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HEADLINE

Book One



THE BRIARS

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ONE



On the first weekend in September, Arthur Oakes drove west to see his mother in the House of Correction. It was a trip of more than two hundred miles, across the southern half of Maine, the chimney pipe of New Hampshire, and into Vermont, and it ended, as it always did, in a line of cars waiting to pass through a twelve-foot-high gate topped with barbed wire.

Arthur always thought the House of Correction looked like a high school: a three-story block of sandstone brick, with narrow slots for windows. He slowed to a stop behind a Ford Ranchero disgorging oily black smoke from the exhaust pipe. A bumper sticker read: NO FREE RIDES—GAS, GRASS, OR ASS. There was a bumper sticker a man could respect. Arthur's VW had been his mother's ride before it was his, and the Rabbit had bumper stickers too . . . a lot of them. His mother hadn't let a square inch of the rear end go to waste. One said ARE YOU FOLLOWING JESUS THIS CLOSE? Another showed a picture of Gandhi and said AN EYE FOR AN EYE MAKES THE WHOLE WORLD BLIND. They should've locked her up for crimes against her own car. It grated on him, parking his inherited Christmobile in a lot full of vehicles that had probably seen action as getaway cars.

If the exterior of the Black Cricket Women's House of Correction looked like a big public high school, the lobby resembled a cramped ER waiting room. Fluorescent lights buzzed and cast a dispiriting, impoverished glow. A TV set played daytime talk.

A guard, a heavysset woman with a butch haircut, piloted a rolling office chair behind a scratched, dirty window. Arthur joined the queue, behind a couple in their mid-twenties and a teenage

girl. The guy wore black jeans, tight to his stovepipe legs, a sleeveless black Harley tee, and a do-rag. His lady leaned against him, a woman with hard, bony features that she had tried to soften with blusher and bubblegum-pink lipstick. The teenager stood close by, head down, face hidden behind her own unwashed yellow hair. She had on a Guns N' Roses tee that was too small for her, exposing her midriff. Her acid-washed jeans sagged to reveal the top of her shiny black thong. Arthur looked away, felt somehow it was indecent to have noticed.

"She can't go in there wearing that shirt," said the officer behind the window. She pointed at the teenager.

The girl craned her neck to peer down at her GN'R shirt, as if to hunt for an offensive stain, and Arthur realized, with a jolt, that he knew her . . . not by name but by profession. She delivered pizzas for Shut-Up-And-Eat-It Pizza in Podomaquassy—and marijuana or 'shrooms as well, if you knew what to order, and Arthur's roommate, Donovan McBride, did. She turned up at their off-campus student housing once or twice a month to bring Van a sausage pie and a baggie of green. Arthur figured she hooked half the campus up with weed and indigestion.

"What's wrong with it?" the pizza girl asked.

"No references to firearms. Cover it up or take it off."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" the older sister asked. She put the pizza girl in a headlock and squeezed one breast. "Get an eyeful of Tana's melons." Tana shrieked and twisted free.

The guard let her bored gaze drift away. "The rules are right there on the wall."

Tana rubbed her breast and said, "It's a concert shirt."

"I see a pair of crossed pistols. Garments displaying drugs, weapons, or obscenities are not allowed in the House of Correction. Volpe, Nighswander, you're cleared to enter. Your sister will have to stay here." The guard tipped her head toward the double doors on the left.

"My sis is coming with us, lez," said the older sister.

"What's that?" asked the officer. She cocked her head, turning

her ear to the glass. Arthur thought it possible she genuinely hadn't heard.

"Jayne," Tana said, "I'll wait in the truck. Whatever. You and Ronnie can talk to Mom. You don't need—"

"Don't start tellin' me what I need. You're the whole reason we're here," Jayne Nighswander said. She turned her attention back to the officer. "I hadda get up at six in the goddamn morning to drive Tana here so she could explain her latest fuck-up to our mother. And you're gonna make her sit in the truck because you don't like her shirt?"

The officer stood. One hand fell to the baton on her belt.

"You want to spend time with your mother," she said, "keep running your mouth. We might be able to arrange a cell right next to her."

"Six in the mornin'," Jayne went on. "Three-hour drive and I gotta knock heads with a fascist dy—"

"She can have my hoodie," Arthur spoke over her before she could say *dyke* and get her pointy, narrow head knocked in.

It was the girl, Tana, who impelled him to pipe up. She had shut her eyes, lowered her chin to her chest, and hunched her shoulders like a kid listening to Mom and Dad fight. In that moment, she looked not nineteen, but a terrorized nine, and Arthur couldn't bear it.

Jayne Nighswander looked Arthur over. Arthur couldn't quite track the emotions that flickered through her pale blue eyes. He saw something like curiosity, an instant of cold reptilian calculation, and finally, a gleam of amusement.

The ugly color began to drain from the security guard's face and she settled back into her chair. "As long as I don't see guns, I don't see a problem."

Arthur wriggled out of his hoodie and slipped it off. It had belonged to his mother and he still sometimes imagined it smelled of her, the smell of the chapel: old hymnals and pine pews. On the back was an outline of Africa with Steve Biko's face peering out from within.

Tana Nighswander didn't thank him. She kept her head down as she pulled it on, never even looked at him. The boyfriend, Ronnie Volpe, admired the back of the sweatshirt and then said, in a hoarse, smoker's voice, "Eddie Murphy! I love that absurd mother-fucker."

The security officer jerked a thumb at the door. "Go on. Next."

As the three of them moved away, Jayne Nighswander looked back at him and flashed a wolfish grin. "That was damn big of you, bud. We'll have to pay you back someday." She ushered Volpe and her sister through the doors and out of sight.

The guard behind the Plexiglas window was shaking her head, her jaw tight.

"I'm here to see my mother, Dr. Erin Oakes," Arthur said.

"Yeah, I know who you're here to see. The holy mother." She pushed a clipboard at him. "Sign here, dumbass." She muttered this last bit to herself, but Arthur caught it all the same, and then wondered if he had misheard.

"What?"

"Why'd you do that?" she asked him. She sounded genuinely aggrieved. "Why'n't you mind your own business?"

"Oh," Arthur said, "I don't know. Just trying to help. It's what my mother would've done."

"Buddy," said the security guard, "if your mother made such great choices, do you think she'd be in here?"

TWO



The family room held half a dozen stainless steel tables bolted to a sticky tile floor. Arthur took his usual seat, only peripherally aware of the Nighswanders at the next table over. His mother was one of the first inmates through the door, limber and easy in her prison blues, her hair clipped short.

Erin Oakes dropped into the seat across from him, kissed the tip of her pointer finger, and touched it to his. Physical contact wasn't allowed in the family room, but if any of the guards saw, they declined to object. Erin and Arthur sat across from each other, the slender white woman serving seven for manslaughter, and her son, the long-limbed and gangly Black kid finishing up a four-year stretch himself in the one of the whitest colleges on the East Coast—where he was on the dean's list every semester, in case anyone had any questions about his right to be there.

"I missed you all summer long," she said. "How was Old Blighty?"

"It's the only country in the world where they think Spam is one of the five major food groups," Arthur said.

Arthur spent his summers in the UK, with his paternal grandparents, who were Windrush generation, shipped over from Jamaica in the 1950s to rebuild what the Krauts had bombed into rubble. Arthur's father was there too, in Kent. He had the newest marble monument in a graveyard full of mossy, tilting, four-hundred-year-old headstones.

"Do anything fun?"

"I spent an afternoon in the British Library looking at illustrated manuscripts. I think I'm going to write about them in my 'Book as Object' class this semester."

“I was hoping you screwed a red-headed Scottish barmaid out of her plaid socks and got arrested protesting Margaret Thatcher’s criminal incompetence. Maybe you’ll get around to busty barmaids when you’re into Magdalen.”

“If I get into Magdalen,” he said. He shrank from even talking about it, the school where his father had earned his master’s in English literature. As a teenager, Arthur had done his homework under a framed poster of C. S. Lewis and had experimented with wearing tweed. Dark days. “And I’m not going if you’re still in here.”

“February,” she said.

“February,” he repeated—the date of her first parole hearing. In February she would know about early release, and not long after he would know if Oxford wanted him or not.

“What about your summer? Shank anyone in the prison yard?” Arthur asked.

“No, but I did start a book club! We voted on our first book yesterday.”

“Oh yeah? What was the winner? *How to Win Friends and Influence Your Parole Board? How to Escape in Ten Easy Lessons?*?”

“I suggested *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*—”

“Bet that racked up the votes.”

“—but I was shot down in favor of Jackie Collins. *Hollywood Wives*. Which is fine. I can work with that. It’s still an opportunity to talk about the way the culture strips women of their personhood. It’s right there in the title—women defined by their marriages instead of their ideas.”

“You think that’s why they want to read Jackie Collins?”

“Naw. They want to read it ’cause it’s the smuttiest book in the prison library.” She lowered her voice to a mock whisper. “There’s three copies going around and they all smell like countach.”

“Shit,” Arthur said. “That reminds me, though. I had my picture in the paper. They did a profile on some of the rare books in the school library and they quoted me.” In his final year at Rackham College, Arthur had been made the senior student librarian and tasked with making a digital inventory of the books in the rare

collection—copying them to big floppy disks in the library's new computer. It was the card catalog of the future and a good reason for *The Podomaquassy Record* to do a fluff piece about the most peculiar items held in the special collection: a letter from Walt Whitman, an early typed draft of *Our Town*, and, of course, the Enoch Crane journal. No way anyone was going to do an article about the Special Collection at Rackham College without talking about Enoch Crane.

Arthur sat up and patted his pockets—then sat back down. “Shit,” he said again. “I musta left it in the car.”

“I just think it’s great one of us got in the paper and it wasn’t in the police blotter,” she said. “I’m so proud of my little boy.”

Someone cleared their throat. Arthur looked back and saw Jayne Nighswander standing behind him, her sister at her side. Jayne had a hand on the nape of Tana’s neck in what was either a gesture of comfort or a way to keep her pinned.

“Scuse me. Dr. Oakes, isn’t it? Am I correct in saying you are a sort of political prisoner here? You were *convicted* for your *convictions*, so to speak.” She laughed at this fine bit of wordplay.

“I was convicted for trespassing and damaging federal property.”

“And manslaughter.”

Erin shifted her gaze from Jayne to Tana and back. Tana’s face was once again hidden behind her lank strands of hair. Ronnie Volpe and Tana’s mother watched from the next table over. The eldest Nighswander was a tiny woman with lean, haggard features and hair that was some colorless hue between blond and gray.

“A man died, yes,” Erin said. “Although we came unarmed, and in a spirit of nonviolence, there was an accident. A security guard lost control of his weapon and was shot.”

“And you stuck around?”

“To put pressure on the wound.”

“And he died anyway, huh? You ever think you woulda been better off if you just legged it?”

“Sometimes. But then I would’ve been in a different kind of prison. A mental one.”

Jayne wagged a finger at her. “Uh-huh. Now we’re getting to it. You didn’t mean for anyone to die. But you made a choice to break into federal property and someone did.”

“Sorry,” Arthur said. “But if it’s all right with you, my mom and I are trying to have a quiet visit.”

Jayne paid him no mind. She went on, “You were a priest of some kind, weren’tcha? Or was you a professor?”

“I taught practical ethics and theology at Dartmouth. I’m also a pastor with the Episcopalian Church.”

“They don’t defrock you for manslaughter?”

“They haven’t got around to it yet.” Arthur’s mother narrowed her eyes and tried a smile on Tana. “Are you all right, honey? I love your Biko sweatshirt. I have one just like it.”

“That *is* your sweatshirt,” Arthur said, but it was like he was talking to himself; no one even glanced at him.

“She’s fine,” Jayne said. “So you’ve done enough ethical professorin’ to help us puzzle something out. You set out to do a good thing, only there’s a freak accident in the process of breakin’ and enterin’ and some poor fella eats it. You didn’t want it. But you’re responsible for it, all the same.”

“I think that’s true. When you choose a course of action, you accept the consequences—those you intended and those you didn’t.”

“There you go,” Jayne said, lowering her head to look into Tana’s face. “See? Voice of educated reason, right there.”

Tana lifted her chin and glared at Erin with wet, reddened eyes.

“Screw this,” she said. “Screw her and screw you. I’m going to the car.”

She twitched out of her sister’s grip and started toward the exit. Her path took her past her mother, and as she walked by, the elder Nighswander kicked Tana behind her left knee.

Her leg folded and Tana dropped behind the table. There was a guard a few yards away, but he was staring at the TV hanging from a bracket in one corner of the room.

“You burned up my shit, you fuckin’ flake,” Tana’s mother yelled, rising from her chair. “An’ Imma have it back, every cent. I

don't care if Jayne gotta rent you out to hobos for ten bucks a pop." She had a paper cup of coffee in one hand and she threw it at her daughter's head. "Drink up, you thirsty bitch."

Arthur didn't remember coming to his feet. He was, simply, suddenly, between them. It was the kind of leap in time one often made in dreams, but it was the first time he could ever recall it happening in waking life.

He had his back to Tana's mother, to help Tana off the floor. He sensed Mama Nighswander rising from her chair, and he held one hand out behind him, palm raised, like an officer trying to stop traffic. He meant no harm by it. He reached with his other hand to take Tana by the elbow.

"Fuck off me," Tana hissed, and pushed him away.

The sudden motion rocked him backward, off balance, and he slammed the heel of his extended hand into Mama Nighswander's face. The impact snapped the older woman's head back. Her calves struck the chair behind her and she toppled. The chairs were bolted to the floor, same as the table, and had no give. She crashed across it and went sprawling.

"My node!" she cried, blood spouting from her small, hard, bony nose . . . a nose that looked suddenly, disturbingly crooked. "You mudderfugger!"

The elder Nighswander sprang to her feet and lunged, but before she could get her hands on Arthur's neck, a prison guard caught her in both arms and lifted her right off the floor. Jayne shouldered Arthur aside, sinking her fingers into Tana's upper arm. Jayne turned a furious glare upon Arthur. "The fuck you think you're doing, sticking your oar in?"

The guard was retreating with Mama Nighswander in his arms while she kicked her legs helplessly in the air. Two more prison guards smacked through the doors at the back of the room. One of them caught Mama Nighswander by the thrashing feet, and then they were carrying her out like a pair of movers with a rolled-up rug. The third guard unsheathed a nightstick and began to strike it against an iron radiator.

“Inmates, line up against the far wall! Do it now! Visiting’s over. Visitors, move to the exits.”

Mama Nighswander writhed and arced her hips, bucking in the arms of her captors. She howled—a scream of fury that was cut off as they carried her out. Arthur’s own mother moved slowly toward the far wall with the other inmates. She kissed her fingertip and pointed at him, smiling with a kind of tired resignation.

Jayne Nighswander was cursing and marching her sister across the room. Ronnie tossed Arthur a wink before he followed them out. “You got some touch with the ladies, pardner. At my absolute best, I never pissed off more’n two at a time. I think you just collected the whole set.”

Arthur was another forty minutes in the waiting room, filling out an incident report. He looked for the Nighswanders when he left, with a touch of anxiety, but they were long gone.

He was halfway home before he realized Tana Nighswander still had his Biko hoodie. And as for the article he had wanted to show his mother, the one about the Brooks Library at school, it was a week before he had cause to think of it again.