

*Hanna Who Fell from the Sky*  
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## Chapter 1

The wolves were lurking. Hanna could sense them in the brush just beyond her line of sight, and others closer, the most daring of the pack camouflaged by thickets of timber. When her father sent her out into the woods, Hanna didn't argue. It was forbidden to argue and this needed to be done. Hanna was to retrieve the moonshine. She was to bring it home. She was not supposed to be afraid.

With daylight fading, Hanna had expected to be watched. She'd anticipated the wolf pack might hunt her now that winter was ending and food was still scarce. What she didn't expect was the quiet. Out in the woods, over two hundred yards from Jotham's house, there was nothing but silence; no cawing crows or cooing doves. The crickets' chirp had long fallen prey to the cold. Even the trees—at this, the onset of spring—had yet to come alive as they awakened from their seasonal slumber.

Hanna adjusted the cap on the jug. Her father's associate, the man with the white whiskers and the wide scars lining his cheeks, hadn't been able to find a proper lid in the shack where he sold his handcrafted spirits. He'd wedged an ill-fitting piece of cork in its place and told Hanna to carry it carefully. She pressed the cap down firmly now, and then she looked up. In the distance, a set of yellow eyes was watching, sharp and harrowing, like lemons crystallized in the sun. Hanna made out the fur along the bridge of the creature's nose, a toughened patch of skin along its jaw. Then finally a sound, this one from above, a raven swooshing its wings. Hanna looked into the sky, only for a moment. When her gaze returned to the wolf, it was gone.

"It's getting dark. We have to hurry," Hanna said.

Emily stepped forward, a single step where her foot landed on uneven ground. At the last moment, Hanna reached out and caught her, almost spilling the jug in the process. The girls watched it swish and swoosh but never lose a drop.

"Father would be upset," Emily said.

"He would be furious," Hanna said. She took her sister's hand and led her back through the woods.

Emily had insisted on coming with Hanna. Seven years her junior, Emily had been following Hanna around since she could crawl. Emily started life differently than the rest of the children. She'd emerged from the womb with a strong mind and a twisted back. Now eleven years old, Emily struggled to walk. As an infant, she had crawled for three years before the adult women insisted Jotham take her to a doctor in the city. Jotham balked. He stormed around the house in a rage before declaring that no member of his family would ever travel to a place where the minds are base and the souls corrupt. He brought a doctor home instead.

The diagnosis was an abnormal lateral curvature of the spine. Emily's back was shaped like a question mark that leaned too far to the right. Over the years, Hanna had assisted Emily in doing the exercises the doctor recommended. Her efforts had helped to a degree. Still, Emily's

spine looked like a tree that—bereft of sunshine—had tried to reach around a boulder to find light. It was Hanna's responsibility to look after Emily. Hanna gave Emily her bath. She walked her to the classroom for their daylong lessons on faith. Hanna locked arms with her sister at church and helped her kneel. She helped Emily stand.

What would happen to Emily in ten days' time, when her big sister no longer lived in Jotham's house, Hanna still didn't know. That was a subject she had yet to broach and there was no time to think about it now. Dusk hung like vapor in the air. Darkness would soon fall.

A stream appeared up ahead, its frigid water tinted blue by the first glimmers of moonlight. Beyond the water, the ground was a foreboding maze of shadows burdened with steep, imperceptible cliffs and rabbit-sized holes that led to nowhere. Hanna took a hard step and her foot lodged in the swampy mire. She pulled her boot out, careful to balance the jug in her hand and Emily against her hip. In the distance, a light beckoned. Jotham's house. Still too far away. Hanna kept moving. In her haste, she pulled Emily along beside her. Emily didn't complain (the girl never complained), but Hanna could tell from her labored breaths, they were moving too fast. She looked into the sky again. The darkness hadn't fully set in. They still had time. There was no reason to panic just yet.

Three weeks ago, this ground was covered in snow. At the peak of winter, it was two yards deep. Now all that remained were occasional piles of slush. Hanna found she missed the snow. There was contentment in knowing everything was silver and white, that the world was asleep and that time had managed, as incredible as it seemed, to slow down. Hanna had spent the entire season willfully ignoring what was coming, pretending her body hadn't changed.

Hanna would turn eighteen in a week's time, the age she'd always feared. She'd seen how others looked at her, how the men at church glared without shame, how their eyes grew wide as they tried to imagine what was underneath her floral dress. Hanna knew what they wanted, what men expected from women. She couldn't lie to herself any longer. Winter was gone and what she'd been afraid of her whole life was rapidly approaching.

"Did you hear that?" Emily said.

"Yes."

How could she not? The wolves were howling. Since the moment she spotted those yellow eyes, a warm worry had fluttered in Hanna's chest. In the minutes since, it became clear they were being followed. Hanna hoped it was just the one wolf. More likely, up to a dozen were tracking them, the leader of the pack sending silent signals to his brethren to surround the girls, to find the perfect moment to strike.

The sun was gone now. Moonlight had taken over the black-blue skies. They'd stayed out too long and now they had to move quickly. Hanna pressed forward with Emily clinging to her arm. The wolves would take Emily first. They would sense her deformity and, like adept hunters, prey upon her weakness. Hanna's mother had persuaded her to take a knife out into the wild. The weapon pressed against the seam of her dress, the metal cold against her skin. But what good would one knife do against an entire pack of wolves?

Back at the stream, Hanna had tried to lead them astray. She'd splashed through three consecutive piles of slush and then turned sharply, thinking that if they altered their course, what they would lose in time, they'd make up for by confusing their trackers. It had turned out to be a remarkably ineffective strategy. There is nothing more futile than evading destiny. Nothing more frightening than knowing you're powerless to stop what is coming.

Hanna heard a wolf panting, another slipping through a nearby patch of bushes. Three times she'd almost dropped the moonshine. She pictured her father's face, that vein above his eye, the one that throbbed and turned purple when Jotham was angry. The batch of whiskey he'd distilled in their woodshed was all but gone. If the children feared him when he was hard at the drink, they feared him doubly so when he was sober. Hanna adjusted the cap again. Despite her efforts, it wouldn't stay. Rather than drop it and spill what was inside, she set the jug down on a patch of solid ground and kept moving. Jotham could return tomorrow, in daylight with his gun if he so chose.

Hanna leaned into Emily's ear. She whispered hard.

"We have to run."

"I can't."

"Yes. You can."

"I'm afraid."

"No. You're not."

Emily looked up and Hanna caught a glimpse of the girl's eyes in the moonlight, little circles of blue and gray surrounded by startled, shivering white. She grabbed Emily's arm and they ran as fast as they could. Hanna's chest throbbed. Her blood pulsed in her arms, her legs pumping, her feet crashing through the underbrush. The howls disappeared and the swift patter of footsteps took their place. Emily was running on one foot. Hanna hoisted her up and she pressed toward the edge of the forest, afraid that, at any moment, a predator would steal Emily's leg, that the girl would collapse into the darkness and Hanna would be powerless to save her. Still, she stormed into the night.

Suddenly, the girls stopped. Hanna's heart leapt into her throat. The lead wolf was standing in their path, its yellow eyes gleaming in the moonlight. Emily tripped and Hanna grabbed her. Her wrists weakened and Hanna almost lost her grip, but somehow she pulled Emily up before the girl dared touch the ground.

Slowly, the other wolves emerged from the darkness. Seven in total. The creatures led with their noses, baring their teeth, their spindly legs a disguise for their ferocity, lurkers whose time had finally come.

The woodlands' edge was only a few yards away. Jotham's house was fully visible. Hanna could see the window of the bedroom she shared with her brothers and sisters. She pictured herself reaching across the long patch of grass and touching the front door. Only, the house might as well have been an ocean away. Hanna wanted to call out. She wanted to scream for help. But who would hear her? Who would make it there in time?

The lead wolf gritted his teeth. He tilted his snout, arched his back and took a single step forward. Hanna clutched the knife in her hand. She pictured the next ten seconds in her mind. The wolf would lunge. He would leap at Emily, and Hanna would step between them and strike the wolf down. She would strike them all down. In a single moment, Hanna would transform. She would find her true self and be both Emily's heroine and her own. Hanna took a short breath. She waited for the wolf to pounce.

*How long in my life have I been waiting for the wolves to pounce?*

Just then, a shotgun blast rang out. The booming sound overtook the air, another following seconds later. Hanna looked toward the light. It was her father, Jotham, standing on his front porch, shooting his gun into the air. He stepped forward and shouted. Jotham fired a third blast and the wolves cowered in confusion.

This was Hanna's chance. She dropped the knife and picked Emily up in both arms. Then she ran. With all her strength, she carried the girl straight into the grass field. She felt nothing around her—not the cold air against her face or the ground beneath her feet. There was only her and the girl, the beckoning light, the darkness echoing in her wake. Hanna pumped her legs as fast as they would go. She was almost at Jotham's doorstep when she finally realized the wolves had given up the chase. She set Emily down and together they collapsed to their knees. Hanna let out a long gasp filled with relief and agony and fear all at once. She fought back tears.

Jotham was standing on his porch, his face shrouded in shadows, a lone figure clutching his gun. Home was where the real danger was. Only ten days remained until Hanna's birthday. That was all she had left. Ten days. She had grown into a woman and very soon now, her time would come.

## Chapter 2

The next morning, the family assembled in the driveway. The young children's feet shuffled along the gravel, the oldest standing perfectly still, the toddlers clinging to their mothers' legs; all waiting for their father to speak. Hanna could see her breath in the brisk air, her footprints in the frosted ground. An hour earlier, when dawn's first light weaved through the stick-thin trees, the skies promised warmth. Only, it was still cold.

Hanna stood next to Emily and watched Jotham without ever meeting his gaze. Last night, when Hanna had arrived without the moonshine, Jotham's anger overtook him. His hands shook. His skin—ashen during the summer months, anemic now at winter's end—turned a bright, boiling red. It was Hanna's mother, Kara, who calmed him, who spoke quietly in his ear, who implored with her eyes. It was Kara who steered Jotham toward the liquor cabinet, who poured the last drops of whiskey into a glass and placed it in Jotham's hand. It was Kara who helped Jotham's anger crawl back down into his belly.

Jotham paced the driveway now. He labored in his steps, dragging one foot behind the other. For as long as Hanna could remember, Jotham's back brace had limited his movements. In the past year, his impairment had progressed. The occasional spells of discomfort had morphed into bouts of unbroken anguish. Hanna could see it in the way her father clenched his jaw when he stood up from a chair, in the slight hesitation before he turned his head, in the darkened circles around his eyes.

Jotham took a long, wheezing breath and surveyed the group. His four wives stood amongst the fourteen children, aged seventeen through four months, all dressed in their best attire; the boys in white shirts and trousers held up by handwoven suspenders, the girls in almost-matching floral dresses. From five yards away, Hanna's dress looked identical to her mother's. From a yard away, tears in the fabric were obvious. Below her jacket, the seam had frayed. Her dress looked ratty, as though she didn't take care of her things and, by extension, herself. In truth, Hanna owned only two dresses. The others she had outgrown and passed down to her sisters.

The thought was unavoidable, particularly when they attended church services: Jotham's family was poor. It was evident in the holes in the children's shoes. In the stains on their tattered clothes. In that a family of nineteen had eight winter jackets between them, the rest clasping ragged sweaters close to their chests, the youngest children wrapped in blankets. It was evident in how the lot of them looked as though they'd been freshly dredged from a lake.

Jotham ran his hand along his jaw. Hanna waited for him to say something about Emily's tangled hair or the slumped shoulders of one of the toddlers, for a reprimand that never came. Instead, he stepped toward Hanna and examined her closer. This was her day, after all. There would not be an ordinary church service. Today, the minister would conduct a ceremony to formally announce who Hanna's husband was going to be.

"The entire town is coming to see you this morning. Are you prepared?" Jotham said.

Hanna nodded.

"I'm going to need you to say it."

"I'm prepared, Father," Hanna said.

It seemed for a moment that Jotham would speak again. Words formed inside his mouth. Were they instructions for how Hanna should behave? What she should say when she set foot inside the church and all eyes turned toward her? Were words of encouragement—however unexpected—on the tip of his tongue? Hanna would never know. Jotham turned and stepped into the passenger's seat of his old open-back truck. He settled in alongside his first wife Belinda, who had taken over driving duties as recently as three seasons ago. Emily was allowed to sit in the back. The others had to walk.

Belinda started up the truck. It struggled at first, buzzing and clanking before letting out a long, uncooperative wheeze. The truck's frame convulsed and a dripping sound filled the air. Behind the wheel, Belinda pursed her lips. The skin tightened on her face and she turned the key in the ignition again. This time the truck roared to life. It billowed out a hazy black cloud and then the wheels spun on the gravel driveway.

Hanna watched the vehicle pull away before setting off down the street with the others. She clutched her jacket close, her collar turned up to offset the breeze.

"Carry me?" a little voice said.

Hanna looked down to see three-year-old Ahmre with her arms outstretched. She picked the girl up. "What are you dreaming about today?" Hanna said. "Pixies? Unicorns?"

Ahmre leaned into Hanna's ear. "A squirrel that tricks her brothers and sisters."

Hanna laughed. "Would this squirrel trick me, as well?"

The little girl paused to think. "How could it trick you? You won't be here."

Hanna held Ahmre closer. The child was right. Soon, she wouldn't be around to ask Ahmre about her daydreams, to help navigate the child's intricate network of imaginary friends. Hanna surveyed the family now, walking together, the youngest children holding hands, their mothers steering them away from the woodlands' edge, the twins sharing—or were they fighting over?—a torn blanket. She pictured them a week from now, walking without her. It wouldn't be all that different than if a giant hand reached out of the sky and plucked Hanna away.

"Can I ride on your shoulders?" Ahmre said.

"You're getting too big."

"Just this once?"

Hanna lifted the little girl up and felt Ahmre's warm legs wrap around her collarbone. Together they made their way down the gravel path. The journey would take just over thirty minutes. Clearhaven was a small town, isolated by woodlands on its sides, with a dense, impossible-to-traverse marsh at its southern end. On the far side of Clearhaven was The Road—the single entrance point into town. Hanna had never set foot on The Road. Only once, many seasons ago, had she stood at its edge. Hanna knew The Road didn't go on forever. But,

at sunset, the way it dipped into the horizon, its view unbroken by mankind's creations, The Road seemed to lead straight into the blistering yellow orb in the sky.

In between The Road and the marshlands, Clearhaven's homes were clustered on winding semi-paved avenues, a tangled labyrinth leading in circles; counterintuitive and largely unnavigable to outsiders but second nature to Hanna and the other townsfolk. The newest and largest houses had been built near the church and the marketplace, quite some distance from Jotham's home on a small street toward the edge of town. Farmland dominated the northeastern side of Clearhaven, offering abundant livestock as well as fields full of produce and grains that all contributed to the town's self-sufficient nature. It was a settlement sovereign by design. If ever there was a more autonomous township, Hanna had yet to learn of it.

What Hanna knew about Clearhaven's bureaucracy, its internal operations, she gathered mostly from conjecture. Her sister-mothers were masters of deflection on the subject. From what Hanna understood, the town was managed by a council of which Jotham had once been a part. Hanna remembered being seven years old, hiding behind the banister at the top of the stairwell and watching important men visit Jotham's house. They made a great commotion as they entered through the front door, each of them with raucous voices and cigar smoke hovering over their heads like buttermilk clouds.

The important men hadn't visited in years. What role Jotham now played—whether it was essential, occasional or tenuous at best—Hanna didn't know. What she did know was who was in charge. It was Brother Paul, the minister at church. It was Brother Paul who ran the police force, Brother Paul who negotiated Clearhaven's independence from the city beyond The Road. It was Brother Paul whom Hanna was walking to see that morning; Brother Paul who spoke often of *understanding*. At least, that was the word he used. Faith, to Brother Paul, was equal parts obedience, conviction and understanding.

Hanna set little Ahmre down. She watched the girl run to catch up with her brothers and sisters, and then she shook her head. When that didn't work, she shook it again, anything to push today's church service from her mind. She hadn't arrived at the church yet. There was still time to masquerade in her mind, still time to imagine none of this was happening.

She gazed into the woodlands on either side of the street, at the tall trees covering the hills, the vastness just beyond her reach. What would happen, she wondered, if she simply slipped away? It wasn't impossible. A girl could disappear into the woods and no one could ever find her. Hanna had never been outside Clearhaven. The big city was somewhere beyond those hills. The place Jotham loathed was that way.

A break in the trees appeared, a patch of worn shrubbery signaling the traces of a pathway. Hanna pictured herself walking into the woods, her feet settling into the moss-covered ground, the first few steps toadstool-soft, then the sudden sinking sensation of quicksand. For a split second, white stars of terror would explode in her head. Hanna would stretch out her arm—grasping for anything: a boulder, a tree branch, her mother's hand—before strength gushed like waves inside her. Then Hanna's foot rising, the ground beneath her boots



turning firm, Hanna striding deep into the woods, bold and unafraid, the wolves cowering as she marched past their den. The tension inside her stomach—balled up like a fist for weeks—would finally relent.

Inside Hanna, a second person pulled free from the first. Hanna stepped away from the pathway and kept walking with her family, wondering what would happen if she dared enter the wild, while the other—the Hanna she wished she could be—bounded bravely into the unknown.

A hand touched her elbow.

Hanna jumped. She turned to see Kara walking beside her. Her mother's cheeks were unusually pale, a glint of perspiration on her forehead despite the chill in the air. Earlier that morning, Hanna had noticed Kara scraping her fingernail against the edge of her thumb. She looked down to see Kara's skin frayed, the edges red and worn.

"It's okay to be afraid," Kara said.

"You look more afraid than me."

"I'm serious," Kara said.

They were passing houses now, the large homes that had been built close to the church. Hanna pictured the forest, green and blooming and alive as it had been before winter took root, those trees into which a girl could escape and never be seen again.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

Kara took her hand. She pulled her close.

"I know you are."

\*

As the family rounded the final corner toward church, Hanna saw fully the house that Brother Paul had built. Two seasons ago, work had been completed on a massive edifice, a wide, dome-shaped structure, multitiered, with enough lights that its glow could be seen from almost every home in the township. The new church, with its white walls and abundant skylights, was the focal point of Clearhaven. Beside the new church stood the old tower cathedral, taller than the new building, with an abandoned congregation room at its base, decrepit and ramshackle in comparison to the new. The lights inside the tower cathedral were turned down this morning. No one was inside. The stained glass Hanna knew so well growing up—replete with tear-shaped roses blooming in a golden orchard—had not been washed since Brother Paul ordered the construction of the new building. The sunlight still caught the stained glass in places, but a thick layer of dust obscured its brilliance.

Jotham's truck sat in the distance. Belinda had parked at the edge of the lot in order to better see the rest of the family approach. Other vehicles were arriving. Parishioners were greeting one another, exchanging pleasantries, talking about the ceremony about to take place. And Jotham was waiting, his arms crossed, jaw clenched, impatience in his stony eyes.

He called out. "We shall not be late!"

When they arrived at the truck, Emily locked arms with her big sister. As she'd done several times over the past few weeks, Hanna wondered if she'd done Emily a disservice, allowing

her to become so dependent. Hanna slipped away from her sister's grasp and joined the family congregating around Jotham, to see if he had any final words to say before they stepped inside.

Jotham shifted his back brace. He placed his hand on the truck to steady himself and then coughed, a single whooping hack that spoke of a burgeoning cold. He didn't make eye contact with Hanna this time. He didn't have to. She already knew what he needed her to do.

"If I see a single act of disobedience today, it's the lash," he said.

Beside Hanna, her brothers cowered. Just four days ago, Jotham had caught Hanna's seven-year-old brother, Pratt, spilling a can of paint thinner on the back deck. Jotham's rage overtook him. Hanna could still remember Pratt's screams, Kara's frenzied, fruitless attempt to intervene, the sound of Jotham's belt striking the boy's legs, her sisters crowding behind her, the hawkish air in the house. When it was over, Hanna had watched Jotham storm down the hallway, belt in hand, panting and desperate for whiskey; his eyes curiously devoid of emotion; his hulking frame shuddering from the adrenaline surge it took to hold the boy down. Afterward, Pratt couldn't stand properly for twenty-four hours. It took two days before he could walk. He stood next to the truck now, coatless and shivering, a lopsided cowlick sticking out of his head, still wobbly on his two feet.

Jotham surveyed the family one last time and then turned and walked toward the new church doors. The others followed.

Hanna's rib cage suddenly felt tight. Her breath came out in rapid puffs. Every sound, from the pushing breeze to the hum of car engines pulling into the parking lot, resonated tenfold. Hanna's childhood was over and her life was about to change. There would be no cocooning, no holding on to the moment she was in and never letting go. With age came responsibility. There was purpose. There was womanhood to attend to. She followed Jotham toward the church doors, aware of every loose pebble on the pavement, of the movement of her legs, the mechanics of her arms brushing against her sides.

The moment Hanna's foot crossed the threshold, the wind sailed out of her. She felt as though she'd run into a brick wall. Her knees buckled and it was all she could do to stay on her feet. Six hundred sets of eyes turned toward her. They'd all been waiting for Hanna. They were staring, expecting, knowing.

And in the center, clad in white robes, was Brother Paul.