Chapter 1



Sunday, 2 a.m. Mountain Standard Time

The cold on a January night in Billings, Montana, is personal and spiritual. It knows your weaknesses. It communicates with your fears. If you have a god, this cold pulls a veil between you and your deity. It gets you alone in a place where it can work at you. If you are white, especially from the old families, the cold speaks to you of being isolated and undefended on the infinite homestead plains. It sounds like wolves and reverberates like drums in all the hollow places where you wonder who you are and what you would do in extremis. In this cold, you understand at last that you are not brave at all.

If you're Indian—a Crow or Cheyenne off the res maybe, a Shoshone, Hidatsa, Assiniboine, one of the humbled peoples of an unforgiving land—the cold will sound different, but still, it knows your name. It has no mercy for you no matter how long and intimate its relationship with your mothers and fathers. You of all people ought to know that it is a killer. How many of your relatives has it taken? More than wars and car crashes? Do your fingers and toes tingle in the cold because of some childhood

frostbite, before you learned to cover up, or when the power company turned off the juice and your little back got pushed up hard against the cold rock of winter?

A woman in her midtwenties, too thin, with long, loose brown hair and smudged pink lipstick, has just stumbled out into the darkest, earliest hour of Sunday morning. Her hair needs a trim—a good brushing wouldn't hurt—and her eyes have settled into a distrustful squint at an early age. Every so often her lips come together in an expression that looks for a second as if she's about to complain about her bunions and a late Social Security check. Up close, her eyes can show a twinkling purple shade like northern lights, but to strangers they reveal nothing but mute, defiant gray. The length of her nose and width of her face evoke Gibson Girl prints, an old-fashioned beauty that wants elaborate hair and clothes to set it off. It hangs on her like an unkempt garment, ready to cast off soon enough as age and fatigue shred its fibers.

The woman's walk is stiff, even with her impaired condition. The prosthesis on her left leg moves mechanically, its knee joint rolling in a steel socket, supporting her well enough but not quite creating the illusion that there is a whole, real leg under her tight stonewashed jeans. The pointy-toed cowboy boots don't improve her gait. She weaves a little and burps. She fumbles in a heavy, stained canvas shoulder bag for a pack of Marlboro reds that turns out to be empty. She has forgotten her coat. Since much earlier in the evening, so early that most of the partygoers have passed out, she's been getting stoned and drunk in the barely furnished living room of a 1920s two-bedroom bungalow a few blocks south of the tracks. She's been staying there with a fat, alcoholic Pole named Garfield Kozinsky, after the Montana county where he was born. He's not her boyfriend, she tells people, but she sleeps with him and he doesn't ask for rent.

This part of town has been the wrong side of the tracks since

they went in, spanning North America back in the 1880s, when Frederick Billings the railroad man came blustering across the northern plains with a load of cash and dreams. The cash has long since dried up, and who would have a dream around here? Who would be that stupid? The ones with dreams have left, abandoning the others to their cryogenic stasis. It's a neighborhood of vacant lots, chain-link fences, and wide, dented siding, where broken-down cars sit like ships run aground in this ancient inland sea. The oil and coal money lubricating the rest of town only makes the dry rasp of need more pronounced. The derelict shopfronts out on Minnesota Avenue reflect the ashes of prosperity in dirty, cracked windows and urine-soaked doorways.

There's an old bakery on the corner, dating to the days when horses pulled bread wagons on local routes. When you peer into the boarded windows, through the cracks, the dust on the long counter looks as if someone has been kneading dough again, getting ready for another early morning's baking. The old delivery truck is on blocks out back, stripped clean and sun-bleached. Cars and other abandoned machines inhabit the yards of houses that would be called shacks in warmer parts of the world where nobody would bother to finish or heat them. Ragtops and upholstery are shredded and the door and window levers don't work. They suck up gas and run on duct tape, baling wire, and desperation. Here and there is a creative attempt at auto body repair. An old Chevy just up the street from Kozinsky's has a headlight reflector fashioned out of a pie tin with a hole cut in the middle for the lightbulb. The slightly crumpled fender has been pulled out a bit with muscle, not proper tools, and the uneven surface is mottled by a patchy putty-and-paint job. There is dignity, even elegance, in this, a fuck-you ingenuity that takes pride in the homely fix.

They say the cold keeps out the riffraff, but it may just keep them out of sight. The wind comes barreling out of the

Beartooth range to the west, pinballing off the Pryors, the Crazies, the Bull Mountains, gathering force in the foothills and across the plains, shivering down the Yellowstone, the mighty Elk River—howling, hunting tonight. The leafless trees bow over before it, but the pines, the native ladies, merely part their heavy skirts and let the wind come through, lifting the featherweight of snow from their boughs, dispersing it in breathtaking little blizzards that sweep down the street, one after another, like guerrillas advancing, attacking, and taking cover.

Brittany is eleven years old. Her mother believes her to be asleep under the coats in the back bedroom, which is really a walled-in, icy back porch, but Brittany has stayed awake and dressed, passing the time by imagining the living room populated by talking animals rather than growling humans, waiting for people to quiet down and pass out. Those who haven't gone are mostly unconscious when her mother decides to go find her ex, Dennis, to see if he's still good for a little pot. From the crack where the bedroom door doesn't hang flush, Brittany watches her mother stagger out, then come back for her bag. Brittany leaps back into bed, expecting her to come looking for her coat in the pile.

But she isn't coming back. Instead, the front door slams. Brittany hurries to the front room and hops over sleeping bodies to climb onto the back of the gray velour couch and wipe a hole to peer out the fogged, frosted window. She sees her mother find her keys and follow an indirect, tacking course through gusts of wind toward their car. She fumbles at the car door, then gives up and starts to walk toward the lights blocks away on Twenty-Seventh Street. Nobody on this street bothers to shovel the sidewalk. The thin layer of snow on the ground has hardened in the recent cold snap into a layer of ice you'd need a chisel and hammer to crack. Brittany watches her mother me-

ander down the middle of the street, coming in and out of focus as she appears in the pooling illumination of one streetlight after another.

Dry snow pellets rush before the wind in a steady current. Brittany clambers along the back of the couch to drop onto the cold patch of floor next to the front door. Even with the overheated living room behind her, Brittany inhales hard in the doorway as the cold slaps at her. "Mom!" she cries, but the wind throws the sound back down her throat. She tries again. "Come back!" A gust smacks her chest so hard it knocks the wind out of her.

Her mother is making uncertain progress up the street, oblivious to the calls behind her. Brittany navigates through the bodies in the living room on tiptoe. A greasy-faced, long-haired guy half awakens from the spot he's nabbed near the heat register and grabs her ankle.

"Hey, sweetheart, get me a beer, will ya?"

Brittany nods and yanks her leg free. *Fantasy Island* is starting on TV. Ricardo Montalbán intones something heavily accented about the dangers of getting your heart's desire as she finally reaches the yellow phone on the kitchen wall. Sometimes there's no dial tone. Tonight there is. She exhales and begins to dial all the numbers she knows. Her father, her great-grandma, her great-aunt Helen, her uncle Pete. Dad doesn't answer. He never does, but she always calls him first. She dials Great-Grandma wrong and gets an angry hang-up. Great-Aunt Helen answers the phone and tells her no, Uncle Walt won't come, and quit bothering people in the middle of the night. Last, she calls Uncle Pete, the most likely to say yes, the one they've cried wolf and wild goose to over and over, the one she least wants to bother again. He sleepily agrees to come.

Brittany peeks around the doorjamb toward the beer drinker, who has fallen asleep again. She creeps along the edge of the living room back to the bedroom, where she finds the

heaviest coat in the pile. Then she sneaks back out to the living room and again maneuvers herself onto the back of the couch pushed against the front window. The chill comes straight through the single pane. Brittany wraps the coat more tightly around herself and stares out for as long as she can stay awake. She thinks she sees headlights down the street, but they don't come as far as the house. If it were Pete, he'd come for her, jog up the steps in his businesslike way, sweep into the house with that steadiness like he's on land and Kozinsky and all his pals are swaying on a ship's deck. If she can't have Pete, Brittany wishes that her invisible dog, Burro, were here, climbing up the way he used to, nearly unbalancing the couch with his weight, to lie down along the length of its back next to her. She can almost see him, almost feel his smelly, doggy warmth. For just a moment, Brittany allows herself to caress Burro's head and ask him to shift her mother's steps, just enough, toward safety. Brittany is too old for Burro—people have made clear that this is childish foolishness. Burro padded off when she was seven or eight, but she still thinks of him, still knows that he's real, even though she doesn't talk about him anymore. Tonight, unexpectedly, here he is. Burro lifts his head to show his empathic brown eyes and nudges his licorice-black nose into her hand. The warm solace fills her, makes her sleepy.

Sunday, 7:45 a.m. Mountain Standard Time

Some early riser has just found a woman facedown in a front yard three blocks from Kozinsky's house. She has her keys clenched in a bloodied fist, as if she cut herself falling or struggling with a car lock. Her old wool sweater is twisted around her, and her bag has spilled with her wallet still inside. Her nose is bloodied. A small amount of blood from her nose and a gash on the side of her skull is pooled under her head, frozen so

quickly that its color hasn't changed from red to brown. It looks fresh and urgent on the ice, as if she needs only to be bandaged and sent home, but against the bright blood her skin is already changing from no color at all to a morbid shade of blue. On the solid sheet of snow and ice, her body leaves no mark. To fall on such a surface would be very painful, but the expression on the woman's icy face is not a grimace. It's a childlike look of disbelief, as if she was taken utterly by surprise when death leaned in with rattling bones and trailing robe to take her breath.

This morning the cold has crept away on padded paws and left only this. The wind that was so angry and vicious the night before has slackened and temperatures are back above zero. The Billings PD patrol officer who answered the call stands huffing warm breath over his first cup of coffee, staring down at the woman. "I get real tired of seein' this shit," he says, perhaps to the fire department paramedics, who have brought out their equipment to check vitals on a body already turned blue. "If she'd wandered out in July she'd be sleepin' it off instead of ridin' away in a fuckin' bag. Makes you sick."

He looks up in time to regret his cussing as a little girl in a very large coat comes padding around a high wooden fence at the edge of the lot. She sees the body and the paramedics who have set aside their lifesaving tools and are unfolding a body bag and a stretcher. The officer comes toward the girl, positioning his body between her and the ugliness behind him, stretching out a hand, beginning to speak calming words, but as the crew lifts the body onto the open body bag, the head turns enough that the girl can be sure who it is. Her arms stretch out to her left, as if reaching for something, but there is nothing beside her. Before the officer can get to her, she begins to scream.