



*E*ven in the dark he knew the land, praised the gullies and rocky plateaus, the modest footpaths for their solitude. He knew the craggy jutting of the hills, the stoic black locust pointing upward to a place of promise away from the misery in the hollows below. He was so attuned to this land that his footfalls became a rhythm to which the other creatures sang along in clicks and caws. He knew the names of all things up on the mountain, knew the birds by their calls and the trees by silhouette no matter the season.

Sometimes he walked as a scientist cataloging what he found, what he saw. Sometimes he was a pilgrim foraging along an otherwise untrodden path. This was his peaceful place, the only place he could be alone, the only place far enough away from his mother.

But in the past few days Ted had been watched, no denying that. He had been watched by a bearded man lurking behind trees and rocks, but since the man never came forward, never approached him, he had convinced himself that the sighting was a mirage, a trick of shadow and light, simply a cluster of gray shape-shifting clouds. He comforted himself with the notion of illusion.

Then suddenly the Bigfoot of a man is on him, pinning him to the ground, wielding a knife.

As they tumble together on the damp ground, it becomes difficult for Ted to see where his own arms end and the muscled arms of the massive man begin. The blade on the bearded man's hunting knife is thin like the blade on his own knife, but Ted knows that thin doesn't count for much. His father had taught him that it is contour and attenuation that makes a knife dangerous; he knows that the curved point can easily slice through skin, penetrate past flesh and muscle into the deep, beet-red organs. He imagines his own entrails hanging like a string of sausage in the bearded man's

*smoking shed and considers screaming for help. But that would be futile. He has come to this place to be alone, and now he is alone with the bearded man.*

*Small and thin for fifteen, Ted is surprisingly strong from years of hauling water, years of using the pitchfork and shovel to clean stalls, from wielding a pickaxe to remove rocks for spring planting. He knows his strength, knows to push harder and harder still. But the man just grunts against his efforts, pushes back with an even more savage determination. The heavy hopelessness that Ted carries around with him down in the hollows makes him consider giving up. He could die at the hands of the brute here, in the only beautiful place he knows. Instead, he allows the gears of his fear and rage to ratchet up toward a place of deeper resolve, the place where instinct takes over, instinct that comes from eons of land and sea creatures who, when facing a larger captor, used agility and raw will to break free, to crawl under rock, skitter off into a hole. Spitting into the man's glowing eyes, wriggling frenetically as if possessed of demons himself, Ted breaks free, rolls over a sharp ledge of rock, then down a muddy slope. He gets to his feet and runs. Runs.*