

THE WINSLOW INCIDENT

Elizabeth Voss

I find myself considerably discomposed and disordered—full of notions.

Poor N. Burt cut his own throat. We hear great talk about witchcraft.

—From the Diary of Stephen Williams, Longmeadow, Massachusetts, 1716-1735

(Poisons of the Past, Mary Kilbourne Matossian)

Don't touch me! Stand back! I am dead, do you hear? I am dead.

I have snakes in my stomach! They are burning burning burning.

—Charles Veladaire, Pont-Saint-Esprit, France, 1951

(The Day of St. Anthony's Fire, John G. Fuller)

Blood is pouring from the sky: We are going to drown.

I see a river of bodies. I see a town of ghosts.

—Aaron Adair, Winslow, Washington, 2010

(A Plague of Madness, G.F. Olson)

Prologue

I'm not well, he admitted.

Fearful of making a sound, Veterinarian Reed Simmons sat rigid in the dining room chair he'd wedged against his front door. From that vantage point he could make out the patch of brown grass that constituted his lawn but not the vehicle he heard roar up.

His rifle rested across his knees.

This intrusion could only spell trouble. Since Simmons' visit to Holloway Ranch that morning, followed by the realization that he too felt peculiar, he'd had his suspicions. And if those suspicions turned out to be correct, he did not want to be involved in any capacity.

Nothing I can do about it anyway. He shuddered so violently his teeth clacked together.

Footsteps on the gravel driveway, as loud as fireworks, advanced toward the porch. Simmons could identify the condition if not the cause: hyperacusis, his sensitivity to sound growing more and more painful as this interminable day wound on and on.

I'm not well, the thought crept back into his worried mind.

A dog began to bark . . . and clamor and claw around the porch.

Simmons cringed, which sent his forehead throbbing again. *How did I cut my head so severely?* Images flitted through his mind: the red truck, crashed in a roadside ditch; his bloodied face reflected in the bathroom mirror, hands fumbling to dress the wound. Now gauze stuck to the gash, making the area even more tender and sore.

If only that were the worst of it.

“Doc Simmons?” a young female voice sliced his eardrums and encouraged the dog to bark louder. “We need your help.”

Hands trembling, the vet gripped the rifle. Just as he’d feared, they were coming for him. And why? He wasn’t an MD. *I wish we had a real doctor on this godforsaken mountainside—*

A thunderous knock erupted inches from his ear, piercing his skull like a spike.

He sprang from the chair.

Holding his gun, he crouched in the middle of the living room and twisted this way and that—the barking coming from every direction at once—until he realized, *I can’t see*. Where were his glasses?

Floodgates opened and panic the likes of which he had never known washed through his core. *I’m not right! There’s sure to be others. Bound to get worse. What should I do?* His mind was a book he struggled just to open, written in a language he no longer understood.

There—he recognized the vague shape of his spectacles on the foyer table and dashed to retrieve them. Donning the glasses brought the world back into focus, brought him instantly back in control.

“All right, then,” he decided, feeling angry that they expected him to save them when really the situation was quite hopeless, wasn’t it?

He kicked away the chair and wrenched open the door to find the girl poised to knock and plead again.

Trick or treat, he half-expected her to say.

Instead she gasped and drew back from the doorway, a reaction that told him *he* was the trickster in a monster mask.

A growl replaced the barking, a sound so menacing it startled Simmons. Because there wasn't a dog in Winslow that wouldn't recognize the vet's scent.

Truth is, Simmons realized, *I don't recognize myself.*

He looked down.

Beside the girl, the Irish setter drooled copious amounts of saliva onto the porch.

“Mad dog!” Simmons screamed. “Mad dog!”

The girl shot the vet a look of terror before bounding down the porch steps, the dog at her heels.

Simmons walked to the top step . . . slowly. *What's the hurry?* he thought. *No one in Winslow is going anywhere. Not anytime soon.*

The girl made it to the driveway with the dog running protective circles around her.

Simmons raised his rifle and took aim.

Part One

Day One of the Heat Wave

Friday July 9, 2010

Holloway Ranch

Winslow, Washington

Hazel Winslow quickened her pace up the hill, each anxious step churning up dirt. A shadow's length ahead of her, Patience Mathers braced her back against the NO TRESPASSING sign and raised a hand to cover her mouth, revulsion spoiling her flawless features.

“What’s wrong?” Hazel asked, her heart batting away at her chest like a bird caught in the house.

Patience let her hand fall from her face. “They’re dead,” she said.

“Who’s dead?” Hazel crested the rise and saw for herself—and her mouth flooded with thin saliva. Dusk washed the hundred-acre pasture an agreeable orange. Tall weeds spun sparks of sunlight. The sky hung heavy with the sinking sun. *It'd be pretty*, Hazel thought, *if it weren't for all those dead cows*. Half a dozen corpses littered the pasture: bloated bellies crushing grass, legs jutting out at odd angles, black masses of flies feasting.

“What the hell?” Sean Adair said.

Hazel jumped at her boyfriend's voice behind her. She spun to face him, and they gaped at each other in astonishment. The dying light created a halo around Sean's long brown hair, and he looked sun-kissed and sturdy, as if the mountain air agreed with him.

Paler and lankier, as though he lacked some vital nutrient, Hazel's cousin Tanner

Holloway skidded to a stop next to Sean and made a grave face at her. “Uncle Pard is *screwed*.”

Hazel gestured at the carnage with a sweep of her arm. “You said they were sick, Tanner. Not—”

“Sicker than we thought.” Tanner smirked. “Apparently.”

“This is bad.” Patience sank to her haunches on the dirt road and clasped her hands together as if praying that she, too, would not suddenly be struck swollen and dead.

There was no breeze, yet Hazel could sense the stench of death. Scanning the pasture, she whispered, “What happened to them?”

Tanner flipped straight blond surfer hair out of his face. “Mad cow disease.”

“No way.” Hazel flashed on the steak and eggs she’d eaten during the mid-morning lull in her shift at Rose’s Country Crock.

“No way,” Sean said. Hazel had served him a cheeseburger for lunch.

Patience rose to her feet and swung toward Hazel, her beautiful dark eyes seeking reassurance from her best friend. “Mad cow?” she said.

“Okay, they don’t know yet,” Tanner admitted. “Doc Simmons was out poking and prodding the poor dumb beasts all morning. Now Uncle Pard’s waiting for the vet to come back with test results. But I do know one thing.” His pale blue eyes brightened. “They are damn worried—and that was *before* any beef went belly up.”

Feeling hot and grimy, Hazel gathered up her long hair and knotted it into a sloppy, strawberry blond bun. Fanning the back of her neck with one hand, she scrutinized her cousin, uncertain if she trusted him. They were all seventeen, but unlike Patience and Sean, Tanner Holloway was something new. Two weeks ago he’d been

shipped up to their uncle's ranch for the summer to straighten out and fly right. And experience had taught Hazel that the Holloway side of her family kept secrets like thieves hoard plunder. Certainly her mother had, and took nothing but secrets with her when she left. Hazel turned from Tanner, unhappy to be reminded that her mother hadn't chosen to take her along either.

Silently she counted cattle carcasses: three nut-brown cows huddled in the shade of the aspens; a steer felled before the bridge spanning the creek, his enormous head dunked halfway underwater. But fifty feet away near the split-rail fence surrounding the pasture, a red cow stood chewing her cud—alive and kicking and flicking her switch. And close by, a calf romped around in a patch of clover. Hazel started toward the animals, curious why they seemed okay when the others were clearly not.

Sean grabbed her by the hand. "Don't go near them. You don't know what's wrong."

"You're the one who wanted to come here, remember?" she snapped and writhed free. But as soon as she recognized the hurt in his amber-colored eyes, a familiar remorse struck. She smiled in a way intended to say, *Sorry*. "I won't get too close. Promise."

She pulled away from him and headed for the pasture. As she approached the fence in a cloud of dust bothered up by her black Converse, she flapped the front of her baby blue t-shirt to get some air circulating against her skin. By late afternoon the sun had swallowed the entire Pacific Northwest mountainside; now it was digesting it. Blowing out her breath, she waved a hand in front of her face to fend off the swarm of gnats that were losing their tiny minds to the heat.

"You're an idiot, Winslow," Tanner yelled.

“Hazel, come back!” Patience sounded alarmed.

Yet when Hazel glanced over her shoulder, she found all three crossing the road toward her, Patience wide eyed and Sean grimacing as though he had a bad taste in his mouth.

At the fence, Hazel noticed that the red cow’s hind legs were trembling. Suddenly both legs buckled.

“Whoa!” Hazel cried and leapt onto the lower fence rail. Out of instinct, she reached for the cow, arm outstretched, and her fingertips skimmed stiff hide as the animal dropped to the grass. The long-lashed creature emitted a pitiful moo, struggling to rise on legs that refused to cooperate.

Coming up behind Hazel, Sean wrapped his arm around her waist. “That’s not too close?” He pulled her off the fence and plopped her indelicately on the ground. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, Sean,” she said. But by the time she turned around, he was already headed back toward their motorcycles, his head bowed in a way that tugged at her heart.

“You shouldn’t have touched it.” Tanner sounded like he was enjoying himself. “It’s probably contagious.”

Hazel frowned. “Cow sicknesses don’t spread to people that way.” But as she watched the animal struggle, she began to feel less certain. She glanced sidelong at Tanner. “Do they?”

He scoffed. “Guess you’ll find out.”

The calf that had been playing in the clover tottered up, nudged the cow’s neck with his nose, and gave a sad bleat. Then he scampered deeper into the pasture, not

slowing until he put fifteen feet between them as if he, too, were suddenly worried about contagion.

“This is bad,” Patience repeated. Between strands of long black hair hanging in her white face, she eyed the animals with obvious gloom. “And that ring around the moon last night meant it’s sure to rain soon.” She flung back her head to search the sky. “I hope our rodeo isn’t ruined.”

Hazel couldn’t care less about the rodeo, but she did feel sorry for the animals—and realized this meant serious trouble for their uncle. She squinted at Tanner. “What did Doc Simmons say?”

Tanner shrugged. “Only that they might’ve gotten into something they shouldn’t have.” He knocked Hazel’s forearm with his elbow. “Think it’ll be half-priced rib eyes at the Crock tonight?”

Ignoring him, Hazel crouched and held her hand between the fence rails toward the calf. “Hey, buddy,” she said softly.

The reddish-brown calf stared at her for a moment before opening his mouth to say, “Blat.”

She realized then that the calf wasn’t right either. His muzzle was coated in something sticky-looking and the tips of his ears looked flaky and sore. At the sound of horses clomping across the wood bridge, the animal gave a frightened toss of his furry head.

“Later.” Tanner was already walking away.

“Wait for me.” Patience scrambled after him.

The calf studied Hazel with huge wet eyes. A tuft of red hair stuck up on top of

his head as if he'd just woken from a long nap.

"It's all right, little guy," she said. "Come here."

On his rickety legs, the calf started toward her, just as Sean yelled, "Get out of there!" from what sounded like far away. But the horses seemed closer now: heavy hooves pounding soft grass. The white, crescent moon-shaped markings on the calf's face made her think of rings and rain and the rodeo in ruin.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" she murmured. "Gonna grow up to be a prize Holloway bull."

The animal was less than ten feet away. He picked up his pace, small rump swaying, tail swishing to-and-fro. Then he raised his pink nose and gave her a friendly bleat.

Hazel wondered why it sounded like someone was running in the dirt. "That's a good—"

"Get back!" a man's voice boomed. "Keep away from it!"

Thunder cracked and the calf's face exploded, showering her in bits of blood and hide. For a stark moment Hazel thought she'd been shot too and toppled backward. Grabbing hold of the rough fence rail to keep from falling, she felt her palm fill with slivers.

"Hold your fire, Clark!" the man shouted. "That was *the* most asinine, half-cocked move! You're damn lucky you didn't shoot her."

Hazel's eyes were locked on the calf, crumpled on his side before her, silent and still. Blood erupted from the hole where moments ago there had been one large brown eye. Through a second hole in his skull, brain protruded.

She felt panic and vomit and tears all rising at the same time and heard that sound again of shoes slapping dirt right before Sean grabbed her up and away from the fence. Then she was running back down the road so fast her body got ahead of her feet for one long scary moment and she nearly tumbled to the ground.

Tanner and Patience were already tearing off on the red Kawasaki, with Patience tucked behind Tanner, screeching like a mouse clutched in the talons of an owl.

Heart hammering, Hazel clambered over the cattle gate after Sean, swinging her legs over the metal bar and landing next to their Yamahas in an explosion of dirt.

Three ranch hands on horseback were bearing down on them fast.

Fear fought with relief when Hazel realized it was her Uncle Pard leading the charge. Then she saw the fury steaming off him and fear won that battle.

After reining his horse to face Kenny Clark and Old Pete Hammond who followed, Pard held up his hand and yelled, "I'll handle this." As soon as they turned their horses to head back, he rode up to Hazel and Sean where they stood panting and sweating on the other side of the cattle gate.

Pard Holloway was a big man rendered even larger astride his horse, pointing down at them with a finger that seemed huge. "You will not breathe a word of this. Not. A. Word. Understood?"

"What's wrong with your herd?" Hazel asked. Despite her ragged breath, she sounded calmer than she felt. "Why did Kenny shoot that calf?"

"That's not your concern, Hazel." Her uncle started pointing again. "And I will not allow you or anybody else to trespass on *my* property and interfere with *my* business. Matter of fact, trespassing is a punishable offense. Go ask your father." He reached into

his back pocket, retrieved a blue bandanna, and flung it to her. “And clean yourself up before you catch something.”

She let the bandanna flutter to the dirt. Her father always warned her to steer clear of his brother-in-law’s ranch; now here she was: spattered in bits of baby bull, her hand full of splinters, sick to her stomach after witnessing animal murder. When she realized calf blood was trickling down her bare arms, a whimper escaped her.

She forced herself to swallow hard and stand up straight. “*Something?*” she echoed her uncle. “If you don’t know what’s wrong, why are you killing them?”

“All right, listen up!” Pard shouted with such force that Hazel, Sean, and the horse all started. “That calf was sick and we couldn’t chance it spreading to the rest of the herd.” He pushed up his hat to reveal eyes the same greenish-brown as hers, hair the same shade of reddish-blond—as if neither of them were willing to commit to any one particular hue. Then he narrowed his familiar eyes. “And I will not allow *news* of this to spread, either.”

Hazel glanced at her blood-spattered arms before grimacing at him. “People will find out.”

“I’ll be damned if I’ll let that happen. You know why?” He gestured at the sky; the answer so obvious, surely it was written there. “If we lose our reputation, we lose *everything*. Not just my ranch, but this whole damn town. Right now I’ve got this under control, but you two have to promise me you’ll all keep your mouths shut.”

“Whatever.” Sean shrugged before he kick-started his motorcycle to life. “We’re outta here.”

Hazel nibbled at her bottom lip, distraught over the animal remains stuck to the

front of her shirt. Looking back at her uncle, she raised her voice to be heard over the bike's engine: "It's not safe to eat the beef, is it?"

"Dammit, Hazel!" Pard threw up one massive arm. "Repeat that and I promise you I'll dig up that mess between Sean Adair here and Hawkin Rhone.

Hazel and Sean swapped haunted glances.

"Going on five years now, I believe," Pard continued, leaning down toward them with his forearm against Blackjack's mane. The horse looked smug, Hazel thought, showing them his yellow teeth and breathing hot foul air in their faces.

Pard added, "That whole sorry business was never actually settled up. Was it?"

When Hazel looked at Sean again, his mouth moved but nothing came out.

A burning sensation crept across her scalp, and she caught herself chewing her lip—a habit she had fought hard to break ever since that day at Three Fools Creek when she witnessed Hawkin Rhone bite clear through his own tongue.

She stomped up to the gate and yanked the horse by the bit. Blackjack's head snapped back into her uncle's chest, the animal's frightened eyes rolling her direction. "You do that," she yelled, "and I'll tell everyone in Winslow—everyone down in the whole valley—that your beef is poison!"

Pard pushed her back a couple of feet with the bottom of his boot against her shoulder. "Don't force me to tell Zachary Rhone what really happened. Or about how your father lied. Because you know, sheriffs can lose their badges over a helluva lot less." Pard glanced at Sean before he drew closer to Hazel and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "Not to mention what might happen to your friend, here. How's a boyfriend in prison sound?"

Feeling herself begin to shake, Hazel shoved her hands into the pockets of her shorts and turned her back on her uncle, stupefied that he was threatening them. “Who cares about your cows and your shit-filled ranch anyway,” she said, instantly aware of how weak that had sounded. She climbed on her own motorcycle and kicked and kicked the starter until the engine finally sparked.

“Good,” Pard shouted while Blackjack reared from the buzz of both engines. “We’ve got a deal. You stay out of my business and I’ll stay out of yours.”

Instead of heading back the way they had come earlier from Ruby Creek, Hazel and Sean blasted the opposite direction up Loop-Loop Road toward town. After a minute of riding flat out, they were forced down into the ditch in order to get around a white truck parked across the road.

It wasn’t until they had skidded around the west gate that Hazel stole a glance over her shoulder.

Her stomach sank.

From that higher vantage point, she could see that there were more than a mere half dozen. Strewn across the pasture like passengers from a plane crash, at least fifty head of Holloway cattle lay dead.