

Prologue

January 10, 1936

I believe it's the cold I remember most.

Yes, I still feel the cold. I still feel a lot of things. Like the deep down shiver of my sweet little Maggie as she stands beside her daddy, stealing fingers the color of bone into his calloused brown hand, needing his warmth. But there is no warmth in him, my poor, poor Henry, and it grinds my heart to see it. Yes, I still have a heart too. Or an ache, at least, where it used to be.

Maggie clutches at the buttoned up collar of her black wool coat, hunching her shoulders as if to hoard her heat. I want to scold her for not remembering her gloves—and Henry too, for not looking after her. He's dressed her up, I see, put her in her yellow dress from last Easter, the one with the bow in back. Already her knees are blue with cold.

But it's not in me to be angry. The man next to Maggie hardly resembles the one I knew, and I knew Henry Gavin well. He's hollowed out now, hardly there at all, though his boots still leave prints in the earth. And he never leaves off staring at that stone. I knew right off where he was going when he cranked up that old truck, and I knew right off why. He means to tell her.

She's a beautiful child. Her face is so still and pale, like a doll's, the fine blue-white of china, and her gray eyes are wide and shimmery from the chill. My arms long to go around her, to hold her close, to keep her warm, and guard her against all that may come. For a moment the pain is so raw it nearly bends me in two. You forget sometimes to steel yourself against those moments. You think it all stops but it doesn't. You can still hurt, long after you're dead and gone.

Well, if the child must know, and it seems she must, I wish it were me doing the telling. Men don't do these things well. She's already confused. I see it in her face when he got out of the truck and started walking, and I see it again now as she follows her daddy eyes to the pale slab of soapstone.

It's my stone, my bones that lay beneath that mound of dark earth, all fenced in with pretty black iron. There's a gate with two doves and a shiny brass lock to keep me in my place. Too late for that I guess. There are words inscribed there, but no dates, and no name. Thank heaven, at least, for that.

The sun comes through the clouds like ice water and the wind makes a sound like crying. Maggie's hair lifts out around her head like smoke. "It's beautiful, Daddy," is all she can think to whisper. Her voice is soft as a secret.

Henry isn't wearing a coat over his gray flannel suit and the breeze yanks at his tie, whipping it like a flag over one shoulder. His eyes look so tired, so far away. He doesn't blink, just stares back at her with his Adam's apple bobbing against his collar. His mouth begins to churn finally, but no words come, and all at once there are no more questions in his daughter's eyes.

What can the old fool be thinking? He must see that no good can come of it. Even the child knows that. And what in God's name would the fine folk of Gavin, North Carolina have to say if they learned he had buried his wife's maid up on his precious ridge? I don't belong here. There are places for us, separate places far off from our betters. My stone should be proof enough of that. We've already given those stiff necks and their kind enough wood to burn.

Maggie tries again for her father's hand but he's forgotten she's there. She steps to the stone alone, and goes to her knees. Her fingers are blue as she folds them beneath her chin. It's

the first time I've wanted to cry, and the first time I realize I no longer can. It doesn't seem fair when your heart still aches so. But so much isn't fair.

"It's time to go child," Henry calls out. His voice is thick and unfamiliar, like when you wake from a dream. "I've got work to do and your—" He stops, glances away, clears his throat. "Your mama will be wondering where you got to."

Maggie stands facing him. Her knees are stained and she scrubs at them with the heels of her hands. I'm relieved that they're going. He sees now that it's the wrong time to tell her, that it will always be the wrong time. There's no point, after all. Not anymore. But Maggie isn't ready to go. She turns back, bending to read the stone's brief inscription. Her mouth moves over the words—words so precious I feel them like a wound.

*I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.*

The eyes she turns to her father are shiny with tears. Her tiny shoulders wrack with silent sobs. And in that moment I see Henry change his mind.

"Maggie, I want you to listen." His voice is dry like paper as he clamps his rough brown hands on her shoulders. "There's something I—"

But she won't listen. She claps her fists over her ears, shakes her head from side to side, and her words wrench my soul. "Never say it," she whispers. "If you say it, then it's true."

For a moment Henry goes rigid and I believe he will fall into little pieces at the child's feet. The air goes out of him suddenly, a long slow gush of breath, a kind of caving in. It makes him smaller somehow, frail in a way I never noticed. Let it go, Henry. You must leave it where it stands. The child has asked you to.

Maggie has him by the sleeve now, tugging him against his will back to the present. "We better get back," she says, her voice strangely grown up. "Mama's going to want to know where we've been. We'll stop up at Jackson's and get you some cigarettes. You can tell her you ran into old man Gainey or somebody."

She starts for the truck then, her cold blue fists knotted at her sides. I can tell by the tilt of her head that she's listening for footsteps, but there are no footsteps, only the low keening of her daddy's heart breaking wide open.