



MALORIE

THE SEQUEL TO
THE GLOBAL SENSATION
BIRD BOX

JOSH MALERMAN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MALORIE

A BIRD BOX NOVEL

JOSH MALERMAN



NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Malerman, Josh, author.

Title: *Malorie*: a Bird Box novel / Josh Malerman.

Description: New York: Del Rey, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2019059282 (print) | LCCN 2019059283 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593156858 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593156865 (ebook) | ISBN 9781984820143 (international edition)

Subjects: GSAFD: Horror fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3613.A43535 M35 2020 (print) | LCC PS3613.A43535 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019059282>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019059283>

Ebook ISBN 9780593156865

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Edwin Vazquez, adapted for ebook

Cover design and illustration: Blacksheep/Orion Books, based on images © Shutterstock and Depositphotos

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**THE JANE TUCKER
SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND**

Malorie stands flat against the brick wall of a classroom. The door is locked. She is alone. The lights are off.

She is blindfolded.

Outside, in the hall, violence has begun.

She knows this sound, has heard it in nightmares, has heard it in the echoes of a fallen house full of sane people tearing one another apart as she gave birth to her son.

Tom is out there in the violence right now. Malorie doesn't know where.

She breathes in. She holds it. She breathes out.

She reaches for the door, to unlock it, to open it, to find her son and daughter among the screams, the hysteria, the frenzy. Something cracks on the other side of the door. Sounds like someone slamming their head against the hall wall.

She pulls back from the doorknob.

When she last saw Olympia, the six-year-old was reading braille books in the Tucker Library. A dozen others were there, listening to the classical music played through the school speakers by way of the record player in the office.

Malorie listens for the voices of those people now. She needs to know if this violence has reached the library. Reached her daughter. If it has, she will look for Tom first.

She listens.

Her kids have taught her a lot about listening since arriving at the Jane Tucker School for the Blind. And while Malorie will never hear the world they do, she can try.

But there's too much noise out there. Chaos. It's impossible to discern one voice from another.

She thinks of Annette. The blind woman, much older than herself, whose name she heard screamed, moments ago, as Malorie, hungry, walked the hall to the cafeteria. Before Malorie had time to process the nature of the scream, Annette herself came around the corner, blue bathrobe and red hair trailing like spinning sirens, knife in hand. Malorie had time to note the woman's open, unfocused eyes before closing her own.

Malorie thought, *She's blind...how is she mad?*, then she went still. Annette passed her, breathing heavy, moving fast, and Malorie, hearing the first guttural howls from deeper in the school, stepped blind into the nearest classroom and locked its door behind her.

She reaches for the knob again now.

The last she saw of Tom he was in what was once the staff lounge, pieces of a new invention at his knees. Malorie is responsible for those pieces. Only six, Tom the boy invents like Tom the man, his namesake, once did. Often Malorie's instinct is to humor this impulse. She feels a mother must. Or perhaps, a mother *should have*, in the old world. Now, here, she always destroys what Tom's made and reminds him that the blindfold is the only protection any of them will ever need.

Yet, Annette is blind.

And now mad.

Malorie hears a sudden obscenity from the other side of the locked door. Two people are fighting in the hall. It's a man and a woman. And it's not difficult to put visual images with the sounds they make. Clawing, scratching. Fingers in eyes and fingers down throats and the cracking of a bone and the tearing of what sounds like a throat.

Bare-handed?

Malorie doesn't move. A body slams against the wood door and slides to the tiled floor. Whoever's won the fight, he or she is panting just outside.

Malorie listens. She breathes in, she holds it, she breathes out. She knows there's no stopping the panic. She wants to hear farther up the hall, past the breathing, to the screams of the people who live here, to the exact things they say, to the exact location of her kids. She remembers giving

birth in the attic of a home, a place much smaller than this. She recalls a cry from below: *Don tore the drapes down!*

Who tore them down here?

In the hall, the breathing has stopped. But the distant sounds of fists on wood, fists on fists, and the last vestiges of sanity are getting louder.

Malorie unlocks the classroom door. She opens it.

There is no immediate movement in the hall. No one erupts toward her. No one speaks at all. Whoever won the fight, they are gone now. Howls erupt from deeper in the building. Muffled death knells, last words and wishes. There is the smacking of fists, the cracking of wood. There is yelling and gibberish, doors slamming open and doors slamming closed. Children cry out. The music from the office continues.

Malorie steps over the body at the open door's threshold. She steps into the hall, keeping to the wall. An alarm sounds. The front door to the school is open. The rhythmic throbbing is so at odds with the classical music that for a confused second Malorie feels like she's already lost her mind.

Her kids are somewhere in this furor.

Shaking, she tries to close her eyes a third time, behind her already closed lids, behind the fold wrapped tight to her head, closing her mind to the idea of what this all must look like.

She slides along the brick wall. She does not call out to Tom or Olympia though it's all she wants to do. She breathes in, she holds it, breathes out. The bricks prick her bare shoulders and arms, tugging at the fabric of the white tank top she wears. The alarm gets louder as she approaches the end of this hall, approaches the very place from which redheaded Annette came rushing with a large knife in hand. People scream ahead. Someone is close. Heavy, clumsy boots on the floor, the grunt of someone not used to this much effort.

Malorie goes still.

The person passes her, breathing hard, muttering to himself. Is he mad? Malorie doesn't know. Can't know. She only slides along the wall, finding herself, incredibly, feeling a slim sense of gratitude for the two years they have lived here. For the respite from the road. But that indebtedness is a

marble fallen to a beach of glass orbs, never to be found again. A horror she's long expected has arrived.

Don't get lazy.

Her three-word mantra means nothing now. Proof: she's already gotten lazy, she doesn't know where her kids are.

A metallic bang thunders throughout; the music and alarm get louder.

Malorie doesn't try to calm the children she hears. She doesn't reach out in her darkness to help them. She only slides, so flat now the bricks draw blood.

Movement ahead, coming at her, quick, flat steps. She holds her breath. But this person does not pass.

"Malorie?"

Someone with their eyes open. A woman. Who?

"Leave me alone," Malorie says. "Please."

She hears the echo of her own voice pleading, six years ago, in the attic in which she gave birth.

"Malorie, what's happened?"

Malorie thinks it's a woman named Felice. All that matters is whether or not this woman is mad.

"Did they get in?" the woman asks.

"I don't—"

"Everybody's mad!" the woman says.

Malorie doesn't answer. This woman may be armed.

"You can't go that way," the woman says.

Malorie feels a hand on her bare wrist. She pulls back, cracks her elbow against the bricks.

"What's *wrong* with you?" the woman says. "Do you think *I'm* mad?"

Malorie walks from her, arms out, prepared to be hurt. She moves toward the end of the hall, where she knows a glass case dominates the wall, a thing that once held trophies, accomplishments, proof of progress in a school for the blind.

She connects with it before she can stop herself.

Her shoulder cracks it first, the cuts coming fast and warm, the pain loud. She cries out but her voice is inhaled by the rising chaos in the halls.

She does not stop moving. And she still doesn't call their names. Touching the wall with fingers painted freshly red, she approaches the wailing, the shouts, the metal on metal, the fists on fists.

Someone brushes against her shoulder and Malorie turns quickly, pushes at them, shoves nothing.

Nobody is there. But she feels cold. Doesn't want to be touched by anyone.

By anything.

She thinks of Annette, blind but mad.

Yes, a person could go mad in the old world way. But Malorie knows the look of the particular madness delivered by the creatures.

Annette did not simply snap. And if the woman cannot see...what happened?

"Mom!"

Malorie stops. Is it Olympia? The urgent but distant cry of the girl she did not give birth to but has raised as a daughter all the same?

"Somebody turn off that music," Malorie says, needing to say something, needing to hear a familiar, sane voice as she drags her fingers along the bricks, as she feels the pegboard where community notices alerted people to school events for the last two years.

Ahead, a scream. Behind, the cracking of wood. Someone bounds past her. Someone follows.

Malorie does not cry. She only moves, her knees weak, her shoulder bright with the fresh injury. Her ears open for an echo of the voice that cried *mom*, one of her own, perhaps, rising to the surface for air, before sinking back into the raging waves ahead in the hall.

She tells herself to move with purpose, but slow. She needs to be sharp, needs to be standing.

A boy cries out ahead. A child. Sounds like he's gone mad.

She breathes in, she holds it, she breathes out. She walks toward the maddening volume, the sounds of an entire community losing their minds at

once. A second child, perhaps. A third.

“They got in,” she says. But she doesn’t need to say it. And this time her own voice brings her no comfort.

To her right, a door rattles. Ahead on the left something on wheels crashes against the bricks. People scream profanities. Malorie tries not to allow herself to imagine what these scenes must look like. The expressions on the faces of the men and women she has shared this edifice with for two years. The chips in the bricks. The wreckage. The bruises and the blood. She tries to deny herself even the memory of sight, as if imagining what happens in the space might drive her mad.

She refuses to imagine a creature. She will not even allow herself that.

Something clips her bad shoulder. Malorie covers it with her hand. She doesn’t want to be touched. Is thinking that Annette was touched. Is worried, horrified, that the creatures have begun...*touching*.

But this was a piece of wood perhaps. Another brick. A finger sent sailing from a hand.

A woman howls. A child speaks.

Speaks?

“Mom.”

A hand in her own.

It doesn’t take more than a second for her to recognize the hand as Olympia’s.

Mania fattens ahead.

“This way,” Olympia says.

Malorie doesn’t ask her daughter why they are walking toward the violence rather than from it. She knows it’s because Tom must be on the other side of this scene.

Even at only six years old, Olympia leads.

Malorie cries. She can’t stop it from happening. As if, in her personal darkness, she is being lowered into the house at the moment when Don tore the drapes down. As if she never took the river to the Jane Tucker School for the Blind. As if she is falling, on her back, through the attic floor, into the hideous events below.

Tom the man died that day. The namesake of her son. Yet Malorie did not bear witness. She was removed, if such a word applies, safer in the attic than those below. But here, now, she hears the carnage up close, no floors between her and it; ordinary people turning. Once civil men and women now cracked, cursing, hurting each other and hurting themselves.

Something enormous crashes. Glass explodes.

Malorie wouldn't be able to hear her daughter if she spoke. They are in the eye of it now.

Olympia's grip tightens.

Someone thumps against Malorie, shin to shin. Then, bricks again, against her bad shoulder. She recognizes some of the voices. They've spent two years here. They know people. They've made friends.

Or have they?

As Malorie steps deeper into the madness, she hears a distant question, asked in her own voice, her own head, asking if she was righteous in her staunch safety precautions, the fact that she was often chided for wearing her blindfold indoors. Oh, how the people of this place were offended by her measures. Oh, how it made the others feel as if Malorie thought herself better than them.

"Tom," Olympia says.

Or Malorie thinks she hears it. The same name of the man she most admired in this world, the optimist in a time of impossible despair. Yes, Tom the boy is much like Tom the man, though the man was not his father. Malorie can't stop him from wanting to fashion stronger blindfolds, from covering the windows with layers of wood, from painting false windows on the room they've called their own for two years.

But she can stop him from doing it.

Someone hits Malorie on the side of the head. She swings out, tries to push the person away, but Olympia pulls her deeper into the derangement.

"Olympia," she says. But she says no more. Cannot speak. As now bodies press against her, objects break above and behind her, words are sworn close to her ear.

It can sound like a celebration if she wants it to, the screams no longer of terror, but excitement. The heavy thuds only heavy feet upon a dance

floor. No anguish, only cheer.

Is this how Tom the man chose to see this world? And if so...can she do it, too?

“Tom,” Olympia says. This time Malorie hears it clearly, and she understands they are on the other side of the violence.

“Where?”

“Here.”

Malorie reaches out, feels the doorjamb of an open classroom. It smells of people in here.

“Tom?” she says.

“Mom,” Tom says. She hears the smile in his voice. She can tell he’s proud.

She goes to him, crouches, and feels for his eyes. They are covered with what feels like cardboard, and Malorie thinks of Tom the man wearing a helmet of couch cushions and tape.

The relief she feels is not tempered by the chaos in the halls. Her children are with her again.

“Get up,” she says, her voice still trembling. “We’re leaving.”

She steps farther into the room, finds the beds, removes three blankets.

“Are we taking the river again?” Tom asks.

Beyond them, the madness does not quell. Boots clamor up and down the halls. Glass breaks. Children scream.

“No,” Malorie says. Then, frantic, “I don’t know. I have no plan. Take these.”

She hands them each a blanket.

“Cover yourselves from head to toe.”

She thinks of blind Annette, blue robe, red hair, the knife.

“They can touch us now,” she says.

“Mom,” Tom says, but Malorie reaches out and takes his hand. The violence swells, swallowing the questions he was close to asking.

Olympia takes Malorie’s other hand.

Malorie breathes in, she holds it, she breathes out.

“Now,” she says. “*Now...we go.*”

They step, together, out of the classroom and into the hall.

“The front door,” she says.

The same door they entered two years ago, Malorie’s body and mind then ravaged by rowing and the constant bowstring terror of navigating the water blind.

And the fear then, too, of a man named Gary.

“Malorie?”

Malorie, under the blanket, grips the hands of her children. It’s a man named Jesse who speaks to her. Malorie knows Jesse, when sane, had a crush on her. He does not sound sane now.

“Malorie? Where are you taking the kids?”

“*Go,*” Malorie says. She does not turn around. She does not answer Jesse, who now follows close behind.

“Malorie,” he says. “You can’t go.”

Malorie makes a fist, turns, and swings.

Her fist connects with what she believes is Jesse’s jaw.

He cries out.

She grips the hands of her children.

Tom and Olympia move in concert with her, the trio making for the open front door.

“My blindfold worked,” Tom says. Still, despite the horror, there is pride in his voice.

“It’s here,” Olympia says, indicating the door.

Malorie places a palm against the doorjamb. She listens for Jesse. For anyone.

She breathes in. She holds it. She breathes out.

“How many are out there?” she asks. “How many do you hear?”

The kids are quiet. The frenzy continues deeper into the school. But it feels far now. Farther. Malorie knows Tom wants to answer her questions exactly. But he can’t.

“Too many to count,” he says.

“Olympia?”

A pause. A crash from far behind. A scream.

“A lot,” Olympia says.

“Okay. *Okay*. Don’t take the blankets off. Wear them until I tell you otherwise. They touch us now. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Tom says.

“Yes,” Olympia says.

Malorie tries to close her eyes a third time. Tries to shutter her imagination to what lurks outside.

A lot.

She tries to close her eyes a fourth time, a fifth, a sixth. She wants to say something about how unfair this is. She wants to tell someone her age. Someone raised before the creatures came. How it shouldn’t be that a mother and her children have to flee the place they call home, so suddenly, to enter a world where the threats are worse than those they leave behind.

She grips the hands of her children and takes the first step away from the Jane Tucker School for the Blind.

This is the new world. This is how things are and how they have been for many years.

From hysteria to the complete unknown.

The three of them, blind, draped in cloth, setting out.

Alone.

Again.

TEN YEARS ON

ONE

Tom is getting water from the well. It's something he's done every other day for the better part of a decade, the three of them having called Camp Yadin home for that long. Olympia believes the camp was once an outpost in the American frontier days. She's read almost every book in the camp library (more than a thousand), including books on the history of Michigan. She says the camp lodge was most likely once a saloon. Cabin One was the jail. Tom doesn't know if she's right, though he has no reason not to believe her. It was a Jewish summer camp when the creatures came, that much is for sure. And now, it's home.

"Hand over hand," he says, taking the rope that connects Cabin Three to the stone lip of the well. He says it because, despite the ropes that tie every building to one another (and even link Cabin Ten to the H dock on the lake), he's trying to come up with a better way to move about.

Tom loathes the blindfolds. Sometimes, when he's feeling particularly lazy, he doesn't use one at all. He keeps his eyes closed. But his mother's never-ending rules remain firm in his mind.

Closing your eyes isn't enough. You could be startled into opening them. Or something could open them for you.

Sure. Yes. In theory Malorie is right. In theory she usually is. But who wants to live in theory? Tom is sixteen years old now. He was born into this world. And nothing's tried to open his eyes yet.

"Hand over hand."

He's almost there. Malorie insists that he check the water before bringing it up. She's told him the story of two men named Felix and Jules

many times. How his namesake, Tom the man, tested the water the two brought back, the water everybody was worried could be contaminated by a creature. Tom the teen likes that part of the story. He relates to the test. He even relates to the idea of new information about the creatures. Anything would be more to work with than what they have. But he's not worried about something swimming in their drinking water. The filter he invented himself has taken care of that.

And besides, despite the way Malorie carries on, even she can't believe water can go mad.

"Here!" he says.

He reaches out and touches the lip before bumping into it. He's made this walk so many times that he could run it and still stop before the stone circle.

He leans over the edge and yells into the dark tunnel.

"Get out of there!"

He smiles. His voice echoes—the sound is a rich one—and Tom likes to imagine it's someone else calling back up to him. For as lucky as they are to have chanced upon an abandoned summer camp with numerous buildings and amenities, life gets lonely out here.

"Tom is the best!" he hollers, just to hear the echo.

Nothing stirs in the water below, and Tom begins to bring the bucket up. It's a standard crank, made of steel, and he's repaired it more than once. He oils it regularly, too, as the camp giveth in all ways; a supply cellar in the main lodge that brought Malorie to tears ten years ago.

"A pipeline that delivers water directly to us," Tom says, cranking. "We could put it exactly where the rope is now. It passes through the existing filter. All we'd have to do is turn a dial, and presto. Clean water comes right to us. No more hand over hand on the rope. We wouldn't have to leave the cabin at all."

Not that the walk is difficult. And any excuse to get outside is a good one. But Tom wants things to improve.

It's all he thinks about.

The bucket up, he removes it from its hooks and carries it back to Cabin Three, the largest of the cabins, the one he, Olympia, and Malorie have

slept in most of these years. Mom Rules won't allow Tom or Olympia to sleep anywhere else, despite their growing needs, a rule that Tom has so far followed.

Spend all day in another one if you need to. But we sleep together.

Still. A decade in.

Tom shakes his head and tries to laugh it off. What else is there to do? Olympia has told him in private about the differences in generations that she's read about in her books. She says it's common for teenagers to feel like their parents are "from another planet." Tom definitely agrees with the writers on that front. Malorie acts as if every second of every day could be the moment they all go mad. And Tom and Olympia both have pondered aloud, in their own ways, the worth of a life in which the only aim is to keep living.

"Okay, Mom," Tom says, smiling. It's easier for him to smile about this stuff than not. The few times outsiders have passed through their camp, their home, Tom has been able to glean how much stricter Malorie is than most. He's heard it in the voices of others. He saw it regularly at the school for the blind. Often, it was embarrassing, living under her thumb in public. People looked at her like she was....what's the word Olympia used?

Abusive.

Yes. That's it. Whether or not Olympia thinks Malorie is abusive doesn't matter. Tom thinks she is.

But what can he do? He can leave his blindfold inside. He can keep notes and dream of inventing ways to push back against the creatures. He can refuse to wear long sleeves and a hood on the hottest day of the year. Like today.

At the cabin's back door, he hears movement on the other side. It's not Olympia, it's Malorie. This means he can't simply open the door and place the bucket of water inside. He needs to put that hood on after all.

"Shit," Tom says.

So many little dalliances, so many quirks of his mother's that get in the way of him existing on his own, the way he'd have it done.

He sets the bucket in the grass and takes the long-sleeved hoodie from the hook outside. His arms through the sleeves, he doesn't bother with the

hood. Malorie will only check an arm.

The bucket in hand again, he knocks five times.

“Tom?” Malorie calls.

But who else would it be?

“Yep. Bucket one.”

He will gather four buckets today. The same number he always retrieves.

“Are your eyes closed?”

“Blindfolded, Mom.”

The door opens.

Tom hands the bucket over the threshold. Malorie takes it. But not without touching his arm in the process.

“Good boy,” she says.

Tom smiles. Malorie hands him a second bucket and closes the door. Tom removes the hoodie and puts it back on the hook.

It’s easy to fool your mom when she’s not allowed to look at you.

“Hand over hand,” he says. Though really now he’s just walking alongside the rope, bucket in one hand. Malorie’s told him many times how they did it in the house on Shillingham, the house where Tom was born. They tied the rope around their waists and got water in pairs. Olympia says Malorie talks about that house more often than she realizes. But they both know she only talks about it up to a point. Then, nothing. As if the ending of the story is too dark, and repeating it might bring it back upon her.

At the well, his arms bare below the short sleeves, Tom secures the second bucket and turns the crank. The metal clangs against the stone as it always does but despite the contained cacophony, Tom hears a foot upon the grass to his left. He hears what he thinks are wheels, too.

A wheelbarrow pushed past the well.

He stops cranking. The bucket takes a moment to settle.

Someone’s here. He can hear them breathing.

He thinks of the hoodie hanging on the hook.

Another step. A shoe. Dry grass flattens in a different way beneath a bare foot than it does the solid sole of a shoe.

A person, then.

He does not ask who it is. He doesn't move at all.

A third step and Tom wonders if the person knows he's here. Surely they had to have heard him?

"Hello?"

It's a man's voice. Tom hears paper rustling, like when Olympia flips pages while reading. Does the man have books?

Tom is scared. But he's thrilled, too.

A visitor.

Still, he does not answer. Some of Malorie's rules make more sense in the moment.

Tom steps away from the well. He could run to the cabin's back door. It wouldn't be difficult, and he'd know when to stop.

In his personal darkness, he's all ears.

"I'd like to speak to you," the man says.

Tom takes another step. His fingertips touch the rope. He turns to face the house.

He hears the small wheels creak. Imagines weapons in the barrow.

Then he's moving fast, faster than he's ever taken this walk before.

"Hey," the man says.

But Tom is at the back door and knocking five times before the man says another word.

"Tom?"

"Yes. Hurry."

"Are your—"

"Mom. *Hurry.*"

Malorie opens the back door and Tom nearly knocks her over as he rushes inside.

"What's going on?" Olympia asks.

"Mom—" Tom begins.

But there is a knock at the front door.

The door is thin and old. Malorie has expressed worry before; it isn't enough to stop anything, or anyone, from coming in.

"It's a man," Tom says. But Malorie has already tapped him on the shoulder. He knows what this means. He knows also that Olympia received the same tap.

Tom doesn't speak again.

"Hello in there," the man says on the other side of the cabin door. "I'm with the census."

Malorie doesn't respond. Tom thinks of the rustling papers he heard. A barrow full?

"Do you know what the census is?"

Malorie doesn't respond. Tom thinks he might have to do something. If the man tries to break the door down, he's going to have to do something.

"I don't mean to frighten you," the man says. "I could come back another time. But it's hard to say when that will be."

Malorie doesn't respond. Tom knows she won't.

He wants to ask Olympia what a census is.

"I just wanna talk to you. However many there are in there. It could save lives."

Malorie doesn't respond.

"*What does he want?*" Tom whispers. Malorie grabs his wrist to quiet him.

"So, what I do," the man says, "I go around gathering stories. I gather information. I know quite a bit about failed attempts at trying to look at the creatures. I know of successes people have had in terms of living better lives. Did you know there is a working train now?"

Malorie doesn't respond. Suddenly, Tom wants to.

"Right here in Michigan...a train. And did you know there are more creatures now than before? Estimates say they have tripled since first arriving. Have you noticed more activity outside your home?"

Malorie doesn't respond. But Tom really wants to. What this man is saying electrifies him. Why not exchange information? Why not learn? In

the name of a better life, why not?

“There’s some evidence of one having been caught,” the man says. “Certainly people have tried all over.”

And now Tom knows why Malorie hasn’t spoken.

By her measures, this man is unsafe. Just the suggestion of capturing one must have turned her to stone. If she wasn’t stone already.

“I have lists,” the man says. “Patterns. A lot of information that can help you. And your stories, in turn, might help others. Please. Let’s talk?”

Malorie doesn’t respond.

But Tom does.

“Do you have that information written down?”

Malorie grips his wrist.

“Yes, I do.” Relief in the man’s voice. “I have literature on me. Right here.”

Malorie grips his wrist so tight he has to grab her hand to stop it.

“Could you leave it on the front porch?”

This is Olympia speaking. Tom could kiss her.

But the man is silent for some time. Then, “That doesn’t seem like an even trade. I’d be leaving everything I know, without getting anything in return.”

Finally, Malorie speaks.

“Add us to the list of people who turned you away.”

Tom hears a sigh through the wood.

“Are you absolutely sure?” the man asks. “It’s not often I encounter a group. As you can imagine, it’s not the most fruitful, nor the safest, endeavor. Are you sure you won’t have me in for an hour? Maybe two? Can I at least get your names?”

“Leave us now.”

“Okay,” he says. “You realize I’m just a man trying to do good out here, right? I’m literally trying to give us all a better understanding of where we’re at.” Then, after further silence from within, “Okay. I apologize if I’ve scared you. I see I have.”

Tom's ear is cocked to the door. He hears the man leaving the porch, shoes on the cabin stairs, breaks in the dry grass beyond, the wheelbarrow pushed once more. By the time Tom is at the door himself, his ear to the wood, he can hear the man's steps diminishing, taking the dirt road out of camp.

He turns to Malorie and Olympia. But before he can say anything, Malorie does.

"I told you not to speak," she says. "Next time, you *don't*."

"He's gone," Olympia says.

But Tom already knows what Malorie is going to say before she says it.

"Not until we sweep the camp, he's not."

"Mom," Tom says. "He's not Gary."

Malorie doesn't hesitate with her response.

"Not another word," she says. "And wear your hood for fuck's sake, Tom."

Tom remains by the front door as Malorie readies herself to step outside, to check every cabin in the camp. The man could be staying here, Malorie will say. He could be camping out in the woods, she will say. Who knows how long he's been watching them, she will say. And the name *Gary* will come up again. As it always does in times of trouble.

But Tom isn't listening for what Malorie says or doesn't say. His ear is on the soft rustle on the other side of the cabin's front door. As what must be a welcome breeze shuffles the papers sitting out there on the porch.

The literature the man left behind after all.