



ONE DELLA

The prison is always quiet but never still. A train's low rumble vibrates the cement walls, releasing ancient dust in ghostly breaths. Water drips. Mice scurry in the ruins. Starlings flutter in the rafters, all rattle and rasp. Wind moans through the narrow, broken windows.

Everyone in town thinks this old prison is haunted. They don't know how right they are.

"I'm here," I call. My voice echoes in the predawn darkness, making the starlings stop their chatter. I shine my flashlight over the path, watching for rubble that could trip me. If I fall, she might decide I'm prey. If I fall—

"Are you awake?" I ask, pushing away the fear before it can get its roots into me. I pause, listening for her slightest movement, a single breath. There's nothing.

The short, fine hairs at the back of my neck prickle, and I spin, ready to block a slap, a lunge, a bite. But her silhouette in

the darkness is still. She's back in her human form now, only a slight, pale woman with long, dark hair and a smell like the river at flood time. I wait for her to move, wait for her to show today's mood. Will she be quiet and sly, or raging?

She steps into a shaft of weak light. Her hair is matted with dirt and something dark and wet. Her eyes are as shadowed as the forgotten corners of this derelict prison. A smear of dried blood turns her thin lips into a clown's crooked smile. She comes closer and reaches a bony hand toward my face.

Everything inside me wants to startle and back away, wants to bolt. But you can't show her any weakness, so I brace myself for her touch. Her hand is moist and cold and smells of earth. She caresses my cheek, her gaze almost gentle.

Some old blood instinct, some half-forgotten longing, rises in me. "Momma," I say, leaning into her touch. She smiles at the endearment.

And then her hand snarls in my hair and I'm flying across the room. I catch my balance just in time to keep from toppling into a brick wall. My fingers splay over the peeling white paint, knocking long flakes of it from the wall in my hurry to spin back around. A brick barely misses my face as I turn.

Momma cackles.

"Are you done now?" I ask after a beat, keeping my voice steady, almost indifferent. That's the way to handle my mother when she's in a mood like this. She's human now, but only just. By noon, she'll be more like her old self. But I'll be stocking shelves at the grocery store by then.

Momma shrugs, but I can tell she's already lost interest. She

wanders across the open room and pauses beneath the squawking starlings, gazing up at them. That must be where the blood came from—a bird she caught in the night. At least I hope it was a bird. I guess it could also be a rat or possum.

“I brought you some breakfast,” I say, crossing the room with my pack. Momma settles onto a clear place on the floor and I sit across from her, pulling out a thermos of decaf coffee and a fried-egg-and-cheese sandwich, which she regards with deep skepticism.

She turns her eyes back to the starlings and begins to hum. Her voice, even while humming, is eerily beautiful, especially here, echoing in the stillness of the prison. The starlings stop their chattering to listen. Maybe this is how she caught one last night.

“What’s that you’re humming?” I ask, hoping to draw her back to human thoughts.

She looks at me and smiles, the blood on her lips turning it into a chilling expression. She sings, picking up where she left off.

*From ear to ear I slit her mouth,
And stabbed her in the head,
Till she, poor soul, did breathless lie,
Before her butcher bled.*

I go as still as the birds, my eyes fixed on hers. Her expression turns troubled as she sings the next verse, but her voice seems to caress the words.

*And then I took her by the hair,
To cover the foul sin
And dragged her to the riverside,
And threw her body in.*

“That’s enough, Momma,” I say. “Stop it.” I shake myself, as if the movement can release me from her song and the memories it evokes: gray skin and sharp teeth, a curtain of hair like seaweed. The wildness in her green eyes as she pushed the body into the river.

I should have known better than to encourage Momma’s singing. I used to love to hear her belt out these old ballads, songs carried to Tennessee by our ancestors. Sometimes she sang to draw the magic, and sometimes she sang just for the love of it. But now her beautiful voice is only a tool for the monster to use.

She stops talking and grabs the sandwich from the floor, raising it to her mouth. I grit my teeth as a sour taste rises up my throat at the thought of the last food that passed through her lips.

Once she finishes the final bite of sandwich, her eyes are clearer, less hungry. “Do you want to come home with me today?” I ask out of habit more than anything else. For some reason I also add, “I’m sure Da would like to see you.”

She takes a cautious sip from the thermos and smirks as if to say, *If he wants to see me so bad, why’s he not here?*

“He’s busy,” I lie. “Gathering ingredients. We’ve been getting more customers lately. The heat must be making everyone more bloodthirsty than usual.”

It's only June, but already it feels like the middle of summer. The forest is like a wet, green mouth, oppressively hot by ten in the morning. This old prison is probably the coolest place for miles.

Momma starts humming again, but I cut her off. "Come home with me today. You can take a shower, see Da. Maybe help with some of the spell work."

Her eyes flash, and I know it's time to back down, but I'm so tired of leaving her alone here. "You're still human," I tell her. *For now*, I add to myself. She only changes at night, but every day, she becomes a little more monster than woman. "You're allowed to go home."

She only bares her teeth at me in response. Is it my imagination, or have her canines gone a little more pointed?

I sigh and gather my things, leaving behind some food. I always bring a full day's food and water with me. Every morning I offer to bring her home, and every morning she refuses. I don't know if it's because she's doing penance for Aunt Sage, she's angry at Da, or she just doesn't want to play at being human anymore.

"See you tomorrow, then," I say as I make my way over the broken floor, stepping carefully over piles of rubble and small animal bones. The sun is fully up now, and I can see the prison in all its decrepit glory. The high, grim windows, the lonely, empty cells. I let myself out the usual door, padlocking it behind me, then head toward a crumbling brick wall. I skirt through a body-sized hole, and then I'm under the barbed-wire fence and trudging to my truck, which I left parked on the shoulder of the road.

I pull onto the pavement, Momma's song still echoing horribly in my ears, louder than the train barreling down the tracks on the other side of the prison. Momma has barely had a lucid moment in months now. She's locked up inside herself, wandering the strange labyrinth our twisted magic has made within her. She's never been able—or maybe she's just not willing—to tell me what happened to her and Aunt Sage eleven months ago. I don't know how she feels or what she wants. These songs are the closest thing to sense I've gotten from her in weeks, but I think I like her silence better.

I leave behind the industrial area of the prison as I cross the bridge over the river, and then the nature park is on my right. Soon, my view is obscured by trees on either side. I wind my way up into the hills, breathing a little freer as I distance myself from Momma and her prison and the row of falling-down warehouses that line that side of the river.

Ten minutes later, my truck's engine whines as it strains up the steep, rutted driveway toward home. At the top of the hill, I glance into the rearview mirror for a final look at the forest that borders the road. Green fills my vision for one perfect moment before I look forward again and the house comes into view.

It's a big, rambling farmhouse from the 1800s that looks a little more abandoned every year. It used to bustle with the activity of five witches, but now it's just Da and me rattling around inside. Six months ago, someone set fire to the front porch, sending a column down and leaving the front door a blackened mess. It might've been kids playing pranks. More likely, it was someone who found himself at the receiving end

of a Lloyd vengeance spell and wanted some revenge of his own.

I start to pull into my usual place by the dogwood tree, but an unfamiliar car is parked there, one of those sporty hatchback numbers suburban women drive, complete with a smiling stick family on the back windshield. The house looks even more broken-down next to the car's shining white paint and cheerful bumper stickers. This car says *wholesome, safe, happy*. Everything the Lloyds are not.

A bitter, noxious smell hits me before I even reach the porch, which means Soccer Mom is here to buy our brew for a cheating husband. Not so happy after all.

I make my way through the cluttered living room, down a dark hallway full of closed doors, and into the kitchen at the back of the house. The door creaks when I push it open, startling a petite, mousy white woman in yoga pants. Her eyes are wild, like those of all the women who come here. She's sad and angry and desperate—I can tell because that's what the brew simmering on the stove smells like: misery and rage. But right now, she's afraid. Afraid to be in a run-down house in hillbilly country, afraid of the dried plants that hang in bunches on hooks and of the jars of insects that line the shelves. Most of all, she's afraid of the short, stocky man who leans over the simmering pot, muttering in a harsh, heavily accented rasp.

My father stirs the pot one last time and then motions to the woman. "Come 'ere. Add those seeds I gave you, name your intention, and the brew'll be done."

The woman slowly opens her tightly clenched fist, revealing

a bright pink seed capsule with dangling red seeds. It's *Euonymus americanus*, or bursting heart.

She might be small and scared, but this woman means business. She hisses something I can't hear and tosses the seed capsule into the brown, lumpy water, and Da stirs it in, whispering the final words of the spell.

I'm not sure anyone deserves what this brew will do to them, no matter how big a cheater. On its own, bursting heart is poisonous, causing severe diarrhea to anyone who ingests it. But when it's made into a vengeance spell, diarrhea takes on a whole new meaning. It's an old family recipe called Shits-His-Soul, so called because it hollows a man out, taking away his desire, his ambition, his personality, all he is. For six months, he becomes a shell of a man. And by the time a soul grows back, he's lost everything—including his mistress.

This spell killed someone only two months ago. Da said it was because the wife administered too much at once, but I think the magic just slipped out of bounds, the way it's been doing for the last year and a half, since before Momma was turned. Maybe I should feel guilty about that, but Momma taught me it's not our job to judge whether someone deserves vengeance—only to give our customers what they ask for. What happens after we hand over a spell is none of our business.

When the spell caused that man's death, I was worried the police would make it our business, but the wife kept her mouth shut, the spell's ingredients didn't turn up in a toxin screen, and the medical examiner ruled the man's death a heart attack. Still, I'm surprised Da's selling this brew again.

“Cash,” he grunts, making the woman flinch. She pulls a leather wallet from her purse and tentatively places two crisp twenties on the scratched counter. Her hand hovers above her purse, which is always the sign to ask for more money.

“This spell’s eighty,” I say. “It’s hard to get bursting heart this time of year.” That’s not strictly true, but this woman won’t know. And who can say when another customer is going to come along. They’ve gotten rarer since our magic started going wrong—our Liquid Lies spell gave a man bleeding mouth ulcers instead of allowing him to deceive his boss; a brew that was supposed to make a woman’s thirty-year-old son move out of her house sent him into a violent temper so extreme he smashed all the windows in their home before he left. A dozen more stories like that are floating around Fawney. So only the people who are angry or desperate enough to be reckless come now.

Like Soccer Mom. She pulls another forty dollars from her purse while Da pours the concoction through a mesh strainer into a small mason jar. The contents are as murky brown as the river that runs through this town. That’s mostly owing to the handful of forest soil Da has started throwing into every brew he makes. He says the soil grounds the spells, making them homely and serviceable. I think that’s more superstition than anything, same as having the customer add the final ingredient with their own hand. I’m not sure there’s any measure we can take now to keep the magic under our control.

Da fastens the lid and holds the jar out to the woman. “Now listen carefully and do exactly what I say. You need to get it into

his food or drink. A third today, a third tomorrow, a third the next day. Don't do anything differently. Exactly that, and you'll get what you came for. His new girl won't recognize him." Da gives the woman a contemptuous smile. "You understand?"

She snatches the jar and rushes for the back exit, leaving the kitchen's screen door banging in the wind in her hurry to get away. Soon, her car tears down the driveway.

"Poor bastard," Da mutters, shaking his head.

"Couldn't you have given her something else?" I ask.

Da snorts. "Uh-uh. That woman won't be satisfied till her cheating husband is limp and lifeless as an overboiled crawdad."

"Well, let's hope it's more limp than lifeless this time," I say. Da grunts in agreement.

I start helping Da clean up the mess scattered all over the kitchen—dried mushrooms on the table, drifts of dirt on the counter and floor, water dripping down the stove. We work in silence together, each of us content to keep to our own thoughts. I don't realize I've started humming Momma's murder ballad until Da swears and says my name. I nearly drop my broom.

"The Bloody Miller," he murmurs. "That sort of morning, then?" He finishes washing out his brew pot and then tosses it under the kitchen sink, where it lands with a dull thunk. When I don't answer, Da sighs and leaves the kitchen. Soon, the busted old recliner in the living room groans with his weight. He turns on the TV, and the familiar, monotonous voice of anchorman Jerry Jones drifts down the hallway. I half listen for a few minutes as I rummage through the kitchen for something to eat. I take my bag of chips into the living room

just as video footage of the road that runs past our house appears on the screen.

Jerry's face turns grim. "The hunt is still underway for local woman, twenty-one-year-old Rochelle Greymont, who went missing last week."

A posed photograph of a beautiful white girl with blond hair and perfect teeth appears on the screen behind the news anchor. "Authorities have located her car on the outskirts of Wood Thrush Nature Park, but—"

Da shuts off the TV, and we sit in silence, only the ticking of the clock over the fireplace making a sound. Worry unfurls in my gut like a fiddlehead uncurling from its bud. Another missing girl. The second one to go missing on the Bend—a four-mile stretch of land hugged on one side by the river, roughly approximating the borders of the nature park, though of course the Bend came first. The Bend has been the secret source of our family's magic for the last hundred years, whether it's been private farmland, unclaimed wasteland, or a state-funded nature park. The land has never belonged to the Lloyds, but that doesn't matter. The Bend is ours.

And now girls are going missing on it.

The first one, Samantha Parsons, had been out hiking with her boyfriend. He said he turned around and she was just gone. One girl missing, fine. But two?

My mind flits to the smear of blood on Momma's lips.

"Da," I say, but he interrupts.

"Don't even think that, Della. Your momma's locked up good now. She's been there every morning, hasn't she?"

“Yes,” I whisper. *And singing about the murder of a blond girl.*

“She’s not a killer.”

“She killed Aunt Sage,” I say.

Da flinches at my words. The memory is still as painful to him as it is to me.

Momma and Sage had gone out to try a new spell to heal the Bend’s wayward magic. But something went horribly, unimaginably wrong. Da and I found them just in time to see the monster Momma had become push her sister’s bloodied body into the river. I had to go home and tell my cousin Miles that his mother was dead and mine was to blame.

Da shakes his head. “That was different. She’d only just changed, and she didn’t know her own strength. She wouldn’t hurt those girls. I know she wouldn’t.”

I rub the sore spot on my scalp where she grabbed me by the hair this morning, but I don’t say anything. Everything in me wants to believe that Da’s right, that Momma is more than the monster who hides inside her by day and comes creeping out at night—the one I’ve begun to call the river siren.

After Aunt Sage, we locked Momma in the defunct Wilson J. Monroe Penitentiary, where she couldn’t do any more harm.

But the closed-down prison is closed down for a reason: it’s old and crumbling, with a dozen possible escape routes for someone cunning enough to find them. And my mother is nothing if not cunning.

My eyes wander to the framed pictures on the wall, all family snapshots. Momma and Aunt Sage with their arms around each other, Sage smiling like a sunflower while Momma looks

at the camera with a mysterious smile. Miles and me as little kids, playing at spell work in the mud. And my favorite, of me and Momma and Da at the kitchen table, Momma blowing out the candles on her birthday cake. The difference between the mother in that photo and the half-feral woman I left behind in the prison this morning makes me want to weep.

Now this new girl, Rochelle Greymont, is missing, and her disappearance sits heavy as a weight in my gut.

But if Momma is escaping, if she's hurting people, what am I supposed to do? When she first turned, Da and I tried every brew we could think of to change her back, and nothing worked. After a while, he gave up. He visited her less and less, until one day he stopped going at all and left her to me. Miles was too angry and grieved to stay here; he took a cleaning job at Highland Rim University, saying he was done with magic. I lost my aunt, my mother, and my cousin in one go. Now I'm on my own, and I have no idea what to do.

I could shoot her, I guess, or I could lead the police to her and let them do it. But I know I'd kill a hundred park visitors myself before I'd let my momma die.

It's an ugly thought, but maybe the Bend makes monsters of us all.

Someone starts knocking on our front door the next morning before the sun is fully up. I'm brushing my teeth, so I wait for Da to wake up and answer it.

"What?" Da finally hollers, dragging himself down the hallway toward the front door.

The banging comes again.

It's too early in the morning for a customer. I've been up for half an hour, making Momma's breakfast and getting ready for the day, but Da never shows his face before nine if he can help it. Besides, customers don't bang like that. They are much more timid, afraid a witch is going to blast them at the threshold.

I peer out of the bathroom when Da opens the door. Two uniformed police officers stand there, a burly white man and a short white woman with blond hair. I walk softly down the hallway to see what's happening, toothbrush still in hand. I catch the end of the man's sentence.

“. . . checking in with the neighbors, see if anyone heard anything or saw the girl.”

Da keeps his hand on the door. “We didn't, and you might've noticed we don't have any neighbors. We're the only folks around here for a long ways.”

“Yes, that's why it's so important for you to give us any information you might have,” the man says patiently.

Da sighs, and I come to stand next to him before he can say anything too nasty. “We don't know anything about the missing girl,” I say, meeting the female cop's eyes. She's kind of hot, but cops mean nothing but trouble for us. “If we did, we would've called already.”

She raises her eyebrows like she doesn't believe me, and my heart starts to race. She cocks her head as if she can hear it beating in my chest. “Mind if we take a look around your property, just in case?”

“Actually, I do mind,” Da says, but I step in front of him.

We can't give them any reason to look into us. We've got too much to hide.

"Feel free to check the yard and the shed," I say. "But we really don't know anything."

She looks to Da for permission, and he gives a terse nod.

The male cop looks over Da's head, trying to catch a look at the inside of the witches' house. I'm sure he's heard more than a few stories, probably seen the aftereffects of some of our brews, whether he knew it or not. "Only y'all live here? Nobody else?" he asks. "I thought the Lloyds were a big family."

I freeze, but Da answers. "My lazy wife got tired of looking after this 'un and hightailed it off to Memphis with her sorry sister. Just us two now."

"And that cat there," I add as the enormous orange tabby Aunt Sage named Sunny darts past the cops' ankles and into the house. The female cop meets my eyes again, as if checking to see I'm not banged up. I give her Da's patented disdainful smile and she looks away.

"Thank you for your cooperation," the man says. "We'll have a look around and be on our way. But if you hear anything, you give me a call." He places a card in Da's hand.

"Yes, sir," I say before Da closes the door in their faces.

"Shit," I whisper, leaning against the closed door. "Shit."

Da puts a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Ain't her, Della. I told you that. Them sniffing 'round here don't make a damn bit of difference."

"What if they ask more questions about where Momma and Aunt Sage are?" We never reported the death, and Sage didn't

have anyone but Miles to wonder about her. Miles agreed to keep quiet about her murder for the family's sake, but if pressed by police, he might reveal something. "The lady cop seemed concerned about my lack of a mother," I add.

Da snorts. "They don't give two shits what happened to your momma. They'll see these girls going missing's got nothing to do with us and be on their way. Now, don't you have someplace to be?" He looks meaningfully at the old grandfather clock standing across the room. "You're gonna be late, and she'll think you've abandoned her for good."

"I'm not the one who's abandoned her," I mutter as I walk back to my room. Da picks up Sunny and strokes the cat's head, pretending not to hear what I said.

As I drive over to the prison, my mind starts churning through every possible escape route Momma could take. I picture her breaking through a window, scaling the high walls of the prison, and dropping to the dead grass below. I picture her racing across the road and into the forest, bounding on all fours, making for the river. But I don't let myself picture what might come after that. I don't let myself think about teeth and claws and blood. Not yet. Not until I have to. For now, I'll keep pretending, just like Da.