

### Thistle, Utah

The road hadn't been paved anytime in this century. Delia's 1990 Jetta could barely make it over the buckled pavement as she dipped and popped, her head grazing the ripped fabric of the ceiling. Route 89 was supposed to be a major thoroughfare in Utah, but this stretch of highway was a small part of a trip, not any kind of destination. The ruts and bumps could be briefly tolerated, then forgotten. This part of the road didn't have to enter into your memory at all.

Delia had always wanted to go to Thistle. She had heard stories about the town growing up in Salt Lake—scary stories and sad stories, bedtime stories and stories only felt through whispers in the dark—and those stories stayed with her. Delia tucked them into her chest, somewhere between her lungs, and the stories nestled there like turtle doves bedding down. They cooed with the rising sun, before she was fully awake, before she had a chance to open her eyes and see the white of her walls. They murmured their small, birdy murmurs in the place right before light.

They woke her.

When he hit her, the stories were what created the space in her head for the thought to form, a bubble, and pop, release the thought: *Get out, go, go, now*. It wasn't the kind of hit you see in a movie, no broken cheekbones, no bloody nose, and it was the first time, but still. Still.

Everything was still, silent, waiting, this far out. She had even turned off the radio, the tinny wail of pop songs sounding too desperate against the silence. Even above the clunking of the engine, Delia felt that she could hear her bones creaking, her stomach complain, the echoing, aching rush of her eardrums.

The rest stop, claiming panoramic views, was empty. Just like the road before it, it was in poor repair, signs hanging half off their metal posts, the guardrail bent and rusted. Evidence of

the slump, what they called the massive landslide that damned up the Spanish Fork River, was a scar etched into the face of the valley. She touched her own face. The left cheek still throbbed, gently, like it had its own, individual pulse.

As she looked out, she could hear her mother's voice in her ear: *April 17, 1983 was no ordinary day. It was the day of two very significant events: the birth of Delia Constance Brown and the death of the town of Thistle.* Delia shuddered as the wind turned itself over, crashed into her body. The tunnel the mountains made held the cold of late April bright and clean against the sun.

They had learned about this area in school, when Delia took geology at BYU, her one concession to the natural sciences. The Wasatch Plateau was a hellmouth of disaster, due for a massive earthquake any moment now. That was how Professor Egan had always said it, *Any moment now...* always pausing before she began her new sentence, like a cue. Delia took a deep breath every time that pause lit up the basement classroom, studying the shape of the area, a smaller Utah inside the larger outline on the map.

Her mother used to tell her that it was the nature of maps to always force you to choose. And any choice meant discarding something else. *Any way is a loss. Any direction. Any choice.* Delia grasped her own hands together against the softness of her stomach, but it was no use. The body knew better—she was alone, nearing thirty and holding her own hand for comfort in the middle of nowhere.

That dimly lit room, fluorescents half-on to better view the projector Professor Egan preferred to the virtual blackboard behind it, was the same place Delia had seen Thistle for the first time. In the initial slides, it was a movie set. A town that looked ready for a gunslinger and a sheriff to have a shoot-out down near the saloon while the player piano whined on in the

background. It was idyllic in the way that only a picture can be. And then, without preamble, the slides shifted and the movie Delia was watching had changed. Destruction everywhere, on a scale she had never seen in person. Most of the town simply wiped out. Water clogged buildings choked with shoes and papers and everything else the few remaining inhabitants had left behind. The aftermath, a scarred swath of landslide that marred the earth, cut through Thistle's main street. Professor Egan's voice rose above the images, as if the small, elderly professor were floating on the ceiling looking down:

*It's about prevention. The surveyors had noticed the problem and failed to fix it because Thistle was no longer a strong revenue source for the railroads. The town had dwindled, so no one—not the state, the federal government, or the companies invested—thought it to be worth the time or money to fix the problem. The joke was on them in the end. Thistle was the most costly landslide in U.S. history. Factoring in inflation, when all was said and done, the oversight in geological planning cost \$922 million dollars.*

But Thistle wasn't a grand disaster. It was no Pompeii. It was a ghost town, but there were no ghosts in it, no echo of tragedy. There has been no one caught in the slump. People had lived here and people had died here, and while Delia was certain that awful things had happened here, those awful things were no different from any other place. By the time she was born, by the time everything died here, only a few families were left. The town had never been more than 600 people at its height, and was a shadow of its former self when the slump ripped through. Her mother's family had been long gone by then. Nothing linked her to the town in 1983 but some coincidental timing.

Delia knew all that, but still. Still she made her way down the slope.

Purple thistle cascaded down the incline, catching at the hem of her jeans. It was too early for the flowers, as they usually bloomed well into May. The resulting blooms were ragged and small, their usually sharp edges dull and unable to sting her through fabric. They were still sharp enough to catch Delia's skin when she slipped and fell, skidding down the last half of the hill. Her engagement ring, which she still wore daily after eight years of marriage, turned on her recently thinned finger and cut into her palm. A small bead of blood rose where the setting had gone as far as to cut into her skin. Delia sat in the dirt for a moment, looking at the blood. It shone.

Delia wasn't Mormon, though her ancestors had been, but she was a BYU legacy and got in early admission. Walking across BYU's campus, all the Mormon couples were holding hands with one sparkling ring between them. Everyone she knew was engaged, if not by the end of freshman year, then soon after. There was wedding after wedding, shower after shower, modest bachelorette after modest bachelorette to attend. Delia had eight bridesmaids' dresses in her closet, gathering dust, by the time she reached senior year. Each had their shoulders carefully covered. It bothered her.

Not that she wanted to get married. Not that she wanted a diamond. She wanted a man. Delia had always dreamed of a man with thick wrists and a slight frame, tall and willowy, but strong. A sylph of strength. Smart. Didn't have to be kind, she didn't want him to be good. Smart was enough. The BYU boys had a sweetness that made her feel corrupt and broken. She wanted someone who was harsher than her.

Cue Aaron.

Delia stood up, shaking the blood from her palm and bringing it to her mouth. The taste of salt and iron on her tongue felt right, correct. As if her body wasn't whole anymore, as if it

should, somehow, be falling to pieces. She tried to stand up and felt a tenderness in her ankle, as if it wouldn't be able to support her full weight. Delia winced once and walked on.

She couldn't see Thistle from the bottom of the hill, but the scar was an undeniable pathway. The ground had been disfigured and it was somehow beautiful, the way it churned up and exposed what was underneath. The mica glinted in the weak sunlight that filtered through the clouds, her feet crushing it into finer powder. There was no specific color to the dirt, but instead a spectrum that whipped itself around her in the wind, dusting her boots and layering her mouth with grit. No roads lead to Thistle, and the train tracks were washed out in the slump. Delia had never seen a place so secluded, growing up in the city, going to school in the city, marrying and staying in the city. Only a geological blemish on the face of the earth was there to mark out that anything was there at all. Or had been.

Delia and her mother had always meant to go to Thistle together. Where her mother's grandmother had worked at the train station during WWI. Where Delia's grandmother had been born. Where a long-ago piece of the puzzle that was Delia's life had been formed, the precursor, the preface, the prologue. The town of the strange coincidence, as she had thought of it as a child, making it into a Nancy Drew mystery.

It's not as if Delia had thought of Thistle every day for almost thirty years. No, it was nothing like that kind of burning obsession, that ripping and tearing kind of fascination. It was that it kept cropping up. The day she was born. Her mother's stories. Professor Egan's class. Aaron's historical research as a BYU associate professor. Thistle followed her. Thistle was the one obsessed.

Now Delia was here, alone, palms up and open and empty, limping and bleeding a little, but here nonetheless. Or almost here, her ankle whimpering and slowing her progress. She

wished she had thought to bring a jacket when she ran out of the house this morning, but she had been running, literally running. And she felt lucky she had thought to grab anything besides what she was wearing at all. Though the jeans were too tight and she had boots, but no socks, she was warm enough, even as the sun was hidden behind a cloudbank.

Just as everything happens, suddenly, the town swam into view. It swam in wavy lines, like a heatstroke, like a mirage, as if it was being created in front of her. Delia couldn't breathe for a moment, a moment so much like the pause Professor Egan used to make between *now...* and the words that followed after. A moment where something is expected, but nothing ever actually happens. This day was no different, but so completely different. Because as the wind died down, the town of Thistle straightened out and there it was, it was right there in front of Delia. The stories in her chest fluttered their wings as if breathing again as Delia finally exhaled. A fairytale, a picture, a dream in reality.

It wasn't much of a dream though, and not really fairytale-like at all. As for a picture, Professor Egan's slideshow was based on much older snapshots, taken not too long after the slump and flood rammed through. Delia could tell, even from a distance, that the town had become even more ghostly and decrepit. It was the palimpsest of a place where people once existed, but only that shadow. Nothing living remained.

She came upon the train station first, the sign above the still-standing brick arch missing the "I" and "LE." *Welcome to THST*. As if the name of the place was so deeply tied to the idea of the place that the sign couldn't hold out. Delia turned her palm over and studied the still bleeding mark on her palm. Was that the same? Was the ring rebelling because she had run? Was Aaron's digging into his skin too, after what he had done to her? They weren't really Mr. and Mrs. Cartwright anymore, if they had ever been.

It had been illicit in the beginning, the senior coed and the young, dashing associate professor. And illicit always has an undercurrent of fun and danger and something special. It was the stuff of a romance novel, the cheesiest kind, the kind English major Delia and Historian Aaron would never stoop so low as to even look at. They ignored those kinds of novels as they perused the musty shelves of Salt Lake's used bookstores, pretending they didn't know each other, but brushing hands in the aisles to send up small puffs of dust. They took weekends out of town where they pretended to be married in small bed and breakfasts in the mountains. They had sex on the desk in Aaron's cramped closet of an office with the door locked and his hand over her mouth to muffle any sounds he prompted from her. He was tall and lean and his wrists were about average. He was smart and he wasn't sweet, or at least he was old enough to Delia's eyes that it seemed like he wasn't. He was enough. He was different enough.

Delia graduated, he proposed, she said yes. That's what you did. When someone proposes and you love them or you've been sleeping with them for long enough, you say yes. Right? Because Delia's mother wasn't around anymore to insist on a big wedding, the couple went to City Hall and dealt with it quickly and efficiently. And so it goes. And so it went, eight years. Aaron worked at BYU, Delia in one of the bookstores they used to frequent, writing late into the night. For eight years she felt the dust creeping inside her, and she tried to breathe it out into the darkness, shake it out through a pen, a computer screen, a typewriter. But the stories stayed sleeping, the stories never came. Delia felt like a zombie, writing working fucking cooking cleaning, it was constant, all that living never stopped. But it stopped inside of Delia, even while her body still moved.

She ran her hands up and down the brick arch, propped up on wooden stilts. She wondered what would happen if she pulled on the braces, if she would be buried or if the

structure would hold. She just wasn't sure it was corporeal enough to touch her. It was real. It was there, it wasn't a mirage. But Thistle wasn't really a town at all anymore or really a place. It was a place where something once was, a collection of ruins. On their honeymoon, Aaron and Delia had gone to Pompeii. That was still a place, somehow; there were still people in it. The mummified and the tourists, making Frankenstein's monster out of the remains. *It lives!* But there were no monuments here, no placards. Even the rest stop has failed to announce Thistle's location, or previous location, or ruins. The world pretended there was nothing to see here.

Pompeii had been hot. They were there because Aaron wanted to be there, because of the *history* of it, as he would say. When they had sex in the hotel after sweating through their clothes all day, Aaron was rough with her. As if in this place, so far from their normal, the façade he had carefully constructed fell away. Even though his wrists were simply average, they were attached to hands strong enough to leave bruises on her wrists. His voice rasped in her ear, berating her, cursing her, telling her exactly what he thought she was. His hipbones slammed against her again and again, leaving bruises on the inside of her thighs. She felt nothing. She floated up to the ceiling and looked down on the tiny, bird-like creature Aaron crushed underneath him. The stories glowed inside her chest, she could see them lighting up her bones. Delia smiled. Delia knew what he wanted, he wanted to break her. Delia let him.

After, he held her and told her he loved her. She said it back, but she couldn't hear her own voice in the closet-like hotel room. It was sucked up by the heat, the way their bodies stuck together. It was sucked up by how little there was to say anymore.

It was getting late. The sun was creeping down and the wind was picking up. The town smelled like fetid water, like weeds decaying slowly, stewing. Delia limped her way away from the arch, entering the town proper. Improper, now, nowhere for anyone to live. Fireweed had



overrun Main Street, mixed in with the flowering thistles. Here, they grew up to her hip and their thorny blooms were razors. They found the holes the weave of Delia's sweater and sunk into her flesh. There was more flesh than she was used to, her stomach swelling slightly against her pants. She put her hands on it, lightly, as if testing its ability to respond.

A few storefronts still stood, stark against the valley behind them. Empty windows staring eyes, they watched Delia back. But there was nothing behind them. She wondered what she had expected to find here. Her mother? Her mother had been gone ten years. Delia had watched her die for nine months during her junior year of college, and then she was suddenly gone. Lung cancer. It was an easy thing to say, a harder thing to explain.

When Aaron hit her, because she was sad, because he was sad, because they didn't know how to talk anymore, because because because, did it matter? When Aaron hit her, Delia thought of her mother's face in the hospital that last time Delia had seen her. It was shrunken, etched out of bone, swimming above the sheets that were starched in a way that could only mean impending death. She thought her own face must have looked like that when Aaron's hand connected with her cheekbone. Not shocked, not hurt, just dead, almost dying, lost forever. She couldn't really even say what they had been fighting about. They weren't yelling. They were just having dinner. They were just doing what they'd done for eight years. Done. Wouldn't do anymore.

In the midst of the early spring evening, Delia was abruptly sure of that.

She wandered through the rest of the ruins. There wasn't much to see, really. The train arch, a few buildings, rotting and rusted out, shells that didn't know how to echo. The edges of evening were purpling the sky. She wouldn't be able to see anything soon, unless there was a full moon. Still, Delia stood there, looking the reality of what had haunted her throughout her life. It was nothing. It was mentioned only because a railroad once ran through it, remembered only

because it was a surprisingly costly landslide. No one died. No one mourned it too severely.

Thistle was just a word now, the name of a particularly annoying plant. It wasn't even a story.

The last building Delia came upon, at the farthest reaches of what you couldn't really call a town, was still choked with water. Thigh-deep and murky, Delia put her palm against the liquid. It responded, sending concentric circles out into the dark. The structure looked like a fluid-filled lung, gasping for air. A face bloated from chemo, from a punch, like something that refused to leave the earth, but stood, insisting upon its existence. Delia held her breath in the pause between the *now*...and whatever would follow after. But Thistle was silent. Thistle was dead.

*April 17, 1983 no was ordinary day. It was the day of two very significant events: the birth of Delia Constance Brown and the death of the town of Thistle.*

In the gathering dark, she slumped against the outside husk of what was once a home, and began to suck in the slightly fusty air in giant, greedy gulps. The stars were winking on above her. There were so many without the light pollution of Salt Lake. If she floated away from herself now, there would be no way to come back. She would just keep floating, forever, up and up and up. She would bump into a star and burn out. She kept breathing, hard and harder until the cold air made her lungs hurt and she felt the space they took up in her ribcage as a clean outline.

The stories banged against her ribs, as if they finally wanted to vacate their warm spot in Delia's chest. They no longer cooed, but screamed. The stories wailed and thumped in time with her heart, asking, pleading, begging. They were awake. They were ready to live.

Delia let them go.

For a moment, she thought she could hear a voice, or an echo of a voice. For a moment, she thought someone could be, should be, maybe was there. For a moment, there was at least the idea of someone else, out there in the dark.

“Hello?” But Delia’s voice didn’t even return to her. No one answered.