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*To Deb*

## CHAPTER 1

There was a fly walking on Cordelia's hand and she was not allowed to flick it away.

She had grown used to the ache of sitting on a hard wooden pew and being unable to shift her weight. It still hurt, but eventually her legs went to sleep and the ache became a dull, all-over redness that was easier to ignore.

Though her senses were dulled in obedience, her sense of touch stayed the strongest. Even when she was so far under that the world had a gray film around the edges, she could still feel her clothing and the touch of her mother's hand. And now the fly's feet itched, which was bad, then tickled, which was worse.

At the front of the church, the preacher was droning on. Cordelia had long since lost the thread. Lust and tithing were his two favorite topics. Probably it was one of those. Her mother took her to church every Sunday and Cordelia was fairly certain that he had been preaching the same half-dozen sermons for the past year.

Her eyes were the only muscles that she could control, so she was not looking at him, but down as far as she could. At the very bottom of her vision, she could see her hands folded in her lap and the fly picking its way delicately across her knuckles.

Her mother glanced at her and must have noticed that she was looking down. Cordelia's chin rose so that she could no longer see her hands. She was forced to study the back of the head of the man in front of her. His hair was thinning toward the back and was compressed down at the sides, as if he wore a hat most days. She did not recognize him, but that was no

surprise. Since her days at school had ended, Cordelia only saw the other townsfolk when she went to church.

Cordelia lost the tickling sensation for a moment and dared to hope that the fly was gone, but then the delicate web between her thumb and forefinger began to itch.

Her eyes began to water at the sensation and she blinked them furiously. Crying was not acceptable. That had been one of the first lessons of being made obedient. It would definitely not be acceptable in church, where other people would notice. Cordelia was fourteen and too old to cry for seemingly no reason—because of course she could not tell anyone the reason.

The fly crossed over to her other hand, each foot landing like an infinitesimal pinprick. The stinging, watering sensation in her eyes started to feel like a sneeze coming on.

Sneezing would be terrible. She could not lift her hands or turn her head, so it would hit the back of the man's head, and he would turn around in astonishment and her mother would move her mouth to apologize and everyone would be staring at her for having been so ill-mannered.

Her mother would not be happy. Cordelia would have given a year of her life to be able to wipe her eyes. She sniffed miserably, her lungs filling with the smell of candles and wood polish and other people's bodies. Under it all lay the dry, sharp smell of wormwood.

And then, blessedly, the preacher finished. Everyone said, "Amen," and the congregation rose. No one noticed that Cordelia moved in unison with her mother.

No one ever did.

★ ★ ★

"I suppose you're mad at me," said her mother as they walked home from church. "I'm sorry. But you might try harder not to be so rebellious! I shouldn't have to keep doing this to you, not when you're fourteen years old!"

Cordelia said nothing. Her tongue did not belong to her. The person that smiled and answered all the greetings after the sermon—"Why Evangeline,



don't you look lovely today? And Cordelia! You keep growing like a weed!"—had not been Cordelia at all.

They reached home at last. *Home* was a narrow white house with peeling paint, set just off the road. Evangeline pushed the front door open, walked Cordelia to the couch, and made her sit.

Cordelia felt the obedience let go, all at once. She did not scream.

When Cordelia was young, she had screamed when she came out of obedience, but this gave her mother a reason to hold her and make soothing noises, so she had learned to stay silent as she swam up into consciousness, out of the waking dream.

The memories of what she had done when she was obedient would still be there, though. They lay in the bottom of her skull like stones.

It was never anything that looked terrible from outside. She could not have explained it to anyone without sounding ridiculous. "She makes me eat. She makes me drink. She makes me go to the bathroom and get undressed and go to bed."

And they would have looked at her and said "So?" and Cordelia would not have been able to explain what it was like, half-sunk in stupor, with her body moving around her.

Being made obedient felt like being a corpse. "My body's dead and it doesn't do what I want," Cordelia had whispered once, to her only friend, their horse Falada. "It only does what *she* wants. But I'm still in it."

When she was younger, Cordelia would wet herself frequently when she was obedient. Her mother mostly remembered to have Cordelia relieve herself at regular intervals now, but Cordelia had never forgotten the sensation.

She was made obedient less often as she grew older. She thought perhaps that it was more difficult for her mother to do than it had been when she was small—or perhaps it was only that she had learned to avoid the things that made her mother angry. But this time, Cordelia hadn't avoided it.

As the obedience let go, Cordelia swam up out of the twilight, feeling her senses slot themselves back into place.

Her mother patted her shoulder. "There you are. Now, isn't that better?"

Cordelia nodded, not looking at her.

“I’m sure you’ll do better next time.”

“Yes,” said Cordelia, who could not remember what it was that she had been made obedient for. “I will.”

When her legs felt steady enough, she went up the stairs to her bedroom and lay on the bed. She did not close the door.

★ ★ ★

There were no closed doors in the house she grew up in.

Sometimes, when her mother was gone on an errand, Cordelia would close the door to her bedroom and lean against it, pressing herself flat against the wooden surface, feeling it solid and smooth under her cheek.

The knowledge that she was alone and no one could see her—that she could do anything, say anything, think anything and no one would be the wiser—made her feel fierce and wicked and brave.

She always opened the door again after a minute. Her mother would come home soon and the sight of a closed door would draw her like a lodestone. And then there would be the talk.

If Cordelia’s mother was in a good mood, it would be “Silly! You don’t have any secrets from me, I’m your mother!”

If she was in a bad mood, it would be the same talk but from the other direction, like a tarot card reversed—“What are you trying to hide?”

Whichever card it was, it always ended the same way: “We don’t close doors in *this* house.”

When Cordelia was thirteen and had been half-mad with things happening under her skin, she shot back “Then why are there doors in the house at all?”

Her mother had paused, just for an instant. Her long-jawed face had gone blank and she had looked at Cordelia—really *looked*, as if she was actually seeing her—and Cordelia knew that she had crossed a line and would pay for it.

“They came with the house,” said her mother. “Silly!” She nodded once or twice, to herself, and then walked away.

Cordelia couldn't remember now how long she had been made obedient as punishment. Two or three days, at least.

Because there were no closed doors, Cordelia had learned to have no secrets that could be found. She did not write her thoughts in her daybook.

She kept a daybook because her mother believed that it was something young girls should do, but the things she wrote were exactly correct and completely meaningless. *I spilled something on my yellow dress today. I have been out riding Falada. The daffodils bloomed today. It is my birthday today.*

She gazed at the pages sometimes, and thought what it would be like to write *I hate my mother* in a fierce scrawl across the pages.

She did not do it. Closing the door when she was home alone was as much rebellion as she dared. If she had written something so terrible, she would have been made obedient for weeks, perhaps a month. She did not think she could stand it for so long.

*I'd go mad. Really truly mad. But she wouldn't notice until she let me come back, and I'd have been mad inside for weeks and weeks by then.*

Since her mother was home today and unlikely to leave again, Cordelia took a deep breath and sat up, scrubbing at her face. There was no point in dwelling on things she would never do. She changed out of her good dress and went out to the stable behind the house, where Falada was waiting. The stable was old and gloomy, but Falada glowed like moonlight in the darkness of his stall.

When Falada ran, and Cordelia clung to his back, she was safe. It was the only time that she was not thinking, not carefully cropping each thought to be pleasant and polite and unexceptional. There was only sky and hoofbeats and fast-moving earth.

After a mile or so, the horse slowed to a stop, almost as if he sensed what Cordelia needed. She slipped off his back and leaned against him. Falada was quiet, but he was solid and she told him her thoughts, as she always did.

"Sometimes I dream about running," she whispered. "You and me. Until we reach the sea."

She did not know what she would do once they reached the sea. Swim it, perhaps. There was another country over there, the old homeland that adults referred to so casually.

“I know I’m being ridiculous,” she told him. “Horses can’t swim that far. Not even you.”

She had learned not to cry long ago, but she pressed her face to his warm shoulder, and the wash of his mane across her skin felt like tears.

Cordelia was desperately thankful for Falada, and that her mother encouraged her to ride, although of course Evangeline’s motives were different from Cordelia’s. “You won’t get into any trouble with him,” her mother would say. “And besides, it’s good for a girl to know how to ride. You’ll marry a wealthy man someday, and they like girls who know their way around a horse, not these little town girls that can only ride in a carriage!” Cordelia had nodded. She did not doubt that she would marry a wealthy man one day. Her mother had always stated it as fact.

And, it was true that the girls Cordelia saw when riding seemed to envy her for having Falada to ride. He was the color of snow, with a proud neck. She met them sometimes in the road. The cruel ones made barbed comments about her clothes to hide their envy, and the kind ones gazed at Falada wistfully. That was how Cordelia met Ellen.

“He’s very beautiful,” Ellen had said one day. “I’ve never seen a horse like him.”

“Thank you,” said Cordelia. She still went to school then, and talking to other people had not seemed quite so difficult. “He is a good horse.”

“I live just over the hill,” the other girl had said shyly. “You could visit sometime, if you like.”

“I would like that,” Cordelia had replied carefully. And that was true. She would have liked that.

But Cordelia did not go, because her mother would not have liked that. She did not ask. It was hard to tell, sometimes, what would make her mother angry, and it was not worth the risk. Still, for the last three years she had encountered the kind girl regularly. Ellen was the daughter of a wealthy landowner that lived nearby. She rode her pony, Penny, every day, and when

she and Cordelia met, they rode together down the road, the pony taking two steps for every one of Falada's.

So it was unsurprising when Cordelia heard the familiar hoofbeats of Ellen's pony approaching. She lifted her head from Falada's neck and looked up as Ellen waved a hello. Cordelia waved back and remounted. Penny shied at their approach, but Ellen reined her in.

Cordelia had never ridden any horse but Falada, so it was from Ellen—and from watching Ellen's pony—that she learned that most horses were not so calm as Falada, nor so safe. When she was very young and the open doors in their house became too much, when she couldn't stand being in that house for one more second, she would creep to Falada's stall and sleep curled up there, with his four white legs like pillars around her. Apparently most people did not do this, for fear the horse would step on them. Cordelia had not known to be afraid of such a thing.

"Oh, Penny! What's gotten into you? It's just Falada." Ellen rolled her eyes at Cordelia, as if they shared a joke, which was one of the reasons that Cordelia liked her.

"Penny's a good pony," Cordelia said. She liked it when Ellen complimented Falada, so perhaps Ellen would like it when she complimented Penny. Cordelia talked to other people so rarely now that she always had to feel her way through these conversations, and she was not always good at them.

"She *is*," said Ellen happily. "She's not brave, but she's sweet."

Ellen carried the conversation mostly by herself, talking freely about her home, her family, the servants, and the other people in town. There was no malice in it, so far as Cordelia could tell. She let it wash over her, and pretended that she had a right to listen and nod as if she knew what was going on.

Cordelia was not sure why Ellen rode out to meet her so often, when she could say so little, but she was glad for the company. Ellen was kind, but more than that, she was ordinary. Talking to her gave Cordelia a window into what was normal and what wasn't. She could ask a question and Ellen would answer it without asking any awkward questions of her own. Most of the time, anyway.

It had occurred to her, some years prior, that not all parents could make their children obedient the same way that her mother made her, but when she tried to ask Ellen about it, to see if she was right, the words came out so wrong and so distressing that she stopped.

Something about today—the memory of the obedience or the fly or maybe just the way the light fell across the leaves and Falada’s mane—made her want to ask again.

“Ellen?” she asked abruptly. “Do you close the door to your room?”

Ellen had been patiently holding up both ends of the conversation and looked up, puzzled. “Eh? Yes? I mean, the servants go in and out of my dressing room, but I always lock the door to the water closet when I’m in it, because you don’t want servants around for that, do you?”

Cordelia stared at her hands on the reins. They were not wealthy enough to have servants, and there was an outhouse beside the stable, not a water closet. She pressed on.

“Does your family think you’re keeping secrets when you do?”

The silence went on long enough that Cordelia looked up, and realized that Ellen was giving her a very penetrating look. She had a pink, pleasant face and a kind manner, and it was unsettling to suddenly remember that *kind* did not mean *stupid* and Ellen had been talking to her for a long time.

“Oh, Cordelia...” said Ellen finally.

She reached out to touch Cordelia’s arm, but Falada sidled at that moment, and Penny took a step to give him room, so they did not touch after all.

“Sorry,” said Cordelia gruffly. She wanted to say *Please don’t think I’m strange, that was a strange question, I can tell, please don’t stop talking to me*, but she knew that would make it all even worse, so she didn’t.

“It’s all right,” said Ellen. And then “It will be all right,” which Cordelia knew wasn’t the same thing at all.