

LEYNA KROW

## THE RABBIT

**NICHOLAS IS FILTHY.** He knows this from the faces of the men he is with. They are painted with dirt and ash from the brims of their helmets down to their necks. When they pull their respirators off, there is a muzzle of clean. They look like cartoon dogs, he thinks.

The three of them—Nicholas, Skylar, and Declan—hiked out from their camp that morning to investigate a report that a previously contained area of the fire had broken out. It was true. They should have called for support as soon as they saw it, but resources are spread so thin. They spent several hours digging new lines, felling and backburning what vegetation remained. Then the wind changed and the fire headed toward them impetuously. They had to go, their work mostly for naught.

Now they are hot and discouraged. It is a long walk back—the fire cut off the route they took from camp. The extra miles feel heavy with the weight of their gear and the afternoon heat. The grime from their digging and then the sudden influx of smoke turns cakey as they sweat. Overhead, air support carries water to the place they just were. They have ducked back into the burn area; the fire can't get them where there's no fuel left.

Skylar leads them to a clearing. He gives the hand signal for *Sit the fuck down for a minute and eat a snack*. Declan takes his helmet off to pour water on his head and steam rises. Nicholas follows suit but feels no better. It is the beginning of November, and he is afraid this year's wildfire season will have no end. His family and friends back home in Washington have stopped asking how things are going. He assumes they know from the news.

No one says anything. Nicholas remembers, at preseason training, when he called these men his friends. When they were all full of bravado and energy, eager to tell stories and make each other laugh. They didn't have to prove themselves tough. They had to prove themselves fun—the sorts who could keep up a good time under any circumstances. A promise none of them, ultimately, have been able to keep. In July, two jumpers from their unit died in an accident—not from a jump but a tree felled the wrong direction. Then another in September, a man who

walked off from camp. Never returned and could not be found so they assumed the worst. There was no break to mourn. They did not train for this, Nicholas thinks. The part where they would have to hold each other up through the despair. He knows it is childish but he wants the fun back, the excitement and optimism of his first weeks in California. He chews his jerky stick and looks at his crewmates' tired, dirty faces.

"I know a trick," he offers. He hasn't shown anyone his trick before except his sister, Ruby, though she didn't really understand it was him who had done it. He didn't either, at the time. If he had, he would have told her. Nicholas has a twin brother, but it's Ruby, his senior by three years, who is his best friend and closest confidant. They never keep secrets from each other.

"Yeah?" Declan walks over to Nicholas. Skylar joins them as well. They are all desperate for something.

He points into the burnt expanse of the clearing. Then he says nothing and does nothing. The next part always takes a minute. He worries Skylar and Declan will get bored and sit back down. It is a trick easily missed without strict attention.

About thirty yards in front of them, a seagull drifts up from the space between the ground and the sky.

"Hold on," Nicholas says. "Sometimes I can get a bigger one."

Then, a pelican. The bird stands still on long legs for just a second. Then it gets a running start and takes off. The seagull has already flown out of sight.

"There," Nicholas says and smiles, tracking the pelican with his finger. But the mood of his companions is heavy. He worries he has made an error in judgment.

It's always birds. For a long time, he would get a feeling and if he focused on the feeling, he could make a bird. Later he learned to bring the feeling on whenever he wanted. He just has to search around in his mind for it. Though his desire for birds is occasional at best.

"Never mind," Nicholas says. "It's nothing."

"Now do deer," Skylar says.

Nicholas is surprised when a doe and a buck appear. He did not know he was susceptible to the power of suggestion. The deer look confused in a way birds never do. They turn tight circles. The buck tosses his head theatrically like he's trying to prove something. He bolts, with the doe following, in the direction that the fire is not.

"Now do butterflies."

A puff of monarchs, maybe a dozen. They fly up and away with no consideration to landing.

“Are they real?” Declan asks.

“What else would they be?” Skylar says.

“Now do a rabbit,” Declan says.

Brown-furred and white-tailed. Its nose wiggles as it sniffs and sniffs and sniffs at a blackened ground.

“You fucking asshole.” Skylar takes a running start at Declan and shoves him hard enough to topple him. His helmet and respirator pop from his hands as he hits the ground. “It’s just going to die out here.”

“I’m sorry,” Declan mutters, crawling to retrieve his gear. Neither of them seems to consider Nicholas’s role in this.

Skylar helps Declan to his feet. He does not apologize. He checks his watch.

“We need to get to the drop spot,” Skylar says. A plane with fresh supplies and four more crew members is on its way. “Newbie cooks dinner,” he adds, pulling on the collar of Nicholas’s shirt like he doesn’t trust him to follow.

**NICHOLAS DOES NOT** cook dinner. He passes the task off on another man so he can return to the clearing. He brings with him the satellite phone. It is dedicated solely for communication with base and other hotshot units—no personal calls, ever. He sneaks it into his pocket when no one is looking. He brings water and a small bag of peanuts.

The rabbit is still at the clearing. It has dug a half-assed warren. More of a divot than a burrow. It huddles there, exposed, nose and ears alert.

Nicholas scoops it up. He sits on a downed log with the rabbit in his lap. He offers it water, poured into his cupped hand, and it drinks a little. He offers it a peanut, which it ignores. It makes no effort to move from his lap. He’s always been good with animals.

He takes out the phone and dials Ruby’s number.

“I need your help with something,” he tells her. He hates to bother her. A new mother, she is busy and exhausted.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I need you to say the word *trees*.”

“Are you okay?” she repeats.

He knows he can’t do this on his own. If he could, he would have already, before. He doesn’t know when, but he would have. He tells her again. He wants her to say *trees*. Once every sixty seconds or so.

She hesitates. He is going to have to explain. She of all people will understand, he thinks. But he doesn't have the energy for it, the capacity. He has been in the field for fourteen days with no plan for when the team he jumped with will return to base. The new jumpers who arrived that afternoon are not replacing anyone; they just need more bodies on the ground. "Do you remember," he starts, "that time I—"

"Trees."

They come two at a time. Bigleaf maples. White alders. Incense cedars. They are lush and healthy, and almost unbearably green in a landscape of black and brown. He asks her to slow down. "Say it every two or three minutes." He is tired. They don't talk in between. After three-quarters of an hour, she says she has to go; she needs to feed the baby. He wipes at his eyes. His sister's whole life has changed and he hasn't even met the baby. He knew this would be the case when he left in spring. But now everything important feels so far away.

"Is Brayden there?" he asks. She says he isn't back from work yet, but their mom is visiting.

"Do you want me to put her on?" Ruby asks, skeptical.

Nicholas says yes. He listens to the muffled sounds of his sister and mother conferring. Then his mom is on the line, her voice full of parental cheer. "So, we're talking about trees?"

He doesn't want to worry her. He doesn't want to stop yet, either. He tells her what he needs her to do.

"Oh, I get it," she says. "I see what you're up to. I think it's wonderful."

He has no idea how this could possibly be true, but he appreciates the sentiment.

They finish out the hour. His mind drifts: the trees get smaller, more shrub-like. Still the rabbit refuses its peanut.

He does not, at this given moment, think this is a solution to anything. Later, people will argue otherwise. The situation will become complicated, fraught; everything Nicholas hates.

What he has made is not a forest. His new trees cover just half of the clearing. He can't even fathom the area of the fire his crew is working to contain. It is just one of eight hundred currently active across the state, nearly five million acres burned since the start of summer, a number that is so large it means nothing to him. But it's a nice glade.

"Say toadstools," he tells his mom.

"Say grasses."

“Say wildflowers.”

“Say pond.”

“Say lily pads.”

“Say bullfrogs.”

“Say strawberries.”

He knows it's too late in the year for strawberries. Still, they look nice, a pop of red against all the new green. He sets the rabbit down near them; it nibbles. This, now, is a place it can live.