

PROLOGUE

The first thing that seems wrong to her is the vultures.

There are five or six of them, perched in a cluster on the peaked roof of the old bird blind, which sits at the edge of the woods and to the right of the stream.

She freezes with a start about twenty yards away from them, unsettled by their presence. What are they doing so *close*? They're usually in the sky when she sees them, riding thermals.

One of them creeps along the base of the roof and drops its beak. Her eyes follow the movement downward and then keep going, drawn magnetically to the ground.

Three more of the birds ruffle about in the knee-high grass by the stream, and they're pecking at something long and tan colored. A deer must have staggered here and died after being maimed by a car. She watches in disgust as one of the vultures beaks the far end of the animal, then tears away a stringy red piece of flesh.

She starts to turn, unable to stomach a second more of the

grisly scene, but part of her brain has gone rogue and won't let her look away, urging her to revise her interpretation.

No, *not* a deer, she realizes. What she's staring at is a coat. And something denim colored near the lower end of it. Her heart lurches.

Stooping down, she grabs a rock off the ground and hurls it toward the vultures, who lift their wings slightly and hop backward.

It's clear now there's a body inside the coat, lying face-down, with one arm flung outward. And there's skin evident below the bottom of it, the backs of two bare calves. The denim, she now sees, is a pair of jeans that have been bunched around the ankles. Her stomach heaves.

A voice in her head screams at her to flee. Before she can propel herself away, she notices the hand protruding from the sleeve, its nails painted a vivid shade of pink. She's seen this hand before.