

ALONG THE INDIGO

Elsie Chapman

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one.

THIS EARLY IN THE SUMMER, MARSDEN HADN'T YET REMEMBERED HOW FAR SOUND COULD CARRY COMING FROM AN OPEN WINDOW.

She half scowled as she looked back at the boardinghouse, the lights from the exposed bedrooms blazing into the near dusk like eyes from the shadows. Echoes of Nina's brisk instructions—*softer lipstick, bolder eyebrows, heels should be taller than four inches*—swirled out into the air from behind mesh screens. Low murmurs as the girls fixed one another's hair, as they chose between dresses, as they wondered who would be the unlucky one that night, the one to end up with the oldest john or the ugliest. The cheapskate. The fetishist.

Her mother, she knew, mostly dreaded the old ones. Shine feared age as though it were contagious, the weakness she said it was.

"Marsden, you're tipping the bucket! We're losing berries!"

"What? I'm not."

"You *are*."

She glanced down at the ice-cream bucket in her hand, saw that her little sister was right, and tilted it back to save the rest of the berries

they'd just picked. Saskatoon ones, purple as night, hard as gems—they would still be more tart than sweet. Marsden knew they could have used more time on the bush, but when Wynn had suddenly wanted to get her hair done with the girls, offering to take her out into the half-dark to pick berries for homemade strudels had been the first thing to pop into Marsden's head. Bribery: She would never be above it if it meant saving Wynn from the truth.

Still, she hadn't missed her sister's occasional glances back toward Nina's girls and the boardinghouse as they moved toward the berry bushes at the edge of the covert—wistful, still longing. She'd understood it, even, despite not wanting to—that strange wish to get to know them well enough to call them friends, the ache to be surrounded by their sheer number, to let herself be cradled and wanted and accepted.

Wynn tugged at more branches. Berries fell into the bucket, plunks like rain on a roof. Marsden sucked at her thumb, still pricked from when it'd met a thorn, and blood ran into the tastes of dinner—salmon with dill and cream, grilled tomatoes—still lingering on her tongue. As one of two cooks for the boardinghouse, she'd made the dish dozens of times before. It was one of Nina's favorites to serve guests.

Suddenly, her sister froze, her gaze locked on something past the line of berry bushes, and dread rolled into Marsden's stomach. Because she knew, even before her eyes chased Wynn's and saw what they saw deeper in the Covert, lit up by the falling sun like a piece of shiny foil among all that dark green forest.

The body was a pale slash, and Marsden sighed—too late to try to

hide it from Wynn. She'd checked the Covert just that morning as always. But she'd been in a hurry—now that school was out, she had less time to comb the grounds before her sister was awake and up, wanting to play. She cursed herself for not being more careful, summer for existing, and Nina for wanting Wynn out of the boardinghouse in the mornings while Johns were still slipping away.

"I bet she used a gun," Wynn finally said, no longer frozen but contemplative—nearly clinically so—as she analyzed the presence of one more dead person found in the covert. Seeing her like that dismayed Marsden, though she wasn't surprised. Wynn had grown up with the Covert's secrets and not-so-secrets. This was all normal to her. "It's what I would use," her sister continued.

"Don't say that. It's morbid."

"What do *you* think she used?"

Marsden sighed again. "Probably a gun."

"It wouldn't have hurt, right?" Wynn grabbed Marsden's hand. In the dim light, Marsden saw that berry juice had turned the tips of their fingers the shade of new bruises. The taste of blood on her tongue seemed to surge. "However that person died?"

Love flooded Marsden. In that moment, her sister was such the ultimate *kid*—choppy black hair askew all over her head like upturned paintbrushes dried wrong from inside a jar. How she hadn't bothered changing her outfit from yesterday: a Jem and the Holograms T-shirt spotted with grass stains, a pair of baggy cutoffs, a striped rainbow belt with a drooping tail. She was even wrapped up in kid smells: sweat,

cheap strawberry-marshmallow candy, the dusty outdoor burn of early July heat.

“Right, Mars?” Wynn pressed, needing to know, her fingers squeezing. Her bones felt as fine as a sparrow’s. At eight, her sister was tiny for her age, as Marsden herself had been—and still was, at sixteen—both of them sparse and stunted and wiry. Like plants grown beneath strange light, the town sometimes still said. “It would have been quick?”

Marsden nodded, though she had no real clue. Wynn knew she had no clue. She wasn’t really asking about *how*, anyway—more *why*. And that was a question they could never really answer for sure. Suicide notes, if they were found, had little meaning but for the person they’d been written for.

Marsden got a glimpse of pale skin through the trees, of blond hair splotched with the telltale darkness of blood. “It wouldn’t have hurt, no. Out like a light. Totally painless.”

“You’re guessing.”

“Why ask if you’re not going to believe me, runt?” She flicked a crumb from Wynn’s nest of hair—buttermilk waffle. Her sister had brought one along with her, a leftover from breakfast that she had crumbled into the grass to feed the squirrels.

“I do believe you.” Wynn chewed the plum-tinged thumb of her free hand; a sliver of nail coiled out from between her teeth like apple skin off a peeler. Bodies changed her Covert, made it dangerous. She was never scared of the land, though sometimes Marsden wished

she *were*, just a bit—it would make life that much easier, her sister not wanting to play there. Wynn’s expression was thoughtful as she looked up at Marsden. “But I bet Grandma wouldn’t have had to guess. I bet she would have known for sure.”

Wynn had never known their grandmother on their mother’s side, who’d died before she was born. But she’d heard all the stories and was familiar with the legend Star Liu had been in town. How she could hear the dead. How she could connect with them as a service.

“If *Theola* were here, maybe she could tell, too,” her sister continued.

Marsden snorted. She pictured their dead grandmother’s old friend: gaudy floral dresses, oversize feathered hats, a probing stare that tried to unearth all kinds of foul, shameful things from your mind. Old Theola Finney dressed bigger than the town, but her advertised psychic abilities said she fit Glory just fine.

“Theola tells *fortunes* down at her café, Wynn. Looks deep into your eyes and tells you your future.”

Wynn pulled her hand free. “I like her, even if you think she’s a liar.”

“I never said she was a liar. I just don’t think she tells the truth. It’s not the same thing.”

“How come we can’t hear the dead talk if Grandma could?” Her sister was staring at the body again. “Mom used to be able to, too, she says. So why can’t we? Don’t you wish we could?”

The summer heat—which was always bad in Glory, where it built

into a thick shimmering wall that wouldn't tumble down until nearly October—suddenly seemed cold. “Not really, no,” she said.

“But—”

A laugh wafted out from the boardinghouse—a soft trill, perfectly crafted to appeal, their mother's when she was working—and Marsden found herself scowling again. Still, it meant that all of Nina's girls would soon be in their rooms for the night, and she could stop worrying about Wynn accidentally seeing what she didn't need to see.

“Listen, you know the deal, if we ever see anything in the Covert . . .” She dug a dollar bill from the pocket of her shorts. “It's still light enough out, and the corner store won't be closed yet.” Gwen carried Wynn's greatest weaknesses, Kraft caramels and elasticized candy bracelets. “Go eat some sugar. I'll come get you when I'm done checking.”

Wynn eyed the money and moved on from chewing her thumb to her pinky. Her expression was torn. Marsden knew that look. It said her sister wanted to be old enough to face the ugliest parts of the Covert. It *also* said she wanted to pretend she didn't come from a family whose name had long become synonymous with death.

Finally, Wynn shrugged, spitting out another sliver of nail. “Want me to bring the berries to the kitchen first?”

Marsden shook her head. “No, we'll just grab them on the way back.” Another day bought. Still, her relief at saving Wynn from one more body in the Covert was already fizzling away. Wynn saw Glory's businesses during the day and assumed appearances were everything.

Her sister had no clue that home—her beloved boardinghouse and the town's best-rated overnight lodging among tourists—was also the town's most popular brothel. She had no idea that Nina was more their captor than their savior. How much longer before she got old enough to decide Nina's girls were more fun than her dull, worried sister?

Wynn began to head down the path toward the shed for her bike. “Want me to buy licorice for you, Mars?”

“Sure. Black.”

“Barf.”

“Not the rope kind, either”—she grinned for her sister's sake—“but the kind that comes in big, fat chunks.”

“*Double* barf.”

“And don't bother Rupert at the back of the store, even if Gwen says it's fine.” Gwen's brother-in-law ran his bookie side business out of the staff room. “See you in a few minutes, runt.”

She watched Wynn disappear from sight as she followed the wooden fence that separated the Covert from the rest of the town, her family's property from the rest of Glory. Hewn and nailed together by the bare hands of their long-dead great-grandfather, the snaking chain of timber seemed as old as the earth. The *For Sale* sign that was nailed to it was nearly so, the words on it faded away to nothingness. No one wanted land whose soil would always bleed red, that crawled with ghosts and strange stories and decades-old myths. The town itself had no reason to buy it from her mother when the Covert—as morbid as it was—was nearly as much a tourist draw as the midnight casinos

and gambling houses. Shine had long ago declared the place unnatural and unbearable; Marsden couldn't remember the last time her mother had set foot in it.

If there had been potential buyers for the Covert, then none offered the price Shine wanted for the only thing she truly owned. This, Marsden could understand—the setting of a price for freedom was something she still did every day, calculating, wondering which corners could be cut.

She turned into the Covert, toward the body, and hoped there would be cash for her to steal.

Cash: the one thing that would get them out of the terrible, death-ridden town they called Glory.

two.

MARSDEN'S SNEAKERS BROKE THROUGH THE GINGER PLANTS THAT CARPETED THE COVERT, TURNING THE DUSK AIR PUNGENT WITH THEIR SCENT. Their heart-shaped leaves ran rampant in the space, thriving beneath the cool shade thrown by the trees. Only in the Covert, away from the simmering heat of town, would they not wither and die.

Once the groundcover had been nothing but crabgrass and clover and thistle. It would have been like that when her great-great-uncle had walked over it nearly a hundred years ago, when Duncan Kirby first came to this part of the world looking for gold. The stuff was first discovered in the banks of the Indigo River back in 1890, with the most generous amounts in the deepest, most crooked bend that eventually became the town of Glory.

When the gold began to disappear, so did most of the townsfolk who had come west for it. But Duncan stayed, waiting for the gold to come back. He built a cabin for his young family in the town's west end on land he won in an epic game of poker. And when the gold refused to show again, his sanity ended up lost with it, and

he went on to shoot his wife and kids before turning the rifle on himself.

Glory decided to burn the cabin—and the bodies still within it—to the ground afterward. A cleansing fire, the townsfolk nervously called it, as they stoked the flames until nothing remained but the gray and salty ash of bone. It would change the Covert from a cursed place to one that was blessed, the place where sins could be left behind before going to heaven. Dying after touching its purified soil meant salvation—just a handful of the Covert’s dirt needed to be stuffed into a pocket or smeared onto skin.

Marsden decided long ago Glory’s first settlers had no idea what they were doing, because her family’s land still felt cursed. And all the fire did was turn the town into a spectacle. Nearly a century later, and still people came. Like the thirstiest of bees, the most vulnerable of them, the ones looking for understanding of some kind, were drawn in by the Covert. The *Private Property* and *Keep Out* signs nailed along the outer fence might as well have been blank. Each body Marsden found was just another person fooled, lured by a promise that redemption could be found in its bloodstained and now ginger-scented dirt.

At least the sanctity of the Covert’s myth was strong enough that no murder had been committed there since those at the hands of Duncan. Or had yet to be caught, anyway.

She saw the gun a second before she would have stepped on it. It had fallen to the side of the body. In the Covert’s shadowed light,

the black of it was harsh against the soft green needles, the pale gray stones.

The woman had aimed for her mouth.

Marsden had to fall into a crouch at the sight, dizzy as the Covert spun. Not since her first body—a man hanging from a tree by his midnight-blue tie, his name had been Caleb Silas, he’d had ten dollars in his wallet—had she thrown up.

But she had to hurry to finish.

Private property or not, she wasn’t the only skimmer in town.

She took a deep breath and moved over to the body. She pulled out the thin gardening gloves she always carried for just this purpose. There were ghosts everywhere in the Covert—her own ancestors were but a few of them—and she felt their eyes on her as she ran her hands over the woman, searching for her own kind of gold.

There was a necklace, as delicate as spider webbing, its hue that of wheat in falling sunlight. A ring studded with gems.

Both were useless to her. She’d learned that the hard way when she brought a pair of cuff links she’d taken from Caleb Silas’s body to Seconds, the town’s biggest pawnshop. His widow had reported them missing, but the pawnshop owner at the time had already sold them for a nice profit to a tourist passing through—the only reason Marsden escaped. Forever scared into thinking the owner would remember her face, she never went near Seconds again.

She took the five-dollar bill she found in the woman’s wallet, then placed the slip of cheap red vinyl back in her pocket. It wasn’t much,

but it brought her that much closer to the two thousand dollars she wanted to have before she could even think about taking Wynn and leaving Glory. It would be enough for two bus tickets to Seattle, a few months rent for a cheap apartment, and food while she looked for a job.

She had just over a grand and a half saved up, hidden in a pair of old boots in her closet. All of it from skimming—tens and twenties, most of the time, the very occasional fifty—and from working in the kitchen in the boardinghouse, which never amounted to more than a few hours a week during school months. Summers were when she tried to make up for the rest of the year, to save the fastest. But summers were short; she could not add hours to the clock just as she couldn't add bodies to the Covert. Some months saw a dozen if not more; some saw only one or two—the only thing she could count on for sure was never knowing.

She readjusted the fall of the woman's blond hair and fixed the patches of dirt still carefully scrubbed into the backs of her hands. Marsden made sure it looked like the body had never been touched. Glory police would be there not long after she called in the discovery. The department was small given that the town was also small—outside of tourists—so it wasn't hard for Nina to pay all the cops well to only patrol the area when they had to, and discreetly. It didn't make for good business, having cop cars driving around the boardinghouse all the time. And while dead bodies in the Covert were worse, they didn't make any noise; their names printed in the paper the next day were easily missed, the print fine, the column small. The police would barely

give the body a glance—head cop Hadley might even skim it himself—before taking it away, but Marsden had learned to always cover her tracks anyway. The Covert was her best chance at escaping from Glory; she could never risk it.

Marsden tucked away the cash and her gloves and got to her feet. She was brushing off her hands and knees when the sound of a branch snapping nearby made her freeze. Her eyes went everywhere and nowhere, and her breath caught in her ribs like a fork clanging off teeth.

She saw Hadley coming over the dusk-dimmed rise, shouting at her to empty her pockets.

She saw Nina telling her that she belonged to her now, that she would always work for her, in whatever way she decided best.

She saw her mother, crying to never leave her alone, that their debt was Marsden's, too.

And then she saw Wynn, her black hair as messy as ever, her face full of fear as she slowly approached, and she knew her sister was the one who was real.

Wynn's gaze darted to the body, and through the gloom, she paled, came to a stop. "I . . . the store was closed, there was a sign—"

Marsden darted forward and spun Wynn around by her frail shoulders. "You should have waited for me by the fence." She heard the fury in her voice, the fear, and tried to soften. And failed, because most of that fury was for herself. "Let's go."

They marched in silence, her mind racing, her eyes threatening to fill. Here she was, determined to keep her sister safe from who they

were, what the town had determined them to be. But how to run from your own shadow? Your own name?

“Mars?” Wynn was working ginger leaves between her palms—crushed, their scent was strong enough to make Marsden’s nose tingle.

“Yeah?”

“Can we go see Dad’s grave?”



Their mother had had him buried on the west side of the Covert, where the trees were thinner and sparser, their canopy less protective. As such, the one that marked his grave was about as expected, its branches wispy, almost fragile in the gray light.

Marsden wished Shine had chosen a more mature tree to watch over the man she’d met and fallen in love with when they’d both still been kids—one sturdier, more remarkable. She wondered again if it had been a final dig at him, his being buried in the Covert. How it wasn’t because it was family land, or because he’d died by suicide—and suicide and the Covert went hand in hand—but because it was Shine’s way to finally corral her useless, restless husband.

Wynn let her crushed ginger leaves fall to the ground and plucked clover blossoms from a nearby patch. She tucked them beneath a small rock at the base of the wimpy tree. After a long moment of silence: “I don’t hear him like Grandma would have. Do you think it’s because I never met him?”

Like their grandmother, Grant Eldridge was a stranger to Marsden’s sister, too, having walked into the Indigo six months before Wynn was born. Shine had always told Wynn this was a blessing—memories could also be curses.

“Well, I have definitely met him, and I don’t hear him, either.”

Marsden shifted on her feet. “Why are we here again?”

“It’s Daddy—we should visit when we can.”

“We do. But now it’s getting dark.”

Wynn decorated the rock with more blossoms. Her hand and arm glowed a ghostly gray against the murk of the forest. “Do you think Mom could hear them again, if she only tried?”

“You know she won’t. And it’s been too long since she’s heard anything, not since she was a kid.” Or so Shine claimed. Her mother had gotten good at talking without actually saying much at all. It came with her job, Marsden knew. Like a final polish that, over time, became hard to remove. “Grandma told me once that the ability’s just like any living creature—it needs air, or it dies.”

Her sister was watching her. “Do *you* ever still try to hear the dead?”

Marsden’s face stiffened with embarrassment, heat along her ears, and she was glad for the thin dark so she could hide.

She *did* try, but she didn’t think she could ever admit to Wynn her reasons. That she sometimes sat in the Covert in front of a body, eyes shut tight against the quiet and the trees and the ginger, trying to extract from all of it the voices of the dead. Telling her how they came to be there, who they’d once been. Because she thought if those she stole

from could be bothered to talk to her, then it couldn't be long before the voice she heard next was that of her father. Explaining to her why he did what he did. Assuring her he didn't leave because of *her*. That he hadn't hated life because of *her*.

Always, though, she heard nothing. From anyone.

"The dead are dead, Wynn," she said quietly now. "They came here to find some kind of peace. And I think, sometimes, we might be wrong in demanding they still be here, just for us."

Her sister poked in a final blossom and stepped back. "I still wish I'd known him, even for just a bit."

"Me, too."

"But you *did* know him, Mars."

Had she, though?

She'd been eight when they found him drowned in the shallows of the Indigo. No explanation, no note left anywhere. It'd been classified an accident.

Marsden couldn't remember him well enough to still hate him for it. Memories of him were like cards in a deck, slowly shuffled away as time passed, moments of her childhood falling through some metaphorical hole in the pocket that was her brain. He'd spun in and out of her and Shine's lives like a shifty alley cat, unsure if it lived indoors or out, if he belonged to them, or no one, or just himself.

She recalled him once playing tea party with her, patient enough to sip pretend tea and eat pretend sandwiches. His aftershave had smelled of the outdoors, had made her think of cool, gray flannel and

winter mornings. He liked loud movies and songs heavy with guitar. His hair had been Crayola chestnut brown, his eyes a tint lighter than midnight black. He'd been tall. His laugh had come from somewhere deep.

Of that last day, though, she remembered him and Shine arguing explosively. His one retort that had stuck—ravaged, with a desperation so bleak her own chest went hollow with it—about being trapped. *I never wanted this life!* He'd looked right at Marsden as the words had ground from him. She remembered the sound of the flimsy screen door slapping back against the house as he slammed his way out, and how the smell of that evening's terrible spring storm had rushed inward seconds later.

"A squirrel!"

Marsden squinted, saw a fat black shape rustle free from a nearby bush and run toward the last of the sun.

Wynn clambered off after it, clucking her tongue as she made her way toward the entrance. "I'll meet you at the fence, okay?" she called over her shoulder. Her voice was muffled from the density of the trees, what had proven thick enough to swallow up the sounds of gunshots.

"Don't head off anywhere else," Marsden called back.

"I won't!"

She followed in her sister's wake, the scent of ginger freshened again from their steps. She wasn't exactly reluctant to go, but sometimes it was being out in the open that made her feel trapped. Dread

packed itself into the corners of her heart and filled her head with the most miserable of thoughts.

The boardinghouse, where Nina's girls—including her own mother—wore clothes and makeup as colorful as candy, so they appeared just as delectable.

The town, bleached pale from the summer sun.

The future, laid out for her as surely as though it were already set in stone.

three.

THE NEXT MORNING.

Dawn was still edging over into day—the sky from navy to lavender to the shade of robins' eggs, the air from cool to an inferno—when Marsden crept back into the kitchen from checking the Covert. She yawned as she tossed off her shoes, a cloud of ginger wafting from her bare arms and hair. It'd already been proven that she couldn't hide the Covert from Wynn forever, but Marsden was never going to accept it. That would be like choosing to sink into the quicksand that was the whole town.

When it wasn't summer, her job meant helping cook dinners, to be served in the common dining room, for the boardinghouse staff and its guests every weekend. When it *was* summer, she worked every day and had to cook and serve breakfasts, too. The one thing that never changed during the year was the johns who stayed overnight. Unlike official guests, it was an unspoken rule that they never saw the inside of the dining room. Neither were they served food in the bedrooms with Nina's girls. Instead, they slunk out of the boardinghouse through a side entrance while breakfast was served to everyone else.