

Chapter Ten

Killing Chickens

I tuck her wings tight against her heaving body, crouch over her, and cover her flailing head with my gloved hand. Holding her neck hard against the floor of the coop, I take a breath, set something deep and hard inside my heart, and twist her head. I hear her neck break with a crackle. Still she fights me, struggling to be free of my weight, my gloved hands, my need to kill her. Her shiny black beak opens and closes, opens and closes silently as she gasps for air. I hadn't known this would happen. I am undone by the flapping, the dust rising and choking me, the disbelieving little eye turned up to mine. I hold her beak closed, covering that eye. Still she pushes, her reptile legs bracing against mine, her warmth, her heart beating fast with mine. I turn her head on her floppy neck again, and again, corkscrewing her breathing tube, struggling to end the gasping. The eye, turned around and around, blinks and studies me. The early spring sun flows onto us through a silver stream of dust, like a stage light, while we fight each other. I lift my head and see that the other birds are eating still, pecking their way around us for stray bits of corn. This one, this twisted and broken lump of gleaming black feathers, claws hard at the floor, like a big stretch, and then deflates like a pierced ball. I wait, holding her tiny beak and broken neck with all my might.

I am killing chickens. It is my birthday. I was awake through the night, reckoning with a terrible decision. When I woke this morning, the next path was finally, achingly clear. After breakfast I sat with my children, Alex and Benjamin, and struggled to ease the news that their father and I are divorcing. They were stunned into silence.

Now, as I crouch over my quiet hen, my sons are making a birthday surprise for me at the kitchen table. "It's okay, guys," I had said as I gathered my gloves and went outside, trying with my voice to pull them back to safety. "I won't peek."

I carry Bertie's warm, limp body outside and lay her on the grass. Back inside the coop, I stalk my hens and come up with Tippy-Toes. I gather her frantic wings and crouch over her. My husband normally would kill off my beautiful but tired old hens, no longer laying, to make way for the new chicks that are arriving tomorrow. I don't know how to do this. But I am going to do it myself. This is just a little thing in all the things I am going to have to learn to do alone. I have five more to go. Tippy-Toes tries to shriek behind my glove. I clamp my hand over her beak and give her head a hard twist. I feel her body break deep inside my own chest.

Two down. I feel powerful, capable. I can handle whatever comes to me.

But I need a rest. I am tired, exhausted, with a heavy, muffled weight settling inside. "I'm coming in," I call in a false, singsong voice from the kitchen door. "Better hide my surprise." Ten and seven, Alex and Ben know that a terrible thing is happening to them. They are working quietly in the kitchen, not giggling and jostling the way they always do. Their downy blond heads touch as they lean over their projects. I feel a crush of sadness, of defeat. We are exploding into smithereens on this pretty March day and we all know it.

"I have to make a cake!" I sing from the doorway. "When are you guys going to be done in there?"

"Wait! Wait!" they squeal. It is an empty protest, their cheer as hollow as mine.

Our old house smells good, of wood smoke and the pancakes the three of us ate this morning, in that other world of hope and confidence before our conversation. We live on a ridge high over the mouth of the Damariscotta River on the coast of Maine. From our beds, we can see out over Pemaquid Point, over Monhegan Island,

over the ocean to the edge of the Old World. The rising sun bursts into our sleep each morning. At night, before bed, we lie on my bed together naming Orion and Leo and the Pleiades in whispers. Monhegan's distant lighthouse beam sweeps the walls of our rooms all night at thirty-six-second intervals. Our little house creaks in the wind during February storms. Now spring has come, and the world has shifted.

"Help me make my cake," I say to the boys. They drag their chairs to the counter.

"Mum, will Dad be home for your birthday tonight?" Alex asks. Both boys are so contained, so taut, so helpless. They lean against me, quiet.

Guilt and fear tug me down like an undertow. I start to cry.

"I don't know, my loves. I think maybe not."

Bertie and Tippy-Toes lie side by side on the brown grass, their eyes open, necks bent. I close the coop door behind me and lunge for the next hen.

"It's all right," I say softly. "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right. *Sbbb*, Silly, *sbbb*." I crouch over her. Silly is the boys' favorite because she lets them carry her around the yard. I hope they will forget her when the box of peeping balls of fluff arrives tomorrow.

"It's okay, Silly," I say quietly, wrapping my gloved hand around her hard little head. She is panting, her eyes wild, frantic, betrayed. I cover them with my fingers and twist her neck hard. Her black wings, iridescent in the dusty sunlight, beat against my legs. I hold her close to me while she scrabbles against my strong hands. I start to cry again.

When I go back up to the house, Bertie and Tippy-Toes and Silly and Mother Mabel lie on the grass outside the coop.

Benjamin comes into the kitchen and leans against my legs. "What are we going to do?" he asks.

“About what, sweetheart?” I hope he is not asking me about tomorrow. Or the next day.

“Nothing,” he says, drifting off to play with Alex upstairs.

We frost the cake blue, Ben’s favorite color, and put it on the table next to their presents for me, wrapped in wallpaper. I want to call someone, to call my mother or my sister. Instead, I bring in three loads of wood and put them in the empty wood box.

“Alex, will you lay up a fire for tonight? And Ben, go down cellar and get a bunch of kindling wood.”

Like serious little men, my children do what I ask.

“What are we going to make for my birthday supper? Spaghetti?”

“I thought we were going to Uncle Michael’s and Aunt Ashley’s,” Alex says.

“Know what?” I say. “Know what I want to do? Let’s just stay here, and have our own private little party. Just us.”

I feel marooned with my children. I sit at the table watching while they do their chores, then head back out to finish mine.

Minnie Hen is next. She lets me catch her and kill her without much fight. I lay her next to the others in the cold grass.

Itty-Bit is last. She is my favorite. The others chewed off her toes, one by one, when she was a chick. I made a separate box for her, a separate feeder, separate roost, and smeared antibiotic ointment four times a day on the weeping stubs. She survived, and ate from my hand after that. She has grown to be fierce with the other hens, never letting them too close to her, able to slip in, grab the best morsels, and flee before they can peck her. I have come to admire her very much, my tough little biddy.

She cowers in the corner, alone. I sit next to her, and she lets me pull her up into my lap. I stroke her feathers smooth, stroke after stroke. Her comb is pale and shriveled, a sign of her age. I know she hasn’t laid an egg for months. She is shaking. I hold her warmth

against me, cooing to her, “It’s all right, Itty-Bit. Everything’s going to be all right. Don’t be scared.” My anger and fear center like a tornado on having to kill this hen. I get up, crying again, holding Itty-Bit tight to me. I lay her gently on the floor and crouch over her. The sun fills the coop with thick light.

That night, after eating spaghetti and making a wish and blowing out thirty-eight candles and opening the presents Alex and Benjamin made—a mail holder made from wood slats, a sculpture of two-by-fours and shells—after baths and reading stories in bed and our sweet, in-the-dark whispered good-nights; after saying, “I don’t know what is going to happen” to my scared children; after banking the fire and turning off the lights, I sit on the porch in the cold, trying to imagine what has to happen next. I can see the outline of the coop against the dark, milky sky. I touch my fingers, my hands, so familiar to me. Tonight they feel like someone else’s. I wrap my arms around myself—thin, tired—and wish it were yesterday.

Tomorrow morning, I think, I have to turn over the garden and go to the dump. Tomorrow morning, I have to call a lawyer. I have to figure out what to say to Alex and Benjamin. I have to put Ben’s sculpture on the mantel, and put some mail in Alex’s holder on the desk. I have to clean out the coop and spread fresh shavings.