

TOGETHER
WE ROT

S K Y L A A R N D T



VIKING

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To metamorphosis

And so God damned the garden along with man.

CHAPTER ONE

WIL

“It doesn’t count as evidence if you were *stalking* them, Wil.”

Sheriff Vrees has been kicking up a storm since I waltzed through the door, but he lets out another groan for good measure. We’ve got a weekly ritual, the two of us. I’ve spent the last year digging into his ribs like a thorn, looming over my mother’s missing person case, and he’s spent the last year looking into early retirement.

“You can’t solve crimes by committing your own,” he says flatly. Every day, I parade into the Pine Point police station with new clues; he dismisses them, and then we duke it out for fifteen minutes. Today, we’ve made it to the second minute of our scheduled banter.

I slap my hand on the counter. He’s lucky there’s a barrier between us. I’d love nothing more than to leap over it some days and throttle him. “So you admit what happened was a crime?”

His co-workers don’t bat an eye behind him. They’re used to this song and dance. They’re also too busy not doing their jobs: chatting among themselves, wadding papers to toss into faraway cans, slurping coffee, and snacking on doughnuts. Overly stereotypical crap. Anything to egg me on, I guess.

One of them is fiddling with the radio and playing tinny Christmas music over the warbled speakers. I don’t care how much Michael Bublé plays or how hard the snow falls beyond the glass windows—I’m not in a holly-jolly mood. There’s a limit to my patience and we’re at the end of

it. My mood today is best described as five seconds away from physically assaulting an officer.

“For the last time, Ms. Greene, there is no sign of foul play.” His fingers lock together, the way they always do when he’s absolutely livid, just barely keeping his shit together. I’ve done a number on him in a matter of twelve months: Weathered eyes, black hair streaked through with gray, a family of premature wrinkles carved into his skin. “We’ve looked into your mother’s case. Tirelessly. Endlessly. All signs point to your mother leaving town voluntarily.”

Behind him, the wall is a boring wash of pale yellow. It bleeds together with the rest of the office. With him. Muted and dull and unremarkable, Sheriff Vrees is about as bland as they come. He’s a lukewarm TV dinner or a mindless Saturday afternoon, the kind you spend with your eyes glazed over and the local news playing quietly in the background.

He’s shown more emotion in the last couple months than he ever has in his life. He should thank me for that.

I tap a nail-bitten finger on my photo. How I got the evidence shouldn’t matter. “*I’ve also been looking into it, Mark.* Tirelessly. Endlessly. And look what I’ve found.”

The photo I took shows the beloved local preacher—the one seemingly as untouchable as God himself—in the woods beyond his house. Shadows dampen the image, soaking the details of the scene into a blurry haze. Despite this, there’s enough moonlight to carve the unmistakable silhouette of him with his hands around a hare’s throat. Pastor Clarke had snapped it in two and the blood is staining the ice red.

Sheriff Vrees’s eyes glaze over the image for a measly second. “I don’t get it.”

I scoff. “A man sacrificing an animal out in the woods isn’t weird to you?”

“Sacrificing? *Pfff*. With that logic, everyone in the UP is in a cult.” To prove his point that ritualistic animal sacrifice is a popular pastime in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Vrees nods toward the photos on his desk. Next to a portrait of his pregnant wife is a hunting shot. Vrees with a ruddy red nose, standing in front of a deer stand and grinning proudly beside an animal carcass.

“Twelve-pointer,” he says, humming to himself.

“What a beast,” Officer Mathers calls from his computer. He’s not even looking into anything important on the screen. The bastard’s playing a round of solitaire. And losing, at that.

My patience was limited to begin with, but it’s long gone now. “Whatever,” I gripe, “this is only *one* of the things I’ve shown you. I was posting again on my forum and—”

“The Nancy Drew gene really runs in your family, huh?” Vrees has a good long laugh at that.

My fists ball tight at my sides. “My mother isn’t just some amateur detective, okay? She’s a journalist. *Was* a journalist. Had a whole degree before she moved here and became a school counselor—I don’t have to explain this shit to you. It’s none of your business.”

Vrees’s scowl disappears under his mustache. “I don’t care what you or TrueCrimeLover420 has to say, Wil. We’ve been through this a million times before. Case closed.”

“Yes, we have, and each and every time, you never stop to actually listen to me.” I go to snatch my photo back, but Vrees is quicker. He yanks it out of reach and rips my work apart with heartless efficiency.

“What the hell?”

His skin ripples with frustration. “I sympathize with you—believe me, kid, I do—but your mom’s case is as good as closed. She skipped town. You and your dad don’t deserve that, but life’s like that.” He sips

his coffee like we're talking about the weather, not his own ineptitude and my missing mother. "Now it's time to stop playing Sherlock and leave the Clarke family alone. They're good people. Served this town well."

I'd hardly call them good people. Mom hadn't been missing for more than two days when Mrs. Clarke knocked on our door. "I'm so sorry to hear about your mother, Wilhelmina," she'd crooned, so sickly sweet, it could rot my teeth out. Her eyes were splotches of spilled ink and her smile was full of brilliant white teeth. "Send my regards to your father. Our whole congregation is praying they find her soon." And when she'd reached out to hold my hand, I could've sworn my mother's bracelet jangled from her wrist.

Vrees pinches the bridge of his nose. "For as much as you've been harassing them, they should be the ones filing a complaint. Instead, they're helping free your dad from that money-pit motel."

"Money-pit motel" being code for our family home and the only piece of my mother I have left. "Free my dad" meaning steal the place out from under us and flatten it into a parking lot. Anything to run us out of town. Vrees isn't the only one sick of me at this point. I'll never forget the way Mr. Clarke had stiffened when I'd shouted down the street at his back. The hellfire in his eyes when he turned to face me. "*Watch yourself, Miss Greene.*"

There's only so many times you can poke a bear before it finally shows its teeth. But I won't let anyone scare me off. I've got teeth of my own.

My fist slams hard enough on the desk to send every head flying up. "And I've told you a million times too. I'm never giving up on her. Unlike you, I actually care."

"Go home, Wil," he orders.

I huff and shove my phone deep in my pocket before Vrees can confiscate that, too. With a dozen eyes searing into my skin, I storm my way toward the frozen hellscape outside.

“And, Greene,” he calls, his voice more grating than usual. “Consider this a warning. Next time I see you bothering anyone in this town, there will be hell to pay.”

I freeze with my back to him. My fists clench the door handle and I fear any more pressure will have it ripping right off. Beyond the window, the snow has made the evergreens in the forest twice as vibrant. Just like how your eyes get brighter after you cry. Not in spite of the pain but because of it. I swallow back tears. “Don’t worry; I’ll do this on my own from now on.” The door slams hard behind me.

Naturally, my bike is buried beneath a mound of snow in the parking lot. It takes several minutes of yanking it free before I’m able to mount the slippery seat, but then, with a shaky start, I’m off.

The roads aren’t quite treacherous at this hour, but riding in this weather is hardly pleasant.

The storm has bleached the blue right out of the sky. Pine Point is always dreary, but the lack of color makes it worse. It is a ghoulish sort of gray, dismal and infectious; it soaks into my skin, magnifying my bad day until it feels like the entire world has been thrown off-center. Like I might never be happy again.

Get your shit together.

I pedal faster on my bike. I should be going home—warming myself up before my nightly stakeout in front of the Clarke house—but home is the last place I want to be right now. So instead, I veer toward one of the only people in this town I still care about. Ronnie Clearwater is in the middle of her shift at Earl’s Diner. I might’ve been fired from the same

place, but Earl has yet to outright ban me, so I loiter there on the regular.

It serves as a neon-red beacon in the distance, EARL'S PASTIES shearing through the soupy stretch of white. I have to hand it to Earl. The rest of his food might be school-cafeteria grade at best, but his signature meat pies are surprisingly good.

The diner is small and severely outdated, but it's got a roof and a heater, so it's fine with me.

It's also got a million of those little scented pine tree air fresheners in the window, so that's an added perk. The real pine trees outside aren't quite as fragrant.

Even in December, the Morguewood forest reeks to high heaven. The stench of decay wafts from the forest's soil, tickling my nose. The nasty, lingering odor lasts all year. The first frost subdues it, but it still looms like bile caught in the back of my throat.

Creatures die in droves out there. Deer stiff with frost. Bears with their eyes trained upward, past the starving flies and swirling maggots, up to the grimy gray sky above. Winter keeps their bodies fresh, and their carcasses thaw in the spring, decomposing with the wet slide of summer.

I rip my eyes away from the trees as I reach Earl's.

I swing the door open after kicking my bike to the curb. I don't bother locking it up. It's a rusted, ancient thing that no one in their right mind would steal. If someone needs it that badly, they're in worse shape than me.

It's important to mention that Earl's isn't one of those cute small-town, fifties-style diners.

There are no trendy black-and-white-tile floors or glossy red chairs, no teens sipping milkshakes at the counter while someone punches in an Elvis song at the jukebox.

Instead, we've got ugly-as-sin wood paneling and an overwhelming

number of deer heads and taxidermy fish on the wall staring at you while you eat. A local station plays from the radio. Some twangy country song about a wife who wants to commit a felony on her husband.

I shake the snow off on the grimy mat and step into the sickly white glow of the fluorescents.

There are generations of dead flies trapped in them, and when the lights crackle, it sounds like pattering wings. Typically, this would be the point where I'd slump into one of the worse-for-wear booths and smear the last guy's crumbs off the table. Ronnie would hand me a leftover basket of greasy fries, and we'd gossip back and forth until her shift ends.

Not today. She's busy being held hostage at someone else's table. From the tremble of her fists and the grit of her teeth, I can tell she'd rather run a mile in the cold than talk to this booth right now.

I know who it is before I even look. Ronnie's ex, Lucas Vandenhede.

There are less than a hundred students in the entire Pine Point school district, but Lucas Vandenhede has made it his mission to be the most annoying one. He's a walking, talking migraine. Five seconds with him and I need an Excedrin.

Everything about him is too manufactured. Too put in place. His straight white teeth are the product of years of orthodontic work and every word out of his mouth feels like it's been fed to him by a corny eighties high school flick.

"Vee, I only want to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," Ronnie snips, and I'm proud of her for it. She's taken notes from my daily "How to Be a Bitch" TED Talk.

"Please—"

"Fine, fine. You want to talk?" Ronnie echoes, her voice lowering into a sharp whisper-growl. Not much of a whisper, since I can hear it from across the restaurant. "Okay, let's talk. Let's start with how you've

been flirting with Leah Westbrooke all semester. Is that why you're here now? Because she's got a boyfriend? You're wasting your time crawling back to me."

I know she's seething, because she's got a strand of her hair curled around her finger. Some people twirl it like that to flirt, but it's Ronnie's alternative to yanking her hair right out of her scalp. I scowl at its color. Her harpy of a mother was quick to cover the blue. In less than forty-eight hours, she's already driven her daughter an hour away to a salon to fix it. It's no longer virgin blond but a brassy imitation of it.

Lucas's cheeks burn scarlet. "Flirting? She's my lab partner, Vee. What was I supposed to do? Not talk to her on the off chance you decided to stop hating me and make up?"

Lucas's friend Kevin Garcia sits in the middle of their fight like a skittish referee. He looks so thoroughly out of place in their argument that it's almost funny. He's Waldo hidden in the middle of a battlefield, giving a little smile while surrounded by fallen soldiers. Except Kevin's not the red-and-white-striped-T-shirt kind of guy. He's a walking advertisement for the weird and unexplained.

Today he's wearing an extraterrestrial-themed Christmas sweater, I WANT TO BELIEVE (IN SANTA) scrawled on the front, with a UFO led by reindeer. He's "Jack and the Beanstalk" tall, with black hair cropped close to his warm brown skin. He's one of those guys that would have girls lining up for him if he wasn't so obsessed with Bigfoot.

Kevin catches me looking over and gives me a sheepish half smile. We're not friends, but I guess it's one of those "Congrats, you're the only one who found me on this page!" sort of things. I don't return it.

His smile drops and he occupies himself with the syrup container beside him.

Ronnie whips away from Lucas. "Last I checked, making out with

your lab partner wasn't on the syllabus . . . and for the love of God, I keep telling you to stop calling me that."

Lucas's earlier bravado is gone completely. He sucks in a sharp breath and guards his heart with two tightly crossed arms. "We were broken up . . . Ronnie. It was one stupid time and it meant nothing and we never—we didn't—it wasn't like that. It was a mistake, and it ended as soon as it began. Please, can we not do this here?" He waves his hand around like *here* speaks for itself.

Ronnie's having none of it.

"If you're not going to order," she snaps, "then leave."

Lucas tuts. "Give me a Sprite, then, and Kevin will have a . . ." He looks over to Kevin and Kevin lurches in his skin. He pushes the syrup dispenser away like he wasn't just playing with it.

"Dr Pepper," Kevin answers. "Please."

Ronnie sneers. "Two lukewarm waters coming right up."

She spins on her heels, but Lucas's hand lurches out to capture her wrist. Kevin sneaks a pleading look my way again, and he gingerly tries to remove Lucas's arm.

No luck.

"Veronica, you know I don't like her, right? It's always been you. I didn't come to fight. I was thinking . . . maybe . . . Well, my dad's in Iron Mountain at the moment, so I'm having a bit of a get-together at my place. I was hoping you'd come and we could talk about us and—"

That does it.

My fury propels me toward them in seconds, and I don't miss Kevin's sigh of relief. He won't be relieved with what comes next.

"Didn't you hear her?" I snarl, slapping his arm back toward the floor. "She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Where the hell did you even come from?" Lucas massages his

temples as though I'm the one giving *him* a headache. "This has nothing to do with you, Wil. Butt out."

"If it's about my best friend, it has everything to do with me." I'm sure I look like one of those dogs with the foaming mouths, peering at him from behind a flimsy fence. My smile is nothing more than clenched teeth and unblinking eyes. A face that says, "Try me; I dare you." My finger juts toward the door and I point a path from here to the parking lot. "Walk away right now."

If someone told me a year ago that I would be standing here defending Veronica Clearwater, I would've thought they were on something. But that was BMD—Before Mom Disappeared. Back when we both still lived in separate worlds and Mom was the glue keeping the universe tethered together. It was back when Ronnie wasn't a social pariah like me but genuinely popular—ponytail bobbing behind her head, soft gold shimmer swept across her lids. When she spent every second slung around Lucas's arm, giggling when he pressed kisses into her cheek.

But neither of us is the same person we were junior year. Fate had Ronnie and I slumping into the bleachers at the same time, worn out and ruddy-eyed and alone. We'd talked about everything and anything. The carton of milk she'd dumped on her stupid ex's head. Elwood's stone-faced silence as he ran away. The night my mother went missing and the night her father took one too many pills. He had slipped into the night with a single note scrawled beside him: *We can't keep doing this*. She'd cried on my shoulder and I'd cried on hers and that one afternoon changed everything.

I'd rubbed off on her like a bad case of poison ivy and she'd kept me from spiraling to the point of no return—and if you asked me now, I'd say I'd do anything for her.

Lucas's cheeks burn scarlet, his teeth grinding together like flint

sparking a fire. His eyes whip from mine to hers. “You know she’ll turn on you, too, Vee,” he spits, “just like she did with Elwood. She doesn’t know how to trust people.”

Elwood Clarke. The name stokes a flame inside me, rekindling something that never quite died in the first place. He used to sit by my side, his eyes lighting over the tiniest of things, always rambling incessantly about his butterfly collection. We made sense hanging out together. I was the girl that was quick to bite someone’s head off and he was the skittish boy who needed me to. Best friends until suddenly we weren’t. Before everything in my life went to hell in his family’s handbasket.

Now when I think of him, it’s like swallowing a lit match. The longer I dwell on what we were, the bigger the hole burns inside me.

Lucas’s hands clench at his sides and I know he’s on the verge of saying something particularly nasty when he stands. He doesn’t disappoint: “Elwood was a mess after you. You know that, right? You ruined a lifelong friendship and you didn’t even care. So, what, Wil, did you get tired of ruining your own relationships after your mom left? You had to go and ruin other people’s too?”

He’s taller than me, but it doesn’t stop me from getting close. “Anything else you want to say? You don’t know shit, Lucas. You don’t have a clue what I’ve been through.”

He didn’t spend days sprawled beside Mom on the couch, her nimble fingers twisting intricate braids. He didn’t shadow her every summer in the garden with a wicker basket, dutifully collecting fresh herbs and listening to her prattle on about each one. He didn’t cry so hard, he threw up when days turned to weeks turned to months of his mother never, ever coming home.

I grind my teeth and hold my ground. Keep talking, Lucas. See what happens.