

Excerpt

Marlowe woke to the tread of feet in the kitchen and the muffled chatter of her nieces. Slowly opening her eyes, she glanced out the transom window above her bed, where a cloud bank scattered the late autumn sun and the frozen lawn glowed faintly. She guessed it was well past eight, the breakfast hour her mother, Glory, insisted upon seven days a week. The house was in full swing above her basement bedroom, which she'd taken over in her twenties, when her nieces encroached on her childhood room upstairs. She didn't mind retreating—she preferred her privacy, especially during these annual Fisher family holiday weeks at the Gray House.

Pleased that her head had only a dull ache and no searing pain, Marlowe swung her legs over the side of the bed. Last night, along with her brothers, Nate and Henry, she had stayed up until the small hours, cracking open bottles of wine and trading old stories. That was the routine this time of year, when they were all back under one roof at their cherished upstate home. She had been visiting the country house in Dutchess County since she was five years old. Memories from their childhood weekends fleeing New York City and running wild always felt fresher around the holidays, probably because Nate and Henry had their own kids now and came back only for special occasions.

Although she kept an apartment on the Upper West Side, Marlowe had spent increasingly more time in the country over the past few years. She was used to the silence now, and it made weeks like this one feel loud and overwhelming. Marlowe tried to be a kind and attentive aunt, but she often found herself counting down the hours until it would be quiet again.

She ran back through what she remembered of the previous night—the Thanksgiving meal that hadn't changed since she was a child, the wine by the fire—but she winced as she recalled her nieces bounding down from their baths in matching pajamas, looking cherubic as they hugged their parents good night. Nate had glanced at Marlowe with concern, and Henry had actually reached out and patted her hand. She could read their minds: How awful to be a single woman in her thirties without any prospect of children on the horizon. Marlowe's only response was to take a large gulp of chardonnay. Never mind that Marlowe had plenty to fill her life. She had friends and her painting and her travels and her burgeoning career as an illustrator. Despite her brothers' fears that Marlowe must feel left behind, thirty-six was hardly ancient. And she had always been patient. Better to wait forever than settle for less than what she wanted. Although not even she could say exactly what that was.

Marlowe tiptoed over to the French doors that opened to a small back patio, flinching with every step across the cold floorboards. She pushed the sheer curtain aside and peered out at the grass tipped with frost and the silent sentinels of apple trees, drab and colorless now that their riotous autumn was ending. All the apples had fallen into patches of brown leaves and rotted in sweet-smelling clumps. Even with the doors closed, she caught the scent of bonfires in the November air. The Fisher men had made a massive one yesterday, filled with all the dead branches Henry was so diligent about collecting. Marlowe wondered if her younger brother would ever love practicing law as much as he loved his time-honored exercise of picking up sticks.



Once she was dressed, Marlowe ran a brush through her dark hair before heading upstairs. Crossing the spacious living room, she felt a flicker of relief as the empty kitchen came into view. Of course, it was spotless. An hour earlier, the children had probably turned the countertop into a chaotic, sticky land mine, but Marlowe’s mother had already swept in behind them to clean up the mess. Holiday or not, Glory never left a single dish unwashed before bed or after a meal.

It was also Glory’s habit to rise at five every morning and brew a massive pot of coffee. It was nearly nine. The coffee would be cold. Marlowe poured herself a cup anyway, just as the side door off the kitchen opened and Nate strode in, a pile of logs in his arms.

“Mom and Dad are in town getting the papers.” Nate spoke as he unloaded the logs. He brushed off his coat, always in motion and poised for action. “Walk?”

Marlowe nodded and set her mug down on the counter.

Nate grinned, his eyes crinkling up. Nothing seemed to make him happier than rallying his siblings for a walk, as if it was a pleasant surprise and not something they had done hundreds of times. That was the charm of her older brother. His smile could convince you that a river runs uphill.

Henry entered with another armful of logs. Marlowe noted he moved slower than he used to after a late night.

“Marlowe is in,” Nate said to Henry. “Come for a walk with us?”

“Just us three?” Henry smiled. “Sneaking off to the Bend for old times’ sake.”

It was a joke now that they were adults, but the Bend had once been their most cherished secret. As children, they were forbidden to swim without parental supervision. They swam anyway and vowed never to tell.

Nate led them to the door, and Marlowe buttoned up her coat as they stepped out into the frigid cold. She followed her brothers across the wide front lawn, the grass flat and faded to a yellowish green. She glanced back at her home. Even with its boxy proportions, the Gray House stood elegant and alluring. The sky was overcast to match the house’s somber tone, but the Gray House was far from drab. The shutters were painted dark green, contrasting its namesake clapboard color. It was cozy, yet regal, and lovingly maintained by regular visits from a house cleaner, painters who applied a fresh coat every other spring, and a fleet of lawn mowers in the summer, all arranged long ago and directed by Enzo, the wizened Italian handyman who’d become like a second father to Marlowe and the boys.

At the road, Nate paused to look at an oak tree, musing that it might be diseased. It was a habit he had picked up from their father, who believed he had a preternatural ability to spot a rotting tree long before anyone else might notice the symptoms of decay.

“We might have to cut her down.” Nate patted the trunk with his gloved hand, and Henry nodded along. Henry didn’t claim to have the same skill, but he never missed an opportunity to fool around with heavy equipment. During summer weekends, the Weedwacker was practically glued to his arm.

“I’d bet fifty dollars that tree is still fine by next summer,” Marlowe said.

Nate simply sighed and shook his head as they continued walking by a copse of young pines and crossed to the other side of the road, where they passed the empty red Gallagher barn. After their father purchased the Gray House, they’d spent nearly every weekend of their childhoods upstate, watching the Gallagher brothers tend to their herd and mow their hayfields. A ragged wood fence still separated the barn from the gently sloping pastures, but no livestock roamed now that the farmers were gone. Marlowe, Nate, and Henry walked through the open gate toward the other side of the field. Their boots crunched over the frostbitten grass and hardened lumps of dirt. The field had to be mowed every few weeks in the summer now that the cows no longer grazed.



The gradual incline met with a hill that climbed steadily into an overlook—one of their favorite spots on the property—that they called the Rise. There was an old queen oak at its crest; inert branches arched up from the trunk before drooping toward the icy ground. It took them almost twenty minutes to get from their house to the tree. How fast had they run that distance in their youth, with their nimble legs and relentless hearts? Fifteen minutes? Ten?

Marlowe clenched her fists in her pockets. She had her jacket collar pulled up against a bitter wind.

“It hasn’t been this cold at Thanksgiving for a long time,” Henry said. “Even with that snowstorm five years ago, it wasn’t this cold.”

“Can’t handle it, little brother? You must be spending too much time in that fancy law office of yours,” Nate ribbed.

Marlowe laughed. She wondered what she and her brothers were, if not three people with shared memories of an array of holidays and the weather that accompanied each one.

From the top of the Rise, Marlowe could make out the slate-shingled roof of the house and a few of the upstairs windows. Mere steps beyond the house were the garden and the apple orchard, ending at the foot of the north hayfield on its steep hill. The field and the orchard were surrounded by the woods, carved up by old footpaths and loosely mortared stone walls—a perfect playground orbiting the warm sun of the Gray House. A few wisps of green grass and some orange leaves clinging to barren branches provided the only color except for the faded red of the barn. Yet in any season the view was idyllic, like a storybook farm from the olden days, when life was simple and people were good. Marlowe knew this was an illusion, but like the illustrations she painted for children’s books, the deception was a lovely one.

Marlowe looked to her brothers, who smiled broadly as they turned their backs on the barn and the house and headed down the other side of the Rise, toward the wooded gully. They traversed a thicket of trees and underbrush to reach the narrow valley carved from a dried-out streambed. After climbing out, they found themselves on the western edge of the Flats—another field, which was wider, more unkempt, and distinguished by a maze of birch trees, weeds, and brambles guarding their trunks. The Flats rolled in gentle hillocks, their northern side lined by the swamplands. At the northeast corner of the Flats, the Bean River emerged from the murky pools and gnarled trees of the bog. The river cut steadily across the Flats from north to south, about a hundred yards from where Marlowe stood with her brothers. This land had never been a pasture or planted with any crops. It was too uneven and rocky. But it was beautiful—not quite wilderness but not tamed either.

The tall grass, once lush and green in the summer, had turned a soft yellow hue by November. Somehow, this made the field look even more lovely. The trees grew dense near the winding Bean River. As a child, Marlowe had imagined the name came from an actual legume, or perhaps the river’s shape resembled one. Maybe beans had once been cultivated along its banks. In truth, the name traced back to a family who had lived near the river long ago, though no one could quite recall exactly when, or who they were.

With what felt like an ancient instinct, Marlowe turned her head away from the swamp and toward the mythical Bend, hidden among the trees in the southeast corner of the Flats, where the river turned at a right angle and the water widened into their old swimming hole.

“Might be a good day for a dip, Mar,” Henry joked.

Marlowe shook her head. “I’m ready to go back.”

She cursed herself for not eating breakfast before the walk. The freezing cold and the exertion were making her woozy. She was starting to crave the armchair by the fire.

“Come on, we have to at least get to the Bend,” Nate said.



Marlowe huffed a few more steps and then stopped to take in the scene. Her eyes froze on a black shape near one of the solitary trees about three hundred feet away.

“Is that a tent?” Henry had spotted it as well.

“Must be a deer hunter,” Nate said.

Marlowe’s father occasionally granted hunting leases to some of the locals in exchange for a chest freezer full of venison, which kept the Fishers well fed throughout the year. It was a quiet exchange that tied the family to the rhythms of the land, even in their absence. Marlowe rarely saw or heard from the hunters. She had spotted their blinds and perches in the woods her whole life, but the men themselves came and went in the silent predawn hours, their presence more imagined than real. They had a few wire seats rigged up in tree crowns with ladders, and there were some lean-tos as well, but a tent was unusual. Not one like this, with its bent poles and sagging canvas top.

Nate moved first, and Henry a second later. He wasn’t wearing a hat, and the rims of his ears had turned bright red. Part of Marlowe wanted to turn and run home on the spot, but she’d never once let her brothers venture without her.

As they approached the tent, the silence turned heavy. Marlowe didn’t hear any rustle or movement from inside, and the front was zipped up almost all the way.

Henry let out a small chuckle, but it lacked any real mirth. “Well, let’s see what’s inside.”

He reached out and yanked hard on the zipper so that the flap fell open at once.

Marlowe clapped her hand over her mouth as Henry reared backward, his shoulder colliding with her chest.

Had the body been arranged differently, it wouldn’t have been so bad. If the thick boots and mud-splattered pants had fallen out first. But it was a man’s misshapen head that appeared at the opening, one vacant eye staring straight up at Marlowe. He was wearing the type of camo jacket local hunters donned, with brown leaf patterns.

In one swift, sharp movement, Nate turned his entire body to the side, but Marlowe couldn’t look away from the matted hair twisted over the indent in the man’s forehead where his head had been bashed in, where the white of his skull gleamed.

“Jesus, who is that?” Henry had taken several steps back.

Nate tugged on Marlowe’s arm. “We need to go.”

Marlowe didn’t let him lead her away. She reached out and nudged the flap lower.

“Don’t touch anything.” Nate’s grip on her arm tightened.

Henry pulled out his phone and held it up in the air. “There’s never any service out here—I can’t get a signal.”

“We need to get back to the house.” Nate took off in ground-eating strides, and Henry followed, matching the pace.

Marlowe tasted bile on the back of her tongue. She swallowed hard and ran after her brothers.

