WILD HOUSES

PART ONE

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Dev Hendrick was lying in the dark on the sofa, laptop propped on his belly, asleep or almost asleep, earbuds bleeding white noise into his ears when his phone buzzed three times on the coffee table and stopped.

He felt the vibrations more than he heard them. He sat up, snapped shut his laptop and put it on the coffee table. The white noise in his earbuds died. He reached for his phone and knew the number before he even checked the screen. Three buzzes meant: *we are here*. He pulled the buds from his ears, cocked his head to listen into the empty night and then he heard it, the familiar noise of the car crawling up the drive, the low burr of the engine, the bubble-wrap crackle of wheels turning slow on gravel.

There was a near-empty bottle of Corona on the table. He drank off the dregs. The Corona was flat and citrus-sour, a wilted wedge of lime curled like a drowned bug in the bottom of the bottle.

The dog, Georgie, snoozing away on the battered red wingback chair, stirred and came awake with a startled yelp.

'Shush now,' Dev said.

Georgie was a tiny, highly strung dog with a candyfloss coat covering a ribcage as fragilely fine-boned as a chicken's. He had demonic yellow teeth, a wizened, rat-like face and a moist, bloodshot, perpetually beseeching stare that half the time made Dev want to punt the thing over the garden wall. Not that Georgie ventured outdoors much any more; ageing, ill-tempered and increasingly unintrepid, the dog preferred the cosily cluttered terrain of the sitting room, where he spent his days mooching from cushioned niche to niche and staring at the TV like an old woman.

Georgie yelped again.

'Stop now, will you?' Dev said, raising his voice enough to draw a chastened gurgle from Georgie.

Dev and Georgie had never much got on, but ever since the mother died and the dog had come to the realisation that Dev was now the sole source of sustenance and what would thereafter pass for companionship available in the house, Georgie had developed, if not an affection, at least a grudging receptivity to Dev's commands, so long as those commands were delivered with sufficient emphasis and contempt. Georgie respected only emphasis and contempt, at least from Dev.

Dev slipped on his Crocs and lumbered into the hallway. An icy diagonal of light had pierced the front door's glass panel, illuminating the hall's green-and-gold wallpaper and the musty foliage of the mother's old overcoats piled up on the coat rack.

Dev drew back the latch and opened the door. The

sensor light had come on, flooding the drive with brightness. Rain flurried like sparks in the light. Drops touched Dev's face and stuck. The car's engine cut off and the headlights went dark. Dev watched his cousin Gabe Ferdia step out of the driver door and a moment later Gabe's younger brother Sketch stepped out of the back and helped, or rather dragged, a third person out onto the drive. The third person was a kid, a pale-faced young fella.

'Some night for it,' Gabe declared.

'Are you fucking kidding me?' Dev said.

'I'm afraid not,' Gabe said, squinting beleagueredly against the flurrying rain and smiling slyly out of his long, thin face. 'You going to let us in or what?'

The three stood there in the rain, waiting on Dev.

'Come in,' Dev said.

Sketch shoved the kid in the back to get him moving. He was wearing only one sneaker and carrying the second in his hand, obliging him to hop a little on his socked foot across the drive's stony gravel. When the kid was close enough, Dev could see that his face was marked, a dark nick, too fresh to have scabbed, lining the rim of one eye. The boy gazed expressionlessly up at the house, then Dev.

'Nah,' he said.

'Yeah,' Gabe said.

'No fucking way,' the kid said.

He stood in place until Sketch shoved him again. The kid stumbled in over the threshold. Sketch and Gabe came in after him. Dev latched the door as the brothers marched the kid down the hall.

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