

Sharing

Book One of The Fold

by

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ДЛЯ МАШИ

BREAK ONE

There were six of them at first: Cody, Brandy, Crystal, Hunter, Preston, and little Charlotte, who was younger than the others and yet the least afraid. Charlotte was only almost a teenager, but she felt like she was a thousand years old.

They came up out of the Hole on the creature's back, clutching each other's waists and locking their legs around the creature's barrel belly to keep from falling off. Wind and sand ripped through their hair and tugged at their pajamas, threatening to pull them off their mount and hurl them back down into the darkness.

All of them were shrieking, but only Charlotte was shrieking with joy.

At the Hole's lip where the suction was strongest, the creature beat against the whistling currents with unflagging strength, his four legs pumping and the two long whips that had been drilled into the scar tissue of his shoulders buzzing up and down so fast that they looked like bicycle spokes.

Finally, the creature punched through the aperture and dug his hooves into the Hole's rocky ledge, straining hard, pulling himself and all six of his passengers out of the ground like weeds. His whips went momentarily limp, and then they shot out to grab the sides of the Hole like spider webs.

After dragging them over the edge, the creature lay down in the bright orange sand and rolled sideways, throwing the riders off his back. They landed together in a shocked, terrified heap. Heaving and snorting, the creature rested, watching them with his glowing red eyes. His massive chest glistened as if it were an oil slick

Sharing

on a pool of cream, and his long, thin features were fine-boned, cruel, and sensitive. He was white all over, from his milky nostrils to the pendular genitalia that swung like a lazy monkey between his knees. The only parts of his body that weren't covered in slick white fur were his black hooves and the tendrils as thick as garden hoses that sprouted from his shoulders and moved with as much gravity-defying grace as cat's tails. The black blade that had been drilled into his forehead was jagged and sharp and was as long as the creature's slender and sculptured face: a muscular snout that tapered into thick lips and thick, flat teeth.

And those eyes. Those furious, cold red eyes.

Charlotte would always remember the first time she saw her new home with perfect clarity. The moment when her pink feet touched the fine, burning orange sand that rolled toward the Hole like a shaking carpet was cut into her brain like a face cut into a coin.

As the sand burned her toes, her fair face flushed with excitement, matching the deep red of her fiery hair. Her bare feet had been freezing. Now they were ablaze. This place was new. This place was wild and strange.

Crystal, on the other hand, was terrified, and so she grabbed Charlotte and held her, digging her nails into Charlotte's arms, asking if it was going to be okay. Crystal was stout and awkward with bad skin and glasses, but she was shivering, so Charlotte let Crystal cling to her and whimper. Usually Charlotte hated to be touched without asking. People were always trying to pick her up. Just because she was as petite as a doll and could be manhandled didn't mean she liked it.

"This shit isn't real," said Cody, who was the oldest. "This shit can't be real."

"I want to go back," said Crystal. "I want to go back IMMEDIATELY. Make him take us back, Charlotte."

The sky here was dark purple, the color of a corpse's tongue. Bright orange sand stretched out in every direction and there was

Miracle Jones

no flora or fauna except for scatterings of strange gray trees that grew in groves hundreds of yards away from each other and moved as if they were alive, contorting into twisted shapes before Charlotte's eyes like melting wax.

Why had the creature brought them here? When Charlotte saw him hovering outside the window of the girls' dormitory, his whips buzzing as fast as helicopter blades, she had been convinced he was imaginary. She had been stargazing and watching the first snow of the season. She had still thought he was an illusion until she roused the others, all those older children from both the girls' and boys' dorms who also couldn't sleep and who were either intrigued or skeptical enough to climb out of their beds and sneak to the roof with her to find him there, waiting for them. And then the creature had lowered himself down, inviting them to climb on board by pointing to his back with his whips, offering escape from St. Andrew's Home for At-Risk Youth and inviting them to test the mirage.

"He's like a combination of a bull, a praying mantis, and a fashion model," Preston had said. "And the whips coming out of his shoulders allow him to fly like a dragonfly. A new species, I should think. I wonder what he's called?"

"I'm going to ride him," said Charlotte. "He wants us to ride him."

"That knife looks sharp enough to perform surgery," Cody had warned. "Be careful."

"Do you think it's safe?" Brandy had asked.

"Of course it's safe," Charlotte had said.

Five of them had climbed aboard behind Charlotte, thinking the creature would only take them for a ride. Instead, there had been a flash of light and a pop, and then they were rising out of this Hole through all the stinging wind.

As Charlotte and the others surveyed their surroundings and tried to get their balance on the burning sand that raged beneath their feet, the creature stood up to his full height next to them, as

Sharing

tall on all fours as Cody, who was the only one of them who could look the creature in the eye without craning his neck. The creature whinnied.

“Do you think this thing can talk?” Cody muttered. Cody waved his hand in the creature’s face. “Hey, we want to go home. Thank you for the trip, but we want to go home.”

The creature did not speak.

“He can’t talk,” said Brandy, drawing closer to Cody.

“But you can tell he understands,” said Charlotte. “He’s amazing.”

Though there was nothing but desert stretching out in all directions, there were two buildings beside the Hole.

The first was a massive cathedral, looming by the void like an elephant drinking from an oasis. Five cramped towers bloomed from the central nave like mushrooms. The towers were painted in lurid reds, greens, blues, and yellows, and they were topped with onion domes that looked like dollops of sour cream. The cathedral looked organic, as if it had been made from rotting vegetables or sour candy. While there were crosses embedded into the patterns of these towers, the looping spiral designs and intricate patterns of the onion-domes made these familiar symbols hard to see.

“That is the ugliest church I’ve ever seen,” said Cody. “I never thought I’d ever see an uglier church than the St. Andrew’s chapel, but there it is.” Hunter and Preston laughed, and Cody crinkled his freckled nose and ran one clammy hand through his blond shock of hair, cut short and shaved along the sides. He was in St. Andrew’s for the same reason as most of the boys: drugs.

The other building was much different. Across the Hole from the cathedral was a long, sheet-steel building with curved edges and plate glass windows that were covered in thick layers of mossy grime. On the front of the building was a neon sign twisted into the word “Diner,” but the neon did not glow and the dark windows of the diner were transparent enough to show that the diner was empty— bereft of both customers and employees— and had been for

a long time.

Perhaps it had always been empty, thought Charlotte. The diner's red door hung open like a waving hand, and the empty restaurant looked cool and inviting in contrast to the monstrous cathedral and the howling sand that crept along the ground like an undertow toward the hungry Hole. Charlotte wanted to go into the diner, slide into one of the booths, and demand some eggs and juice.

"I want to check out that diner," said Charlotte.

"No," said Cody. "We'd better stick together. What if this thing leaves without us and then we're stuck here?"

"I like it better here than St. Andrew's," said Charlotte. "Much better."

"She's got a point," said Brandy.

The creature walked toward the cathedral. Cody shrugged and followed the creature, leading the others.

"I'm scared," said Crystal. "I don't want to go in there."

"Come on," cooed Charlotte. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Charlotte let Crystal hold her hand. Crystal's rheumy, bespectacled eyes dried quickly in the parching air, but she was still shivering. When the creature reached the cathedral doors, he lowered the jagged blade that grew from his forehead and pointed through the threshold. The children worked together to heave open the massive bronze doors, pinning them back against the stone as the creature nimbly stepped inside.

The cathedral was covered from floor to ceiling in looping graffiti and bright glyphs, and all the pews had been removed and replaced with a thick layer of fresh yellow straw. In the back of the cathedral, where an altar should have been, was a steaming pile of ordure, each turd the size of a dinner plate. The smell blew through the cathedral like a flock of leprous birds and made the children cover their noses, retching and spitting.

Directly to the left of the open doors was a sunken black pit where a sacristy or crying room would have been. Inside the pit, there had been a massacre. Red blood, pink guts, and bright blue

Sharing

tissue, wrinkled like brains, was piled up in mounds on the floor and covered the walls in violent spatters. There were sconces here that had once held candles, but were now empty.

“What is this place?” Cody asked the creature. “Is this your home? Is this where you live?”

The creature did not answer. Instead, he peeled his lips back, revealing his brown teeth and black gums, fixing Cody with a cold, malevolent stare.

“Okay,” said Cody. “What do you want from us? What’s going on here? What are you? Where are we?”

“Don’t piss him off,” said Charlotte.

The creature turned around slowly and cantered across the straw floor to an alcove beneath a dark and filthy mural. The whips that hung from the creature’s scarred shoulders made whispering noises as they snaked along the ground.

Inside the alcove were a bucket and a mop. The creature picked up the bucket in his teeth and shook his head, splashing water against the mural, causing wet streaks to crawl down the wall toward the thick straw floor. The creature dropped the bucket and then picked up the mop in his teeth, wielding it as awkwardly as a paintbrush in the hands of a novice. The creature smeared the mop against the mural, sloshing water against it until he made a clean spot, revealing a faded fresco of a bearded man with ecstatic eyes being pierced with hundreds of arrows. The saint held an apple in one hand and a key in the other.

The creature stepped backward from the mural. Then he cantered to where the children were gathered and dropped the mop in front of them, bending down to nudge the mop towards Cody with his nose. Cody uncrossed his arms and picked up the mop.

“You want us to clean?” Cody asked.

The creature reared on its hind legs and whinnied, pawing the air and shaking his mane back and forth. Cody threw his arms out, shielding the other children. The creature landed with his front legs splayed, pointing its jagged black blade at Cody’s heart and

holding the position while the children drew closer together, staring at the creature with wide, terrified eyes. Only Charlotte thought the creature was smiling.

Finally, the creature turned around and galloped away, bursting through the cathedral doors, nickering as it passed the doorsill.

“I don’t clean for nobody!” shouted Cody at the creature, raising his pajama sleeve to reveal the crude snake he had burned into his own forearm with a red-hot paperclip.

The creature ran for the Hole, and his shoulder-whips started to flap up and down so fast at his sides that they blurred like insect wings. The creature leaped up into the air and was swallowed by the Hole as the children huddled in the cathedral’s doorway and Crystal begged the creature to come back, to take them home, to explain.



Charlotte didn’t remember much about that first day. She remembered exploring the cathedral at first with sensitive Preston and surly Hunter as the older children—Cody, Brandy, and Crystal—debated what to do. She remembered climbing to the very top of one of the onion-domes and staring out over the orange wasteland, seeing nothing but flat sand in every direction. The sand pulsed into the Hole, converging in front of the cathedral like a swarm of ants disappearing into a mound. There was nothing but sand, the purple sky, and those strange trees that slowly warped into sharp new shapes before her eyes, restlessly changing form along with the suck of the burning ground.

Although there was plenty of light, the sky here held neither sun nor stars nor clouds. Instead of a sun, the sky itself glowed, a purple sheet illuminated by a bonfire. The air was cool and pleasant, even though the sand below felt like smoldering coals.

She remembered their first hunt through the rooms of the ca-

Sharing

thedral, looking for an adult or another creature like the one that had taken them from St. Andrew's in the middle of the night. She remembered roaming the cathedral— finally, simply— looking for food.

Finally, she and the other children crossed the sand to the diner, where they discovered the deep freezer. The freezer mysteriously had electric power, and the lights and water in the empty diner also worked. Miraculously, the freezer, refrigerator, and pantries were fully stocked with food. The diner was also fully stocked with pots, pans, and a complete assortment of cooking equipment.

Seeing the kitchen and all the food, Crystal finally relaxed and stopped squeezing Charlotte's hand as if it were a wet sponge she was trying to wring out. Crystal took over and put them all to work chopping, stirring, and seasoning a meal.

Charlotte burned her hand on the stove, and Brandy yelled at her for being careless. Brandy was elfin and beautiful, with glossy black hair and green cat eyes that sloped upward into long lashes. She had been sent to St. Andrews for shoplifting compulsively and without remorse. As soon as the creature had left them, Brandy had broken down sobbing and Cody had comforted her, telling her that this was fun, this was magic.

"What if we have to stay here forever?" said Brandy.

"I told you," said Cody. "This shit isn't real."

He kissed her.

"See?" he said.

Even though she had a boyfriend back at St. Andrews, after Cody's embrace Brandy followed him around like a dopy puppy and did everything he said, though she was still just as shrill and condescending to the rest of them.

They had their first big feast in the diner's bright electric light. Pea soup, collard greens, chopped steak. Charlotte also remembered sitting for hours on the diner floor, so bored that she made a whole city out of empty food cans, while Hunter sulked, picking his nose, and while dreamy Preston constructed a scale model of the empty

cathedral that loomed before them right outside the diner's grimy windows.

It WAS better here than St. Andrew's, though. Nobody denied that. It had been so long since they'd had enough to eat, and now there was plenty of food. Enough for everyone. And variety! They could talk to each other without getting cuffed, pinched, or slapped. There were no heavy-fingered old wardens here, looking down their shirts or trying to coax them into dark rooms alone. They could spread out. They could relax.

When they finally slept, they slept in the booths on the green plastic diner cushions. They told each other that it would only be one night here. They told each other that soon they would be rescued. Only Charlotte didn't want to be rescued. Cody and Brandy slept in one another's arms in a diner booth by themselves.

Crystal wouldn't stop fondling Charlotte, asking over and over again if she was warm and comfortable and telling her not to worry.

"I'm not worried," said Charlotte.



After their first sleep (it never got dark here or turned into night), they stopped exploring the cathedral. They were disgusted by the foul smells of the creature's spoor, they were disturbed by the sunken black pit that dripped with dark signs of murder, and they were terrified of the dark drawings and hieroglyphs that covered every square inch of the blasphemous, lurid church. There was no reason to be inside the cathedral, and so they left it alone, enjoying the cool, bright diner instead, making elaborate meals under Crystal's direction and gorging themselves on greasy food while playing games and telling stories.

"We are going to be in so much trouble when we get back to St. Andrew's," said Crystal.

Sharing

“What else could they possibly do to us?” said Cody. “Relax. Maybe we died, and this is heaven.”

“That would explain the church,” said Preston.

Nothing felt real here, and it was so easy to drift. There was no sense of passing time or of obligation. It was so quiet and peaceful. Everything they needed was provided for them. The droning quiescence was narcotic, and it made their minds slow and calm. It was easy to do nothing but eat and sleep. Nothing mattered. Had anything ever mattered?

After five sleeps, Cody woke up and made a mark on one of the steel doors in the deep freeze.

“We have to do this every time we sleep,” he said. “It’s our calendar. Otherwise we will forget.”

The days passed without incident, and it was difficult to tell them apart without the notches on the deep freeze door. Nothing happened here. They ate; they slept; they goofed around and relaxed. What else could they do?



After twenty-five more scratches, the creature came back.

He pulled himself out of the Hole easily this time, no longer burdened by six screaming adolescents clinging to his shiny white back. The creature snorted, bared his teeth, and shook sand from his fetlocks. The kids ran out of the diner to meet him by the Hole.

“I am ready to go home now, please,” said Crystal.

The creature looked at her, narrowed his eyes, and cantered toward the cathedral, holding his head high. The children followed. They opened the doors for the creature again and followed the creature inside. It was the first time they had been inside the cathedral since their first sleep, and if anything, the stench was stronger now and even more revolting.

The creature walked to the mop that lay on the straw where

he had left it. The creature looked at the pile of shit and at the black room filled with blood and carnage. The creature snorted and whirled on the children in a dark fury, flaring his nostrils and widening his enormous red eyes. The whips at his shoulders flew out like tentacles and caught Cody by surprise, wrapping around his neck and feet, trussing him, holding him fast.

“Stop it!” shouted Charlotte, but Preston grabbed her and held her.

“He’ll trample you,” said Preston. “Let Cody deal with it.”

“We don’t know what you want!” shouted Cody, trying to pull the whip off his neck. “You brought us here and left us! We can’t understand you!”

“We want to go home!” shouted Crystal.

The creature bared his teeth and dragged Cody across the floor while the other children huddled together and screamed. The creature lifted Cody off the ground and then plunged the inky blade that jutted from his forehead deep into Cody’s chest, sending blood up in a dark spray that arced over the creature’s shoulders, dotting his pristine white coat with blood-mist and splashing the cathedral wall behind him, covering the ecstatic saints and arcane cuneiform in grisly red.

Cody’s screams were brief compared to the screams of the other children, screams that lasted long after the creature had knelt to point his jagged blade— at Brandy’s heart this time— and vanished again down the Hole.

Only Charlotte did not scream. She was too mad to scream.