of time before her ex-husband discovered her living in the high country just ten miles out of town, not back in Queens, New York, like she led him to believe.

"Shit," the boy repeated.



The marriage had ended the year before at eleven thousand feet on a dusty mountain road. Jesse had reached over her lap, flipped open the passenger door, and shoved her out—all because the golden aspen leaves had fallen before he had had the chance to enjoy them. People dumped cats and dogs on Mt. Humphreys so they could never find their way home, but she never imagined it would be her.

She was eighteen, eight months pregnant, and, of course, it was her fault—along with bed sheets not tucked taut enough to bounce off a quarter, toast too dark, and, Evie swore, that if he thought about it long enough, the start of World War II.

He drove off in a fury. Dust devils disbursed as quickly as the marriage, and there was danger everywhere after two tours of duty as a door gunner on a Huey helicopter.

"Keep going, fucker!" she called after him, praying he wouldn't loop back.

His engine whined in the thin mountain air. She waited, primed for anything, ears glued for sounds that he had passed the eleven-thousand-foot marker where it became too narrow for a U-turn or for the eerie silence that comes in the moments after a vehicle goes airborne over the edge before it slams into a dusty grave below.

Perhaps it was the end he sought. Perhaps the one she wished for him, too. Maybe her only release from the dark tangle that had started ten months before, when she had agreed to a lunch date at Fat Carlos' Burrito on North San Francisco Street. They sat across from the Sears Catalog Store in downtown Flagstaff, where she worked after quitting the university to take telephone orders from newlyweds she longed to be.

Maybe it was Jesse's only release, too, from the tangle of darkness that jolted him alive in the air outside of his mother's body, and again in the thickness of the Mekong Delta when he deplaned with his squad—a shock to a desert kid from a dusty, red, copper-mining town in southeastern Arizona.

She looked out past the cliff's edge. Six thousand feet below, the colors of the Hopi Wupatki Pueblo glowed cinnamon with the sunset, stretching to the Tall House that had stood since 500 A.D.



To her west was the Painted Desert, and darkening to the east were the Four Corners of the Navajo Nation—the meeting point of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah.

At the sight of the earth's curvature, she drew in a sharp breath, confused as to how such magnificence had been the backdrop for such ugliness. It was a long way down the cold mountain road in the dark without her coat, which was left in Jesse's car. Her best hope was to find Caleb, her college friend who squatted in an old homestead on Hart Prairie, one that the U.S. Forest Service had written off as derelict and that the Selective Service would never find.



Evie set down the sponge and looked at the wall phone next to the door, wondering if Mountain Bell had forgotten to disconnect it. She tiptoed over and lifted the receiver—dead. Too many unpaid New York long-distance charges had finally caught up.

Hoisting Christopher up, she wiped his mouth as he wriggled to get free. “Dat! See?” he chirped as if she hadn’t heard it the first time.

Evie edged up alongside the door. “Never face a door in case the person on the other side is armed,” Her cop cousin Demos had advised from a hospital bed after being shot.

She peeked through the ruffled curtains without disturbing them. No sign of Jesse. Fifteen acres of old horse paddock stretched right up to the back door. When the place had been a working ranch, the owners could step right into the company of horses. It had sat empty for more than a year; they hadn’t the heart to sell and were only too happy to have her as a tenant.

The door squeaked as it opened, and she stepped out, breathing in the crisp air at the sight of the horse.

“Oh my god, look,” she exclaimed, repositioning Christopher on her hip as she walked away from the door. Her pant legs swished through dried sagebrush as she strode to the back gate.

She stopped a few yards from the mare. They watched each other.

“Where’d you come from?” Her voice softened, and she momentarily forgot about Jesse. “Did you live here?”

The horse glanced briefly at the paddock and then looked away.

“Guess not.”

“Horsey,” the boy shrieked, pointing.

“You smartie,” she tickled his belly in relief as he chuckled.

“How did you know there was a horsey out here?”

Evie wondered what to do. “Are you lost?”

The horse looked around as if considering it.

“Lost?” the boy echoed, turning his head and mimicking her questioning gesture.

The animal’s hip bones jutted out like knees under a thin blanket, the hollows of her skull visible through taut skin. A skirt of mud flanked her sides, remnants of previously sleeping in a creek bed. Her jet-black tail nearly dragged the ground, plastered with the same mud.

She had been one of the smaller foals of the herd, with black eyes too large for her head. Her dark mane lay off to one side, forelocks twisted into knots from accumulated burrs after weeks of running scared. A small white whorl in the pattern of a star had grown between her eyes, a mark from when she was a foal in her mother’s belly.

A metal tag with a four-digit code hung from a length of twine around the mare’s throat, one side dangling like a badly tied shoelace, flicking in time with her breath.

Evie cringed at the sight of such thinness. Only dried stalks of sagebrush and dead grass to eat.

Christopher was fully absorbed, quietly watching.

“Wanna come in?” She set the boy down and felt for the metal latch on the gate.

The mare’s black eyes widened, the whites showing a mix of alarm and curiosity washing over her. She blinked and stepped back, huffing at the metal sounds.

“I bet you’re hungry,” Evie said gently, “and thirsty, too.” The horse’s face and the curve of her neck reminded Evie of Stone Age renderings of prehistoric horses in the Caves of Lascaux, France.

"If I can open this," she fumbled with the latch, "there's a barnful of food in here that nobody eats."

Earlier that year, she had explored the stable and the wonders of the tack room. The scent of aged leather saddles, halters, horse blankets, hay, and manure had been intoxicating. Stacked on one side of the stable were leftover bales of hay and unopened bags of horse feed.

Evie rattled the gate latch out of frustration spooking, the horse, who sidestepped in a skittish gait.

"Sorry," Evie said, stopping. She could feel the horse's internal battle between fear and desperation. "It's just a gate. I swear it won't hurt you."

The mare seemed to weigh the sincerity of the promise.

"Dat," Christopher reached a chubby hand through the lower bars of the gate.

The mare's eyes sparked with interest. Her ears relaxed, and she bent down to sniff the toddler's hand.

He squealed with delight at the puffs of warm breath and the feel of the mare's velvet muzzle.

Evie reached in, too, but the horse pulled back suddenly, letting out a sound that was a mix of a growl and a sneeze.

Startled, Evie jumped back, which only scared the horse more, causing her to bolt.

She lifted her son onto her hip as they watched the mare run in a wide arc before returning to the same spot by the gate. They stood, sizing each other up.

As the North Wind whistled against the barn's roofline, the mare twitched around the withers.

"It's just wind," Evie murmured, catching the scent of ozone and the promise of snow.

The mare hesitated, undecided.

As Evie glanced back at the house, the horse took a cautious step closer.

"Yup, still here," Evie said, her voice steady.

Christopher reached out a hand.

Just as the horse moved to sniff the boy's hand, a gust of wind set the windchimes tinkling.

"It's only windchimes," Evie reassured her.

This time, she extended her hand as a gentle request. The mare stepped closer, exhaling a warm breath that touched Evie's heart in a way she couldn't quite explain. She had never been this close to a horse before, except for the brief sightings of the New York City Mounted Police.

Evie scanned the paddock for another gate but found none.

"Ugh," she grunted, shaking the metal gate in frustration.

The horse growled, then bolted into a full gallop. Her mane and tail rippled like black smoke as she raced across the prairie, widening her circle until she disappeared into the darkening backdrop of the San Francisco Peaks.

Evie and Christopher waited, eyes scanning the base of the mountain for any sign of movement.

"Horsey," the boy called, sticking his thumb in his mouth as he prepared to cry.

Evie spotted a tiny spec in the distance, headed toward them at full canter as if the mare might crash into the fence. But she stopped with razor-sharp precision at the same spot where she had stood before.

"Thank you for coming back," Evie said softly.

"Back," Christopher repeated, a single teardrop clinging to the bottom of his lash as he pointed, thumb still pink and swollen from being in his mouth.

The mare's flanks were darkened with sweat.

Evie waited for the animal's head to lower and relax before trying the latch again.

The thought crossed her mind, *That you lived*. She noticed the deep, still raw-looking scars along the animal's hindquarters.

The horse turned, ears twitching, attuned to some distant sound on the mountain slopes that only she could hear. She stood motionless, except for the relentless swish of her tail, pacing and fretting along the fence line, searching for a way in.

Evie set Christopher down and used both hands to work the latch. It released with a loud clang. She nudged the gate open with her hip as it groaned and swung inward.

She lifted Christopher again and stepped back.

The three of them stood still in the open space.

Evie took another step back. "Just promise you won't trample us."

The mare's ears swiveled as if weighing the request.



"Come in if you want," Evie backed away further. The horse studied her through twisted forelocks.

"Mon in?" the boy waved his hand.

The animal's eyes flickered again at the boy's voice.

"If not, that's okay, too."

An image of an overturned aluminum basin the size of a large dining room table popped into Evie's mind. She had stepped around it dozens of times before. Setting the boy down, she hurried to right the basin, surprised at how light it was.

There was a mound of green garden hose against the barn wall under a shredded blue tarp. "Now, what are the odds," Evie muttered as she connected the hose and turned the spigot full force. The hose wriggled like a bucket full of eels as water pulsed through it and hit the basin with a ping.

"What a freakin' miracle," she turned to Christopher, only to her horror, the toddler stood nose to nose with the horse, up on his toes, stretching to give her a kiss.

Evie rushed over as gently as she could, careful not to startle the mare, and swept the boy away.

The smell of flowing water drew the horse closer. She moved cautiously toward the basin but stopped at the sound of the barn door sliding open.

"It's just the barn door."

Evie set Christopher down to drag a haybale closer to the basin.

"Wanna help?" she asked.

"Help." Christopher echoed, leaning on the bale with his dimpled hands and grunting as if his effort would make it move.

The horse stepped toward Evie as she broke open the hay.

Evie watched the mare bend down to drink. "Look how brave you are," she said, her voice soft.

The mare looked away.

"There's food, too," Evie said, brushing off her hands after breaking up the hay, watching to see if the horse would begin to eat.

The mare ignored it.

"Okay, so ... maybe you'd like something else." She scooped up Christopher and headed back inside the barn. Setting him down beside the bags of horse

feed, she ripped one open and dumped the grain into a wheelbarrow. The wheel squeaked as she pushed it across the sawdust floor and out into the paddock.

The horse backed away.

"It won't hurt you," Evie assured her.

The mare stood still.

Evi sighed, dumping the grain onto the ground. "There, see?" She looked at the horse "It's gone. Is that better?"

The horse looked away as if hoping the scary wheelbarrow would disappear.

Just then, Christopher took off giggling toward the horse, but Evie quickly scooped him up. Squirming to free himself, his laughter turned into a fussy cry.

"Horsey," he reached for her.

The mare's ears flicked in distress as she tried to decipher the meaning of the cry.

"Are you sleepy?" Evie kissed the side of his head.

He vehemently shook his head no, yawned, and rubbed his eyes.

"Thought so."

Evie watched as the horse looked from the basin to the pile of grain and to the clumps of hay.

"That's all I have," Evie said with a shrug. "It's bedtime." She pointed to the back door. "We're going in. Stay if you want." As she walked away, she felt the horse thinking.

Christopher was asleep by the time she set him down on her bed. Evie hurried back to peek through the curtains. Her breath fogged the window as she watched the horse bend down again to drink from the basin.

"There you go, little one."

The horse looked up, as if she sensed Evie watching, then moved to nibble on the hay.

"Yes," Evie whispered, filled with unusual happiness, she went to check on Christopher one more time. But when she returned and stepped out the back door, the horse was gone. She hurried toward the open gate in the fading daylight, walking out onto the prairie, searching for any trace of the mare, but the prairie revealed nothing.

"Well, stay safe, little friend," she whispered, pulling the gate shut with a loud clank.



Moonlight glistened off the water in the basin as she turned off the spigot. Evie reached to shut the barn door but froze when she heard the familiar growling sneeze coming from inside.

Slowly, she crept down the center aisle and spotted the tips of the mare's ears in the bluish cast of the moonlight, nestled in the furthest stall against the back wall.

She peeked in. "Hi."

The mare was bedded down on a mound of straw. She looked up with an expression Evie couldn't quite read, then lay her head back down, puffing small grunts of relief as she drifted off.

"Thank you for staying," Evie whispered, gently backing out of the stall and softly closing the barn door.

Tomorrow, she would walk to Donna's to see if someone had lost a horse.



## CHAPTER 2

### **A Month Earlier, Late September 1972— Southeastern Nevada/Northern Arizona**

**N**othing could stop the wild horses as they erupted from the holding pen, a living landslide unleashed when the supply truck clipped its side. The ground thundered with hundreds of hooves, setting the colors of the desert into motion. They raced in a desperate bid for freedom, their backs undulating in waves, kicking up clouds of creosote from a recent rainstorm.

The faster horses broke out front while the old and sick tumbled, scrambling up to their feet and seeking the safety of the herd.

Shouts came from the BLM federally contracted horse wranglers as they rushed toward the collapsing pens. But without their thunderclap hands or whirling iron eagles, the horses were gone in seconds.

It took even less time for the men to turn on each other. They chased after the driver, the one who walked with a loosened body and smelled of bad water, the kind that even horses knew better than to drink. They pursued him with the same iron bars they used to beat the old and weak horses that couldn't move fast enough.

In moments, the whirling iron eagles were dispatched, diving to scatter the horses and line up kill shots. Horses screamed in panic, their memories



flashing back to the dust tornadoes and deafening engines that had pelted and divided them just weeks before.

For a time, the mare raced alongside her brother and mother, adrenaline numbing her lameness. They ran toward home, back to the others who had eluded capture weeks before. She streamed east, running full-on through desert chaparral, driven by the fear of being separated and chased again into the iron holding pen. Freedom was her fuel, propelling her tirelessly until she reached the tall green mesas that marked the start of the high desert.

The mare slowed, then stopped, her ears swiveling. Something was wrong. She looked around, puzzled. Her mother and brother were nowhere in sight. They had always been within eyesight and range of scent. She cried out in sharp whinnies, but there was only silence. Even the birds were quiet.

The pain in her hindquarters returned. She hurried to the top of a mesa, looking for them as shadows grew long. A lone star shined near the rising moon. She searched the ridges and narrow folds of the canyons, calling and listening, watching for dust clouds from their feet.

The next morning, she caught the scent of water in the rocky bottom of a cracked creek bed. The mare began to dig, her efforts intensifying as the smell of water grew stronger until a tiny sip of water pooled in the sandy well. She drank until only grit remained in her throat. Later that afternoon, she retreated into the cool shade of a narrow sandstone canyon for refuge from the sun. And while free, she was captive to the memories, as stark as the scars on her legs. She rested on the cool canyon floor, perfectly camouflaged against the sienna-colored rock.

As she drifted off into the place of remembering, the chuffing of helicopter rotors startled her awake. She lifted her head but nothing else. Her eyes listened as hard as her ears until all was quiet. Not one breeze blew as a lone coyote called to its mate.



The iron feedlot was like nothing she had ever known. The walls groaned as wranglers squeezed in more horses until there was no room to move. Foals were born only to be sold to slaughter brokers. Dozens more horses were

rounded up and funneled into torrents of chaos. Unknowns and familiars were jammed in together. Territorial bites and kicks came from every direction, with no space to run through their fright or work up enough speed to jump clear. Those who tried often fell, breaking their backs. Ripples of terror spread through the pen. Some horses, in their panic, kicked the iron bars and got their hooves or legs trapped, and were left to suffer until a wrangler with thunderclap hands ended it.

The stench of fear and death was everywhere, but at least she had her mother and brother. They bent their necks around one another, breathing in each other's scent for comfort and reassurance.

The sun had no mercy, burning the skin around their eyes and muzzles in the cloudless sky. The water was gone, and there was no place to cool down or find shelter. Even darkness brought no relief. The little food had been chewed down to the sand, and many horses had gone down. Her legs felt wobbly, too. She had seen the stronger ones fall to their knees. They all tried to step over bone and flesh only to fall themselves, struggling to stand, thrashing to survive.

Then, one night, her older brother had tracked them to the holding pen. He whinnied and called, and the mare wrestled her way to the outer edge of the pen. They touched faces over the top bars, rubbing against one another, longing to be free together. He back-kicked the iron bars, trying to knock them down, but before he could succeed, lights as bright as small suns switched on, and he bolted before the wranglers could get a clear shot.



The mare lingered for weeks, circling back in the quiet of night to search the federal contract pens, hoping for a glimpse of her family or their scent. On the last day she returned, the holding pens were gone, and so were the wranglers. She tracked back to her family's range but found only silence. No horses anywhere. She stood, confused and grief-stricken, on the empty, wind-blown land.

The scent from snow clouds in northern Arizona drifted on the wind. Maybe they were there.



For days, she followed the scent, but the echoes of her own footsteps confused her. She halted and doubled back, thinking it was them. And for the first time, the mare learned the sound of being alone.



Days later, she approached the San Francisco Peaks, or the Nuvatukaovi—the place of many snows—a chain of dormant volcanoes on the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau. Sacred to the Hopi and Navajo, these peaks were believed to be the home of the Kachina spirits, who lived in the clouds and created their own weather system.

But as she drew closer, there were no horses in sight. The ground was bare up to the timberline. Even at the summit, the bright white peaks were mottled by dark volcanic hotspots where the snow melted upon contact, resembling freckles on a white dog's muzzle.



## CHAPTER 3

### September 1998—U.S. Border at Calais, Maine

Kevin stood at the edge of Ferry Point Bridge, gazing across at the U.S. border crossing in Calais, Maine, and waited. The banks of New Brunswick's St. Croix Reservoir were muddy from a recent downpour; cool water seeped through cracks in his boots, dampening his socks.

The sickly-sweet scent of freshly cut grass hung in the air, amplified by the evening dew. Although he hadn't eaten in more than a day, his stomach had long since stopped growling.

The nicks in his face stung from using a discarded razor he had found in a truck stop to shave off his "father time" beard, as Evie jokingly called it. In a spontaneous burst of preparation, he had also lopped off his thatch of hair only to discover that his father's face had been hiding in there all along. Colorless skin, his cheeks like stretched out elastic, and his green eyes held a haunted, almost unhinged look. The face of his youth was unrecognizable except for the shrapnel scar just above his left eye, a reminder of the blast that had killed his buddy during their first week of deployment.

Despite his best efforts, he looked more like a badly shorn sheep than a model citizen looking to talk his way past the U.S. border guard.

It was the closest he had been in almost thirty years. An unexpected surge of emotion was met with a crushing sense of lost time that could never be recovered. He fully expected to be arrested, but more likely, he would be



dismissed as just another kook without ID. Either way, he had begun to accept there was no way they would wave him through.

The last time he had seen his mother was the morning he reported to the draft board for basic training. But after receiving a letter from a social worker on behalf of his eighty-seven-year-old mother, he knew he had to try. There were no reparations for a lifetime of missed Christmases and Sunday dinners, but perhaps he could be there for the end. She was the only one who had known that he wasn't missing in action as the military had presumed.

The sodium lights flicked on, flooding the border station with light as bright as day. The words "by the dawn's early light" flashed through his head. He heard the crisp snap of American and Canadian flags, whipping like clean, starchy sheets clipped out on a windy day. His stomach fluttered with childlike excitement at waking up on their birthday only to remember that they had no friends.

Brake lights flashed as cars pulled into the stalls, guards checking IDs. How unreal it was that life had gone on in an ordinary way while he had spent years in the forests of Cape Breton, frozen in the wrongdoings of an unwinnable war.

Delivery trucks were waved through, and a few drivers paused to share a joke with the guards. The evening light softened the harsher angles of the concrete bunker as the chill of another damp night set in.

In another flurry of activity, a passenger ferry arrived. Kevin watched as travelers funneled into turnstiles: vacationers with backpacks, some with bicycles, others presenting official work ID cards while yawning and holding take-out coffees, preparing for another night shift across the international border. Soon, the area was dead quiet once the last traveler had passed through.

Kevin shifted his weight from one foot to the other, second-guessing his timing. Maybe it would have been better to try when they were busier. Maybe he had missed his chance, or maybe there never was one. His childhood friend Kyle, who had dodged the draft in 1968 and settled in Rivière-du-Loup, Québec, had cautioned him, "Not so easy like it used to be, amigo. Not like back in the day. Now, they got helicopters, twenty-four-seven surveillance, and shit. And when they nail your ass, there's no amnesty for you—and if that don't getcha, hundreds of miles of wilderness will." Kevin had once judged Kyle for being "yellow" and considered himself a super patriot. He had had plenty of time to reconsider.

The northern border was marked by a thirty-foot-wide clear-cut, deforested area called the Slash, perpetually maintained by slashing and burning. As Kyle had described the area, Kevin was reminded of Vietnam: the smell of gunpowder from artillery mixed with burning forests and kobang straw. Sweat and body odor combined with diesel, chewing tobacco, and kerosene flooded his memory. He had been in the Thua Thien Hue area when the U.S. military sprayed chemical defoliants, stripping the forests bare and killing everything green that might provide cover. "Only you can prevent a forest," they joked at the time. "My sons, we're watching the wonders of chemistry at work," one of the officers had bragged, putting an arm around Kevin as they watched as every inch of the Vietnamese countryside die.



Engine noise and distant voices from somewhere made him turn his head. The serenity of evening set in. Kevin breathed deeply, feeling the weight of long-buried secrets.

He inched closer to the soggy riverbank, where the water flowed into the Bay of Fundy and out to a small strip of U.S. shoreline on the coast of Maine. Once a strong swimmer, he wasn't sure if he could swim well enough to save his own life.

The brackish water lapped at the marshy grass. Kevin bent down, but he couldn't bring himself to unlace his boots. He sighed. The tide was at its highest, two-hundred-feet deep in the bay. The swift currents and powerful whirlpools of the Fundy tides would disorient even the most experienced of swimmers.

He scanned the lights across the American shoreline. His resolve had already faltered and he knew it, but in losing his nerve, he may have gained some wisdom. Thirty years ago, he might have chanced the swim on a moonless night, but he was younger then—and so was his country.

All was quiet as Kevin waited by the bridge. Inside the station, two border guards watched TV, their faces glowed with ghoulish blue as they burst out laughing at the same moment.



Could they see him as clearly as he saw them? Kevin glanced around. Though he was small for a man, the landscape had long been stripped bare of bushes and hedges where he might hide.

As he stepped out onto the bridge, the familiar rush of vigilance and fear washed over him. He would always be a soldier—hypervigilant, guarded, and ready to confront everyone and everything except himself.

The cold seeped into his body, the same way it always did before faces began to flash through his mind like buckshot, one after another. They had started appearing when he first settled in the marigold-colored house and began working on a local fishing boat.

The faces would gather like cloud vapors, so real that sometimes, he scolded himself for not having been quick enough to grab a wrist and ask what they wanted. In the shallows, everything moved fast. Twenty-eight years ago, he had chalked them up to too many acid trips with fellow infantrymen. But the local Vietnamese had warned that the spirits of the dead clung to those who had taken their lives. Sometimes, it was the sound of a baby crying, a skinny child sprinting past, or the splash of fish into a bucket, never certain if these were real or just birds scattering through the forest. Something would move within the black spruce forest, just at the edge of his vision. A figure in black and yellow would dart past, and he would take off running, shouting for her to stop. He swore it was human, but he could never get close enough to be sure.

After 1970, he had a lot of time to think after walking off the battlefield in Phnom Penh with only his sidearm. He walked five hundred miles to Rangoon on the coast of Indochina, looking for passage to anywhere else. It was there that he signed on to crew a Thai cargo ship. A year later, during a short layover at an American port, he saw his face on the side of a milk carton with the words “Help our MIAs/POWs.” The carton displayed his name, rank, birthdate, a photo from basic training, and the date he was reported missing.

The border crossing was still quiet. The stagnant smell of standing puddles and decaying leaves made him uneasy as the image of a woman’s face emerged from the memory of a field, where she had begged them to stop as man after man assaulted her until one silenced her with a final gunshot. Then, they turned on the woman’s grandfather, who had been carrying a bundle of fresh kobang straw. They kicked him, and the old man held onto the bundle, careful

not to drop a single stalk. They all laughed, finding it funny that the man had neither whimpered nor let go of the straw until they finally kicked the life out of him. They were fighting a war that wasn’t a war, against a people who resisted just as fiercely as they would have in their place.

The memories of what he had done hung around his neck like the strands of ears they collected as proof of the body count to make the nightly news. The higher the body count, the happier the generals. And if the victims weren’t quite dead when the ears were taken, they would be soon after. Not all were Vietcong soldiers, but the generals didn’t care. Children, infants, old men, and women—all were acceptable.



Kevin stepped onto the concrete lip of the Ferry Point Bridge. It was an odd structure, overbuilt for such a shallow, rocky river, but he guessed the Americans had designed it to handle the weight of an infantry truck.

He glanced at the wood-frame Canadian border station. No lights were on, and no guards were in sight. Kevin slipped sideways through the white metal mechanical gates marked STOP HERE and ILLEGAL CROSSING and stepped onto the bridge.

He was weightless, almost giddy, with only air under his feet. He closed his eyes and, for a brief moment, felt at ease.

As Kevin approached the halfway point, his wet boots squeaked. He stopped where the bronze plaque noted the international border.

He stared at the concrete bunker.

He wanted them to see him. He wanted them to know what he had done, and for them to know that they, too, were capable of the same under the right circumstances.

As the guards moved for the door, Kevin touched his sidearm.

The first guard, then the second, stepped onto the bridge.

Each touched their belts in a gesture he understood.

He was close enough to see their eyes, and they looked at him with curiosity.

That was enough. Kevin backed up and threaded his way back through the gates into Canada, trembling.



“Hey, buddy?” The voice of the Canadian border guard startled him. “You need some help, pally? You lost?” The warmth in the guard’s voice broke his heart as the man gently touched his shoulder.

Kevin shook his head and turned to the young man, whose eyes were as blue as a cloudless sky. Then, he sped off toward a distant stand of trees before the guard could ask for a passport or any other ID, none of which he had.

He would go back the way he came—hitchhiking the twelve-hour journey back to Red River. Mostly fishermen would pick him up and let him off at their stops. Long stretches of waiting, walking, and hoping the weather would hold until the next ride.

His knees crunched like breaking branches as he scurried downhill into the safety of the woods. He had no food or money. The nights were getting colder, and while his sense of direction felt off, he knew he had to find the highway and his way back to Evie.



## CHAPTER 4

### Late October 1972—Flagstaff, Arizona

The next morning, Evie trudged over the foothills to Donna’s to check if she had lost a horse. After the first few steps, the soothing effect of the hike took hold, and Christopher was fast asleep in the backpack.

Stepping out from the ponderosa pines, her shoes dusty with red dirt, she spotted Donna’s newly minted husband milling about in the sheep pen.

“Hi, Craig,” she called, charting a course through shards of black volcanic boulders patterned with scales of pale green lichen.

Craig’s hairpiece looked slightly off-center. “Well, well—if it ain’t New Yahk,” he said. “Don’t stare,” Donna had warned about the hairpiece. He was sensitive about it, though everyone in town disliked him for reasons unrelated to his appearance.

“Yeah, yeah,” she grumbled.

“Livestock truck just left.” He checked his watch. “Got ‘em off to market, be too old in a week.”

All the lambs were gone except for one.

“You keeping that one as a pet?” Evie asked.

The lamb glanced at her, while Craig looked at her like she was nuts.

“That there’s seventy-five bucks on somebody’s dinner plate,” he said, chewing on a wooden match. “Must have slipped outta the truck,” he pointed



with the matchstick. “Just radioed in. They’ll swing by tomorrow and get ‘er on the way to the abattoir,” his fancy way of saying slaughterhouse.

The lamb, confused and alone for the first time, toddled over to the furthest corner of the pen, looking for its mother.

“Donna around?” Evie asked.

“Louise called in sick again, so she’s at school serving lunch.”

She felt Christopher stirring awake and reached back to touch his leg.

“You know if she’s missing a horse?”

Craig stared at her, still unsure what to make of her. “Is that why you come?”

She nodded.

“Well, looks like you wasted your time, Evie, walking all this way—”

He held her eyes for a little too long, with a hint of something she didn’t like. He took a step closer with an impish smile, “Unless you come all this way to see me.”

Evie turned and murmured to Christopher, breaking the man’s stare without giving him the satisfaction of looking away first. She had never liked him, and it was hard to pin down exactly why until last month when Donna had casually let it slip that she pulled a gun on him after he punched her. “He was just trying it out, they do that, you know—gotta nip that shit in the bud—let the fuckers know who they’re dealing with,” along with comments about not wanting Donna to pick up any “fancy New Yahk ideas” about “woman’s lib.” Evie was always relieved when Craig was off on a job somewhere, doing whatever it was that he claimed to do.

“Nah—coming to see Donna’s never a waste of time,” she said, pretending to marvel at the blue Arizona sky that still looked more like a doctored postcard than real life.

“Hi, little guy.” Craig reached out to touch Christopher’s arm, but the toddler didn’t react. “So ... you think someone’s missing a horse ...” He drew out the words like it was the stupidest thing he had ever heard, crossing his arms and rocking back on his heels.

“One showed up yesterday evening.”

“One showed up yesterday evening,” he repeated.

“You got an echo out here, Craig?” she quipped, trying to mask her irritation. “I thought since you’re the closest ranch—”

He stopped rocking, spread his legs, and crossed his arms like a cop standing his ground.

“Forget it.” She turned and started back.

“Sure it ain’t wild?” he called after her.

Evie wasn’t sure of anything except that Craig’s hairpiece was tilted, and he was an asshole.

“Yeah, well, you wouldn’t know a wild horse if you saw one, being a New Yahk City girl and all.”

Evie gave him the finger as she picked her way back through the black rocks and up into the foothills.

“Where’s it now?” he called.

She ignored him.

“The horse,” he called louder.

Evie waved dismissively over her head and continued the climb into the foothills.

Once in the cover of the tall pines, she turned to watch the lamb pressed against the wire fence, searching for comfort. Nothing to look forward to other than a drive to the slaughterhouse where she had heard that on the kill floor, the lambs cried like human infants for their mothers. The burden of its life weighed on her long after Donna’s ranch was out of view.



That night, under a full moon, she threaded Christopher’s feet through the leg holes of the backpack. Though she had hiked to Donna’s many times, it had always been during the day. Still better than walking along the highway at bar time.

She stuffed her pockets with horse treats from the barn, just in case she needed to lure the lamb.

The walk went faster than expected, and the stable lights from Donna’s came into view in no time. The lamb’s bleats carried in the cold, dry air.

Both trucks were parked in the usual spots by the back door. No inside lights indicated anyone was up watching TV.



Evie stepped out of the trees and waited. Their dog, Rex, had never barked at her before, and she hoped he wouldn't start now. She would have no plausible explanation if Craig shined the floodlight and chased her uphill with his "shoot first" attitude.

The lamb quieted once she unlatched the pen and stepped inside. It came to her, surprisingly tame.

"Come on, little one," she coaxed. The lamb lay down. She had no idea what to do with it once she got back, but she had to do something.

Evie squatted, trying not to dump the sleeping boy out headfirst, and lifted the lamb to its feet.

Christopher started to stir. Evie froze, silently willing him not to cry. She was relieved at the sound of him sucking his thumb.

"Come on." She dug into her coat pocket and lured the lamb out of the pen with a horse treat, careful to leave the gate ajar so that Craig could blame the faulty latch again.

She dropped horse treats to bait the animal up the foothills, where it halted just shy of the tree line.

The lamb turned its face away.

"Those are trees," she explained, guessing it had never seen one before. She lifted the little body, carrying it into the pines before setting it down again. "Now, come on," she made a kissing sound and patted her thigh as if calling a dog. Soon, there was a steady, rhythmic clicking of the lamb's hoofs on the rocky path as it followed, the bluish-white outline glowing like a woolly halo in the moonlight.

By the time she got back, Evie was exhausted from nerves.

"Go on." She slid open the barn door, and the lamb catapulted to the stall where the mare slept. The animal climbed onto the heap of straw and nestled in the crook of the mare's rear flank.



The next morning, Evie startled awake to the sound of Donna's truck, horn-tapping in the gravel driveway. She slipped into her navy blue crew-neck sweater and high school Levis, then hurried out with Christopher.

Donna rolled down the window, resting her elbow on the doorjamb. "Rough night?"

Evie avoided her gaze.

"And how's my favorite little man?" Donna said, reaching for the boy as he squealed and reached back. Evie passed the giggling child through the window, where he eagerly grabbed the steering wheel and pretended to drive.

"Craig mentioned you stopped by," Donna said, looking sideways at Evie. "Said somethin' about a runaway horse?"

Donna stepped out with Christopher and set him down. She lit a cigarette, flicked her blonde hair as a challenge, and tucked her shirt into the tooled leather belt of her Western jeans—belts she made and personalized with people's names to sell to tourists at flea markets.

"So ... where's this horse 'a yours?" she asked.

"In the barn."

"How come?"

"Just got up."

"Kinda late for you, now ain't it, New Yahk?" Donna said, imitating Craig poorly.

"Shut up—I hate that."

"That's why he does it."

Evie narrowed her eyes.

"You know, you really oughtta get your phone reconnected."

Evie knew she was right.

"Be a lot easier on everyone, including that mysterious Caleb guy of yours, if you did."

"There's nothing mysterious—"

"—phone company's got party lines out here now, Evangeline. Helluva lot cheaper than what you had in town."

"Got time for coffee?" Evie asked, lifting the boy.

"Nope. On my way in for Pizza Day—kids go nuts for it—but first, wanted to see that horse and, uh—" Donna paused, watching Evie closely.



Evie stiffened, and Christopher's brow furrowed at the tension between the two women.

"On another topic," Donna said, her eyes fixed on Evie as the cigarette burned. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about a missing lamb, now would ya?"

"Nonna," Christopher said, reaching for Donna again.

"Come here, big guy," Donna said, stomping the cigarette with the heel of her boot and lifting the boy. "Bad latch, bad, bad latch," she pretended to scold an invisible latch until the boy joined in, swatting at the air.

"Serves his bald ass right," Donna muttered to Evie. "He's driving all over the county now, looking for the damn thing," she laughed in a dirty way. "Livestock truck was back at sunrise," she set the boy down. "Charged him for wasting their time, plus now he's out the seventy-five bucks for the lamb, so he wants to find it and butcher it himself. I told him coyotes probably beat him to it."

Just then, the lamb made a noise.

Donna shot a look at the barn and then sneered at her.

"Why did I know that was you," Donna said with a nod. "Just do me a favor and keep that damn thing locked up for a while."

"So-o-r-ry."

"You ain't one bit sorry, so don't even pretend. Now let me see that horse before I gotta go."

"Hope he doesn't take it out on you."

Donna paused, glaring. "Oooo—he's learned better not to. Besides, after a few blowjobs ..."

Evie said nothing.

"Works better than you'd think," Donna said. She followed Evie through the house and out to the horse paddock. "Mama always said I like the simple things in life," she sighed, "like men."

She made flirty eyes at Christopher, who yelled, "Horsey," and raced her out to the barn.

As Evie slid open the door, both horse and lamb bolted toward the furthest reach of the paddock by the back gate.

"What do you think—" Evie turned to Donna, who was doubled over, her forearms resting on her knees.

Evie rushed over, afraid she had been rammed by the animals. "Donna, what happened? Are you okay?"

Her friend held up a hand, signaling Evie to wait.

"You're scaring me."

Donna straightened and wiped her eyes. "Oh, sweet Jesus, I needed a good laugh."

Evie waited.

"Well ... nobody's missing a horse, Evie, 'cause you got a wild mustang," Donna declared matter-of-factly before breaking into a smoker's cough.

Both leaned back against the fence rail, watching the horse. The mare shot Evie a worried look—the stranger, the shiny red truck—it was all too much. The inventory tag at the animal's throat ticked up and down like a time bomb with each breath, the lamb at her side.

"Shit—never seen one of 'em make it out of a BLM kill pen alive before, with the tag still on," Donna said somberly. "Mustang," she looked at the hindquarters, "maybe some Appaloosa."

They studied the animal.

"Don't know how she could've escaped," Donna said as she moved closer to the horse. The animal dodged her and began to pace. "They chase 'em down with sharpshooters in helicopters, kill them or round 'em up that way."

Donna extended a hand to invite contact, but the horse snorted a growl and darted to the other corner of the paddock, wild-eyed and twitchy, looking to Evie for help.

"Oooo—feisty little missy, ain't cha." Donna chuckled and turned to Evie. "Funny how out of all the places to run, the damn thing came to you."

Evie shrugged.

"Let's get down to business 'cause I gotta run," Donna said, striding back out to her truck. "I come with equipment. But first, promise me you'll cut that damn tag offa her."

Evie raised her right hand.

Donna climbed into her truck bed and tossed each item over the paddock fence as she named them. "Horse blanket. Halter. Lead rope. Coiled lariat. Shampoo." She then hopped down and handed Evie a long training crop and a bucket of grooming tools. "I'll show you another time how to use these."

They stood watching the animal.



“Quite a pretty horse,” Donna remarked with surprise.

“She’s really nervous,” Evie explained.

Donna shot her a look. “Well, wouldn’t you be with everybody and their mother trying to kill you?”

Evie nodded.

“Yeah—we’ll get that tag another day. Better eat your Wheaties, New Yahk—”

“Oh, shut up.”

“—you got your work cut out for you.”

Donna chuckled as she picked up Christopher to smooch him a last goodbye and then climbed into her truck.

“I’ll give you pointers, but—” she turned to Evie, studying her as if reading a horse. “I think you just might have a bit of cowgirl in ya.”

“Uh—doubt it,” Evie said, feeling overwhelmed.

“Gotta run.” Donna put the truck in gear.

“Hey, wait,” Evie called. “What do I feed the lamb?”

Donna lifted both hands in a gesture of feigned ignorance as the truck began to roll backward.

“What lamb?” she asked with a smirk.



## CHAPTER 5

### Late November 1972—San Francisco Peaks, Flagstaff, Arizona

Evie turned off the radio and listened intently. The animals were fed and in the barn for the night, and Christopher was asleep when an odd-sounding thud came from the barn. The nightly downslope winds often caused a lot of slamming and banging in the old barn, sounds Evie had learned to ignore, and after a few weeks, the horse did, too.

She shrugged off the first noise, but when it was followed by a second, louder one, she grew concerned. Evie peeked through the eyelet curtains on the back door.

Both Caleb and Donna had warned her about wildfire danger. She had been urged to keep the local radio on overnight in case an evacuation was necessary, but her primary concern had been Jesse’s antics, not a natural disaster.

The Smokey Bear signs along Highway 180 were flipped to “Extreme Fire Danger,” and what had started as a runaway campfire now shrouded the twelve-thousand-foot peaks in dense smoke that stung the eyes and irritated nasal passages. At night, Mt. Humphreys loomed like a menacing birthday cake instead of its usual silent inky silhouette against the starry sky.

She had spent the past few nights dozing upright in the armchair by the living room window, monitoring the distant glow of flames while a Forest



Service official droned on about how the ponderosa pines had dropped more than their usual share of needles in response to the once-in-a-century drought. This had added high-octane fuel to an already dangerous situation, and her neck ached after nights of sleeping in awkward positions.

During the day, upslope winds drove the fire past the timberline, where it would burn out. But at night, the mountain winds shifted downslope, some clocked at seventy-five to one hundred miles per hour, setting up a dangerous situation. With no snow cover, the deadly firestorm could race toward towns, threatening both people and animals.

Fire jumpers had been deployed, and hotshot helicopter crews, equipped with night vision binoculars, circled overhead, scanning the terrain for signs of smoldering embers from the mountain's inner basin. Suited in Kevlar suits and armed with axes and shovels, they were primed to parachute in, clear the underbrush, and dig firewall trenches to contain it.

Evie checked on Christopher. He was fast asleep, nestled among the stuffed animals she had picked up from East Flag Goodwill.

She headed out toward the noise, where the thuds had grown louder and more insistent, followed by a scream that prickled her skin.

Suddenly, a whoosh of helicopter rotors and floodlights rose out of nowhere. She ducked and squinted under the blinding searchlights of the Forest Service aircraft. A second appeared, swooping down as the downwash from the vortex kicked up desert grit, sandblasting exposed skin. Her eyes and nostrils stung as the helicopters circled the paddock and surrounding landscape, hunting for embers in the sagebrush.

Now, she understood the thuds. Donna had explained herd management to her.

Evie rushed to the barn and slid open the door. The noise was thunderous. She wheezed with terror, unable to catch her breath.

Inside, the mare was kicking and thrashing, her shrieks intensifying. The barn, once a place of safety, had become the animal's worst nightmare. The mare's memories seemed to merge with Jesse's drunken confessions of being a door gunner on a helicopter—stories Evie had chalked off to being too horrendous to be real. Now, she saw the terror of both the hunter and the hunted.

She ran to the stall. The top board lay bashed in pieces as the horse kicked at the back wall of the barn, desperate to escape.

"Horsey," she called out, reaching for the animal, who heard nothing but helicopters.

As Evie yanked open what was left of the stall door, the horse knocked her down, bolting out of the barn and racing toward the back gate. The animal screamed and rear-kicked the fence with a ferocity that was frightening to watch. Her ears were pinned back, the whites of her eyes eclipsing her irises, and her face was twisted into a terrified grimace.

A white flash caught Evie's eye. She dove and caught the lamb, wrestling to secure her in the tack room before rushing out to the horse.

The helicopters made another pass. The mare's lips retracted, her teeth ready to gash as she continued to kick the fence, first with her front legs, then her rear, desperate to get away. The helicopters circled the area, one hovering with searchlights aimed just beyond the back gate.

She was more afraid for the horse than of her and stood by helplessly, knowing there was no erasing what had been done to her. Donna's words echoed in her mind: "Get her feet moving when she goes all panicky. Have her run into and through the fear."

Evie grabbed the rope from the fencepost and approached the mare. She stood tall with her arms out, but the horse was too panicked to notice. There was no way to get close enough to clip the lead rope onto the halter without getting kicked—the halter she had just succeeded in getting the mare to accept.

Feeling along a fencepost, Evie found a coiled lariat and a four-foot-long, orange-colored training stick with a five-foot-long string attached.

She approached the horse again, waiting for a chance to toss the rope over its head, but missed.

"Shit," she muttered, then raised the raining stick.

She had been hesitant to use it, thinking it was mean, until Donna corrected her: "No, Evie, that's how horses talk to each other. They have long heads and necks. We use the stick as an extension of that, to suggest, ask, and then tell—just as they do to each other. She'll know she's doing it right when you stop asking."

"Go," Evie commanded, tapping the mare's hip with the stick.



The horse turned to look at her. She had the mare's attention.

Evie tagged her again and raised her inside arm to direct Horsey, as Christopher had named her, into the wooden round pen. The horse ran in, and Evie followed, slamming the gate shut behind them. Now confined with the frightened animal, Evie fought to keep her panic at bay.

As the helicopters made another pass, the mare twitched into a puddle of fear and reared up to kick. The whites of her eyes gleamed in the searchlights, but in a moment that was shorter than a breath, Evie saw the horse looking to her for guidance.

"Go," Evie urged, driving the mare to run the perimeter, taking control of the flight response instead of letting it control her.

"Good girl," she encouraged. One of the mare's ears swiveled toward Evie's voice, while the other remained focused on the helicopters.

The aircraft turned for another pass.

"Shit., Evie said, looking up. How many passes would they make?"

The horse stopped and bucked, her back hooves slamming into the wooden rails as she turned in tight, trashing circles.

Panic was contagious, but Evie stepped closer, nudging the horse with her elbow and tagging her harder. The mare took off in a controlled run along the edge of the pen.

Evie jogged alongside her, then reversed the mare's direction, forcing her to concentrate on something other than the helicopters.

Searchlights from above lit the paddock brighter than day.

"Go away," Evie screamed.

As if hearing her, the helicopters veered off, heading back to the Peaks and disappearing toward the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in what felt like a second.

In the silence that followed, the mare slowed and walked toward Evie like an old plow horse, worn out after a hard day's work. Evie gently rubbed her with the training stick in a friendly way to let her know it was not a weapon. Horsey's coat dripped with sweat and dirt from the rotors.

Moving closer, Evie slowly raised her arms, and Horsey responded by resting her chin on Evie's shoulder.

"That took it out of you, girlie, didn't it?" Evie murmured, feeling the weight of grief. She stroked the mare's neck and the bony spot between her eyes where a little white spot grew.

"Poor you." She thought of the scars on the mare's hindquarters. The horse, calming down, lowered her head in a restful pose, one ear still listening to the empty airspace.

"We're okay," Evie said, using her voice as an instrument of peace—it was all she had to offer.

Evie couldn't bear to know what the horse had endured. She only hoped that, as time passed, the sting of it would lessen.

The moon hung high and white in the sky.

"How about a bath?" Having discovered that the mare loved water, Evie decided to use it to her advantage. "Come on." Evie turned on the spigot, and Horsey quietly followed.

Lambie, hearing the commotion, burst out of the tack room, weaving worriedly between Horsey's legs.

Evie cross-tied Horsey in the barn alcove. Even stronger puffs of relief came as Evie wet the animal's feet, evidence the horse was calming down, just as Donna had advised because it simulated standing in a stream. Evie then proceeded to wet down the rest of the horse's body, washing off the grit with a rubber curry brush. She felt her own emotions running off with water. She squeegeed off the coat as best as she could.

"Come on." Her voice was somber as she led the mare into a different stall.

Before she had even finished breaking open fresh bedding straw, the horse was down and asleep, with Lambie still yet to take her place.

Exhausted, Evie sighed as she walked back to the house, wishing she had a phone and someone to call.