

## RED

The track that led to Oakridge Farm was steep and dusty, and the dust was ox red, as though stained with the blood of those who had worked the land before. It was a dust so fine that you could trace patterns in it with a blade of grass, and when the rains came it thickened into a paste that stained your skin like henna.

Mollie had lived at the farm for twelve weeks and two days. She'd seen Hal twenty-nine days in a row, and last night was the seventh time that Sherman Rook had come to her room. She recorded the new totals in three ruled columns on the back page of her diary, writing the numbers with the souvenir pen her daddy had bought in Atlantic City. He'd bought salt water taffy that day, and she'd saved the box. It was the old-fashioned kind with bathing belles on the lid, and it was where she kept her diary, her pen, and her collection of mud snail shells. Every evening she wrote about Hal and how close to the house he'd come that day. She wrote about the changing colours of the sky, and how much she missed her brother, Angel. Then she tucked the box away behind her bible, prayed she'd see Hal again the following day, and that Sherman Rook would stay away from her room that night.

Oakridge farmstead crouched on the brow of a hill, bare-boned and weathered, hidden from view by a stand of trees until you turned the last bend in the track. Mollie hated the dark brooding weight of the house, and the trees so dense that they held a part of the night's heart within them even when the sun shone.

Yet when she walked up the porch steps, for a moment it was like being back home. By the bench there was a tub of the same flowers that Mama used to grow outside the soda

shop in Wildwood. They flowered all summer; white blooms with a sweet, powdery scent. And the smell of them at Oakridge always caught Mollie unawares, taking her straight back to Ocean Avenue and the boardwalk.

They were over a thousand miles from the shore now. Sherman Rook asked them to move there just three months after meeting Mama, and she said yes right away. He told her he was in the automobile business, that he had money and a fine house with land. Yet it turned out he owned a used car lot and a rundown ranch that was no finer than the two-bit clapboard house they'd left behind.

Mollie said she'd rather stay with Angel at her daddy's house. That was when Sherman had looked her up and down as if seeing her for the first time. He put his arm around her shoulders, squeezed a little too tightly for a little too long, and declared she would do no such thing.

Mollie could tell straight away that Sherman Rook wanted her mama as a servant to keep his house in order. He was out from dawn until dusk, sometimes all night, and they were left to their own devices. They went into town on the local bus, because Mama didn't drive. Mollie knew how to, because her daddy had shown her, but Sherman wasn't about to let a fourteen-year-old girl behind the wheel of his pickup. So they'd walk down the track to the highway, their shoes coated in red dust that always left footprints along the aisle of the bus.

On Mollie's fifteenth birthday they asked in the hardware store if there was a good place for lunch, and were directed to Lily Brown's. As soon as they walked through the door, Mama pursed her lips, and Mollie knew they'd been set up. The customers were all men,

and no one was eating. Sherman Rook sat at the bar with his arm around one of the barmaids. Mama turned on her heel before he even looked up and led Mollie across the road to Joe's Diner. Neither of them said a word, yet they'd both heard the laughter that followed them across the street.

When Sherman came home that evening he slammed the door hard enough to shake the whole house. He took Mama to their room, then Mollie heard muffled cries and the swish and snap of his belt. When he'd finished he walked into Mollie's room without knocking, yet even though she screamed her mama didn't come. He pinned her wrists together with the span of one hand, and she turned her face away from the sourness of his breath when he told her there was only one suitable birthday present for a teenage girl.

From then on, Sherman forbade them from going into town without him, and when school started again in the fall he decided that Mama could educate Mollie at home. They opened her schoolbooks on the table every morning, and she stroked the bruises on Mama's wrists and told her they should go back home. But she acted as though she hadn't heard her, and stared out across the fields, just as she had stared out to sea when Mollie's father left.

The sky over those fields was as wide as the sky over the Atlantic Ocean. Mollie watched it change colour from blush to the darkest ink, and wondered if Daddy and Angel were watching that same piece of sky five states east. In the mornings she'd see eagles hover over the red earth, and in the half-light of dusk she'd glimpse the shifting shapes of animals crossing the land: cottontails, coyote, and lone stray dogs.

At night Mollie would listen to the haunting calls of owls, and the eerie howl and yip of the dogs. Yet they didn't scare her. What scared her was the bang of the screen door, the key

turning in the lock, and the heave and grunt of Sherman Rook as he climbed into bed at her side.

Most nights she was spared, and he didn't come near her. The nights when he was too drunk, and she'd hear him clattering along the hallway, the clang of the long case clock as the weights jangled, his muttered curse as he kicked over the row of boots by the door. The nights when he went straight to her mama and she could hear the dull, rhythmic creak of the bed through the wall. And the best nights; the nights when he was so drunk he didn't come back at all, but stayed at Lily Brown's.

Even on the mornings when he was at home, Sherman got up before first light and was away to the car lot by seven. And then the day was Mollie's.

The first time she saw the stray dog it was late afternoon. His coat was as red as the earth, with a streak of white at the throat like the blaze of a comet; his face as long as a fox's snout. At first she thought he was a young coyote, but his shape was wrong - too short in the body and legs - and his colour too dense. He lifted each paw high as he trotted along the edge of the field. Mollie caught a glimpse of him by the fence, their eyes met briefly and he was gone. She christened him Halley - Hal for short - after the only comet she'd heard named.

The next time Mollie called up the town store she added a bag of dog kibble to their grocery order, and Mama didn't question it. She left a small handful close to where she'd first seen Hal, then watched from the window until she saw his face peer out between the ears of wild wheat. His nose twitched as he caught the smell of the biscuits, and he slid under the fence into the yard, his ears cocked and his head turning at the slightest sound. Each day she moved the kibble a little closer to the house, and now, on day thirty, Hal had

come right up on the porch and under her open window. The chickens caught his scent and shuffled and clucked in their shed. She saw the glint of his clear, sharp eyes, the dampness of his nose, and the thick fur of his tail, matted with red earth and burrs.

'Hal,' she whispered. She held out her arm over the low sill, and he came to her, tame yet shy, and let her stroke his flank, the fur unfeasibly soft.

That night she made sketches of him in her diary and coloured them with the muddied squares of paint in her watercolour box. On the back page she added the tally: twelve weeks and three days at Oakridge, and the thirtieth day of seeing Hal. Sherman had stayed at Lily Brown's last night, so the third column still stood at seven.

Mollie lay awake for a while, hoping he'd stay out that night too. She thought about Hal, how she ached to walk with him on silent paws, attune to the wind in the wheat. She wondered if the dog was as lonely and scared as she was herself.

Just before dawn she was woken by the rattle of a key in the lock. Mollie listened as Sherman crashed into the house. The screen door bounced twice against the jamb, and then there was silence. She lay still, holding her breath. There were quiet footsteps on the porch, boots treading carefully, and Mollie clenched her fists until the nails bit into her flesh. The screen slammed again. He had gone back outside. There was a squawking in the henhouse and then the crack of a single bullet. She parted the curtains, and saw Sherman crossing the yard, silver-grey in the half-light, holding his gun over the crook of his arm. Their eyes met. She dropped the curtain, and grabbed her boots, but he was too fast. He burst into her room and threw a handful of kibble that stung her face like hailstones. He held his leather belt in his other hand.

When he'd gone she lay on the bed until she could hear him snoring through the thin wall. Then she dressed quickly, took her taffy box, the few dollars her daddy had given her for emergencies, and her rust sweater, the colour of Hal's coat.

She walked softly across the yard, her boots already streaked red with the dew-damp earth. Hal's body lay at the side of the barn. She walked over and bent down to him, traced a finger along his fur until she felt the congealed blood on his side, and then pulled her hand away. It wasn't him. The fur was coarse and thick, and Mollie saw it was the body of a young, half-grown coyote. She smelt the metallic tang of blood on her fingers; her hands and boots were stained with the red of Oakridge, yet her heart still soared, because the dog wasn't Hal.

As she passed the pickup she saw that Sherman had left the keys in the ignition. She glanced back at the house one last time, but it crouched behind her in reassuring darkness. The truck was pointing down the track, so she had a chance. Mollie swung up into the cab and let the handbrake off slowly. It rolled forward a few feet, almost stopped, then gradually picked up momentum. She steered carefully down the track, not daring to start the engine until she reached the highway. At the junction she turned the key and flicked on the lights. She saw the dark red silhouette of a dog sitting in the centre of the road, his eyes a luminous milky green in her headlights. Mollie reached across and opened the passenger door. He stood, sniffed the air, held a single paw aloft for a moment, then trotted over to the truck and jumped straight in.