

THE MYTH BELONGS TO ME

By

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## ABSTRACT

"The Myth Belongs to Me" is a novel in progress. This contemporary story follows an unnamed female protagonist engaged in a romantic grift with the woman who now occupies her childhood home. Meanwhile, our narrator's deranged sister has resurfaced, exhuming past traumas and family secrets that cross time, place, and generations. Told in the first person, "The Myth Belongs to Me" traverses pop culture, gentrification, and biracial and queer identity--all the while considering the ways in which history repeats itself.

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PART I

On the Street Where You Live

## CHAPTER ONE

I never asked Rochelle to keep me.

Did I make sure we met on the street where she lived, two hands reaching for the same blood orange at the corner of Geronimo and Vine? Yes.

And did I take her on a date the day after—pepper her with questions designed to endear, that flexed the livelier lobes of my personality usually left on the blink? Yes, that's true.

But Rochelle was the one who invited me back to her place that night. And Rochelle didn't balk when I slept in the morning after. She kept encouraging me to run a bath, to pocket the spare keys on the hook by the door and come back for dinner. To make myself at home while I was in town on business. Was I in town on business? No.

I've never traveled for business, since that would require having a real job, one with stakes high enough to strap employees into planes and blast them toward consequential meetings. I get by on remote freelance work. I draft property descriptions that lure families on the hunt for their dream homes. It doesn't pay well.

Rochelle is a decade older and has entered the phase of wealth that's all about refinement and escalation. She pays someone to dress her and exercise her and decorate her loft. I'm always discovering tasteful selections I've overlooked, like the crystal cup that bouquets the pens atop her desk, or the glass baubles ordered from museum catalogues—all amorphous, all weightless as tree ornaments.

A week into living here I woke up alone, as I do most mornings. For the first time, I noticed the oil painting above the bed. Stretched on thick, fragrant canvas, the composition amounts to little more than a royal blue smear in a sea of bone white. Like the haphazard impression of a giant's thumb.

Do I love her? The friends I have left in New York always want to know. I catch up with them over drinks when I take the train in to check the mail and pay rent, when I know Rochelle is otherwise occupied. They're really asking if she's worth it. The age difference. The bedroom community. The wrong end of a short leash. Does it all add up to a sum I can live with, or, should they be worried?

They are asking the wrong questions.

I found Rochelle after walking in a daze down Geronimo Street. Nothing was as I remembered. All the patchwork lots and cratered side streets and hungry storefronts of my childhood—ever plate glass window dull with grime, like a dead eye glazed over—had been dusted off and patched up. Reinvented for some new era.

I found myself on a bustling thoroughfare aglow with the season. It was the earnest start of winter, just after Thanksgiving. People were staying out later and drinking more, talking bad weather and pricey travel plans. That day, I'd left the city on a lark. On the train pointed toward my apartment, I received an email from some spokeswoman at the Veld Center. She was writing to inform me that sister had graduated. She was out on her own now. It was possible she might try to get in touch with me. Warm wishes for the holidays and New Year.



I had forgotten Fawn's eighteenth birthday, but at least Terri H. from the Veld Center had remembered. I didn't recall anyone with that name working the admin desk when I'd been at Veld years before, but turnover was high in a rigid, high-stress environment, and what would it have mattered anyway? The message was a mere formality. The subject line might've read—*Re: Your Sister. Don't Say We Didn't Warn You.*

I noticed I was bcc'd on the email, the worst kind of tease, but there was no time to think about that. What I would even do with such information if it were available to me? It was six o'clock in the evening. Fawn had a good head start. She could be anywhere—hat in hand on my front steps, watching from across the train car as my face turned to stone.

When the car lurched forward again, I told myself to make a decision of some kind. I pictured my roommate toiling away at our outer borough roach palace, stinking of flat soda and takeout containers, energized by his next big project. I pictured the scab of rust on the shower floor, the yellow light of the refrigerator, suffused throughout the whole apartment, everything turned the color of drawn butter, everything sticky and past its prime. If Fawn was waiting there for me, all the more reason to do what I do best. Nothing. I let my stop pass me by.

I let myself be shuttled an hour north. I got off in Deerie and lingered on the platform. I had the urge to call someone to come pick me up, to begin the next phase of my spontaneous evening. There was no one. A few miles ahead, the raised interstate split town into vertical hemispheres. The elevated belt of highway was a streak of light, an eight-lane channel curving northeast as it went upstate and out of sight. I started to walk.

They built the interstate because Deerie was going the way of other mill towns. A crust was forming over everything. The great exodus had begun. True to form, my mother bucked the trend. She had the bright idea to pour her fresh inheritance into an old, three-story warehouse on the edge of Deerie's industrial downtown. At the time, she was still living back in New York, splitting scant square footage with all her friends, aspiring artist types she slumped it with. They were always weighing the merits of moving upstate to buy some land, and even now, it's a popular fantasy. When the train breaks down, or roaches procreate in the cupboards, or the plumbing explodes in the alley during a heatwave, and blizzards tear the roof and windows and you wake up inside a fine felt of snow—the dream of a kinder, simpler life is potent.

In any case, logistical discussions never materialized. My mother and her friends refined their fantasy endlessly but took no action to make it so. No town was named precisely. And it would've gone on in that half-baked way until the natural current of things lifted everyone apart, away into their separate lives—occasionally intersecting, almost always running parallel. The difference was, my mother actually went and did it. She forked over the sizable cushion of her trust for good bones and natural light, compelled by the promise that her friends would soon follow, and together they'd create a miniature utopia just a stone's throw away from the real heart of things. They would open a dozen cutesy stores. They would rehab all those promising, low-rent buildings into studio spaces, and bed and breakfasts, and galleries, and co-ops, and lofts they would paint white from floor to ceiling. It would take a village, they knew, but it was the kind of dream they could all share.

Of course, no one followed. My mother's friends arrived in a caravan, ready to

unload her earthly possessions. They admired the massive structure she'd acquired, the muted little town full of old-growth green. So much potential, they marveled, then went back to their lives.

After ten minutes on foot, it began to snow. The wind was turning in all directions, and the flakes hovered in place. My eyes leaked. It hurt to breathe. I thought of turning back, but suddenly became sure that every passing car was driven by someone I once knew. And I wondered what I looked like to them, hulking along the roadside in a camelhair duster nabbed from an ex-girlfriend, footfalls crashing through half-frozen snowpile rutted with gravel and petrified dog shit and trash. Every time a car caught me in their headlights, I tried to arrange my face into what I thought was a lucid expression, as if I might reassure passing drivers of my dignity—that like them, I too had a destination.

Soon, I found myself directly under the interstate. Traffic surged overhead in a wave that never crested, and the husks of creeping vines rattled from the metal rafters where webs and nests had proliferated in a complex colony of suspended vermin. I counted the support pillars rammed deep into the earth, going on in pairs for miles until I couldn't count them anymore.

I followed the interstate's concrete seam and thought back to the summer when body parts were being flung from the raised highway stretch. That was the year everything in my life initiated its slow collapse. And among all those horrors, all that disparate geography I would undertake—to Veld and to my father's unincorporated property, to New York where I'd banish myself for five unremarkable years—the body parts raining down in Deerie were the very least of my troubles.

First, an elbow had appeared. A postwoman discovered it on her route after nearly running it over. It'd been stuffed inside a small duffel bag and cushioned with wads of newspaper, as if prepped for shipping. It was 2004. People were obsessed with suspicious packages, and sure enough, it made the news. Whoever had flung the body parts while zooming upstate clearly had no idea there was an aging hamlet unspooling below the overpass. Back then, the easy off-ramp into town had not yet been built, and the world below the highway must've seemed like coarse, uninhabited woodland—the scant lights of remaining houses no more than reflections off the window glass. Probably, it seemed like an excellent place for body parts to be tossed, if that was the sort of thing you were interested in.

We waited for news vans to roll into town. We practiced our smiles and soundbites in the mirror and gave each other pointers. The reporters only emerged from the woodwork when the second body part was found. That's something I think about a lot. Fawn was the perfect steward for such a grizzly delivery. She had the stomach for it, the curiosity. Sometimes I wonder. If Fawn had never gone out to walk the dog that morning, and if the dog had never picked up the scent of a dead thing and latched on—would my sister have cracked in half the way she did? Probably. Maybe it's like the Bob Dylan song. A Simple Twist of Fate.

My walk dead-ended on Geronimo Street, where youngish people were flitting in and out of storefronts and bars, twinkling restaurants, holes in the walls—all of which were new additions. I'd known downtown Deerie for its brick facades, its gashed windows and soot stains. The town was rich with waste, but most everything has since been rehabbed. Brickwork has been power-washed and patched, and now the storefronts

are stamped with sleek new signage declaring niche specialties: cheese monger, espresso bar, northern Italian cuisine, live-culture zero-waste beauty products. Just before Geronimo siphons into a less populous lane bearing right towards the woods and high-tension towers: I saw Rochelle for the first time.

There was a service alley across the street from her building, threaded between an old YMCA and a former foundry now run as an event space. I bummed a cigarette off of someone passing and tried to make it last while I watched Rochelle in the window.

I hadn't been back in town for years. I told myself I'd go by the old warehouse, run the highlight reel in my mind, walk off the strain of Fawn's auspicious return. Maybe grab a drink somewhere open late. I would find my morsel of peace and acceptance, then head back to the city to pick up where my life left off. It was such an innocent, even-handed plan I'd composed. And to be fair, I have since tried to interrogate myself for some ulterior motive, some wicked scheme I was waiting to unleash on a heart unsuspecting. So far, I can come up with no good rationale. I had gone back to Deerie for the same reason birds go south. It was where I knew to go. I never imagined I would stay.

Few other lights were on in the warehouse, which I could see had been partitioned into high-end condos. There was a bronze LEED certification badge affixed to the building, just outside the arched lobby doors. Someone had been hired to paint ten-foot-tall custom letterforms across the building's broad side. The Geronimo Lofts. Rochelle's was the only window unobstructed. The curtains had been pulled back and she was standing right there—close enough to the window that her nose seemed to brush the glass. I thought she was looking out at something, the lights of the highway maybe. I watched her there for a long while, watched as she tilted her head occasionally, as if

assessing the sight before her, the way I have learned to assess a Rothko or some such, trying to see what everyone else sees.

I strained for a glimpse inside, to soak up any details I could. The brick walls had been painted matte white, the ceiling beams sanded and polished. The flat rooftop had been rehabbed, spackled over into some kind of communal lounge boxed in by trim evergreen beach grass, obviously synthetic. A candle was burning inside Rochelle's apartment. I could tell by the orange flicker wavering under her chin. She was standing in Fawn's old room.

When I began living with Rochelle, I saw she did this window-gazing all the time. She would stop short, as if someone on the street had called her name. And I'd watch from the kitchen, or the living room, or the dining nook—wherever I was, trying to earn my keep by cooking or tidying—as she gravitated slowly toward the glass. By evening, the loft's windows were translucent, smudge-free, and the lamplight doubled itself inside the dark sheet of glass. That was why Rochelle had been poised there at the window that first night I spotted her. She'd been taken in by her own reflection.

Despite our obvious differences, I know Rochelle is someone's total package. And not just someone, but someone in particular. Someone who is probably wondering where Rochelle is and why they haven't found her yet, if she even exists. And if you believe in fate, then here I am, just keeping them apart. But why can't that someone be me? I was the one who spotted her from the sidewalk that night. I was the one who looked up, watched her move inside the yellow square of a midnight window, watched her until the light went out. It's not as if I could've known she was single and looking, or that she would even be interested in another woman, that I might fall inside the strike-

zone of her personal predilections. But here we are. And it's like I never left.

Rochelle and I have settled into a tepid routine. On weekend mornings, we jog the perimeter of town that borders the woods. Where there used to be a chain-link fence, there is now a paved pedestrian path crowded with dogs and baby buggies and zealous cyclists.

She has shown me new ways to optimize my life. She orders obscure vitamins online in bulk and has arranged an exacting regimen, just for me. I take them every morning with coffee and she ruffles my hair when I do.

Dinner is ready when Rochelle arrives home and I always have a story waiting for her. Something fun and frivolous that contrasts amusingly with the comparatively high stakes of her city job. I rub her shoulders at night. We floss side-by-side. All the while, she takes the details of my invented life at face value. If she ever wonders just where I came from, how such a pliant partner arrived out of the blue and into her arms—she has yet to show it.

Some days, it's as if I have stepped inside a giant set piece, wheeled before me preassembled and perfectly lit, complete with a live-in girlfriend who subsidizes my days and asks no questions. Two months have gone by. Christmas came and went. I should sleep soundly. There's been no word from sister. No word from my surviving family. In so many ways, life has gone on just as it was. I haven't told Rochelle I used to live here, and sometimes I forget it, too.

Lately though, there seems to be a kind of leak behind the walls. The warehouse settles into itself at night, creaking just the way it used to. There are phantom smells and sounds where my mother's kitchen used to be—clatter of silver, chair legs scraping,

someone's absentminded hum. Most alarming is the music, all the familiar music, the same songs adrift in other rooms, murmurs belonging to ghosts. The moment I strain closer to listen for my name inside the static, the record skips a beat. The sound disappears completely.



## CHAPTER TWO

The dog came with the name Peanut Butter. We thought about changing it to something clever, or odd. Barkley. Brad. The second *Lord of the Rings* movie had come out so I suggested Gollum, but that didn't stick. Peanut Butter was here to stay. He'd been given to us as a bribe by an ex-boyfriend our mother had spurned. He wasn't the first ex to take the task of wooing her through us, but his bait was extravagant. Fawn took to the dog immediately.

Peanut Butter had been nosing around all the usual junk tossed off the highway when he locked onto something and wouldn't let himself be tugged away. He took the duct-taped bundle in his jaws and Fawn brought it home, took the parcel into her bedroom, shut the door behind her. I didn't know what inspired such curiosity, but she'd always been the odd duck. She would say things that made my mother and me eye each other over her head, but it was all written off as precociousness, sensitivity. Being a dreamer. I waited, and hoped, for someone to accuse me of any of those things, but they never did. I didn't pretend to understand my sister.

Our mother was away in New York, as she often was, which meant I was in charge. I walked into Fawn's bedroom to nag her about a pee puddle left on the kitchen floor and there she was at the end of her bed, in deep concentration. The top of her dresser had been cleared, the bundle arranged there, unopened, with a desk lamp shining over it like an incubator.

When I asked what she was staring at, she jumped to her feet. “Nothing,” she said quickly. It was like she’d been waiting for it to hatch.

She begged me not to unpack it, but I didn’t make any promises. Usually, I spent my days in front of the TV, with company or without. Between commercials, I’d challenge myself to ornate snack arrangements I’d stack along my forearms and shuttle back toward the couch, timed perfectly with the return of *E.R.* or *Law & Order*, reruns that served as reliable stand-bys. I had a crush on Maura Tierney. Her character had a bad attitude and a crazy mother. I took notes.

Devoted as I was to my summer routine, that particular afternoon presented a new objective. Bonus points that my sudden interest aggravated Fawn, but I was in charge. My powers were broad. I called my best friend on the land line and told him to come over and his arrival sent Fawn into hysterics. She wedged her desk chair under the knob of her bedroom door to keep us out, which only made us want to bust through all the more.

“Let me go,” she shouted through the door, “or I’m calling Mom.”

“Does she have a phone in there?” Zeke asked. He was a carrot-top, minus the freckles.

“You don’t have a phone in there,” I called back through door.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Fawn shouted.

“Liar,” I shouted back.

After a while, we let her believe we’d lost interest. Zeke and I pattered around the kitchen, making mac and cheese with dramatic flourishes, drumming up all the noise we could to convince her it was safe to come out. Zeke made heavy footfalls in the direction

of the door, opened and closed it again, making sure it whined on its hinges. As soon as Fawn peaked out, we were back in. "This isn't fair," Fawn said. I didn't care.

Beneath the lamplight, the bundle looked like an experiment, a dead drop from a spy movie. Fawn had no choice but to change tactics. She became light as air, tried to schmooze us into thinking there was nothing to see. She offered to make popcorn. We could put on my favorite movie. But Zeke and I were already volleying theories about what was wrapped inside.

"It could be drugs," I said to him.

"No. No way," Zeke said. "What about a head?"

"Ew," I said.

"It's not something gross," Fawn said. She was pacing. Peanut Butter had draped himself over the shoe collection inside her closet and his tracked her across the room, back and forth.

"You don't even know what it is," I said.

"Do you know what it is?" Zeke asked her.

She gave him a withering look and said, "I'm not talking to you until you get out of my room. This is my room. You're both being so unfair."

Zeke said, "It's definitely a head."

A head. I couldn't believe anything so glamorous could ever happen to me. So, we introduced some logic. If it was a body part, why couldn't we smell it? It was summer. The heat and humidity had soared into the nineties. Statistically speaking, objects were tossed from the highway all the time. Baby blankets, work gloves, a left-footed sneaker, no mate. It was like we lived at the bottom of a landfill. Occasionally,

discarded items were more specific, or menacing, like a sawed-off shotgun Zeke's older stepbrother had found a few summers before. He supposedly hid it in the woods. He'd never say where. Out of the blue sky, tricycles rained down, split bags of fetid trash, shipping pallets, smashed bumpers, suitcases full and empty, couch cushions, roof tile. Once, a whole toilet. Another time, a bass drum. Roadkill was plentiful, and so were flaps of tire treads, axels, dead batteries, single-use plastics, the carcasses of rotisserie chickens and whole glittering banks of shattered glass. Wigs were surprisingly common. We guessed they'd been wrenched from someone's head, caught a breeze and drifted down.

Zeke and I agreed. The bundle was just more junk.

I told Fawn she was being weird and fetched a paring knife from the kitchen. There were several layers of black plastic and heavy-duty duct tape to cut through, though the outermost layer of plastic had gone a little soft and thin under the close lamplight. I didn't even understand what I was holding.

"If it's a body part," Zeke said, "maybe it's the other elbow. Or maybe it's like, a bunch of cash. Like in the Mafia."

"It's wrapped in trash bags," I said. "If I open it, it's probably going to reek."

Zeke shrugged. "So?"

"So? I guess you don't care because you don't actually live here. How convenient."

I remember the clothes he was wearing that day because they were too coordinated, as if they'd been shopped off the mannequin. Bulky white skate sneakers. Cargo shorts. A blue and green striped polo with the words SUNSET BEACH embroidered across his chest. It was the summer before senior year.

“Open some windows if you’re worried,” he said, and scratched at a scab on his forearm. “Not that it’ll matter. It’s probably anthrax.”

“I don’t know why you’re so obsessed with anthrax. And the windows *are* open.”

“All of them?”

“Yeah. All of them.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe you don’t have air conditioning. How depressing.”

Fawn threw herself down on the bed and began to cry. I guessed maybe thirty percent of her efforts were real. Even if she’d clocked in at eighty percent, even ninety, it didn’t matter much to me. Back then, I possessed even less empathy for her than I do now. We went through phases of intense closeness and repulsion, off and on in cycles that could last hours, or months. Lately, Fawn had been learning to test the waters of her own autonomy. She required much more effort, and she made uncomfortable observations. One night, we all went to the movies and saw a tearjerker—cancer, love lost, gone too soon, etcetera—and on the drive home Fawn mused aloud from the backseat. She couldn’t understand why everyone went on and on after someone died, she said. She was staring out the window, holding her thumb up to the moon. Didn’t they get tired of acting like they were sad?

Sometimes, she did spiteful things with the least provocation. She smashed my bag of chips to crumbs and dumped them in the garbage, or dug her fingernails into my forearm so hard that the crescent moon imprints would linger for hours, just because I’d taken her seat on the couch. It might’ve fallen under the category of typical sibling quarrels, but she’d mutter strangely canned and threatening things under her breath while

she carried out her punishments. Like, *I'll get you in your sleep*, or, *I'm going to make you pay*. But my mother couldn't stand tears. If you cry, you win. That's what she used to say. It's what her father had told her. Fawn learned to exploit this loophole and summoned the waterworks at the first blush of trouble.

When I would get short with my sister, my mother would wait until we were alone and tell me, "Give her a break. She's eleven, okay? She's right on the brink."

I assumed she meant the brink of puberty, but it turned out to be the brink of something quite different. There was something wrong with my sister. By the end of summer, I would know it without a doubt. She was capable of anything.

With Fawn keening from the bed, I pressed the tip of the knife to the bundle. With one thrust, I could stab right through and wrench open our afternoon surprise, but suddenly I felt like I had on the train, so many years later. I summoned nothing, no willpower. I could not make the blade break through.

"Well?" Zeke said. "We're waiting."

"Why do I have to be the one to do it?" I said.

"It's your house. I'm the guest."

I laughed in his face. "That's a good one."

"Are you going to tell?" Fawn said from the bed.

"Tell who what?" I said. "It's just going to be some stupid trash, and then we're all going to feel really dumb in about two seconds." But I didn't move. As if he sensed the impasse and opportunity, Peanut Butter dragged his way over to me. He gave me a long, doleful look.

“What do you want?” I said. He prodded his nose between my socks and jeans. He found skin and started licking with abandon. “Get him off,” I told Fawn. “He stinks like halitosis. I think he needs to go out.”

Fawn stood quickly and breezed past us. “I don’t have to help you,” she said, and began gathering her compendium of puppy figurines to reset the top of her dresser with a new tableau, as if Zeke and I no longer existed, as if she’d lost interest entirely in the bundle she’d kept under the limelight all afternoon. The puppy figurines were detailed, but transparent—little shapes blown from glass from a shop upstate my mother loved. Fawn squeezed a dachshund tight against her chest and murmured into its beady glass head: “You are my sweetie. I love you. I love you. I love you.” She looked at me sharply then. I thought she might snap the figurine to pieces inside her fist. “I’ll come for you,” she said evenly. “You can tell Mom. You can tell anyone. It doesn’t matter. I don’t care anymore, but you’re going to be sorry.”

I shook the dog away from my ankle. “Yeah, yeah,” I said. “I’ve heard that before.”

One last time, I tried to feel for the object’s outline inside the bundle, its ridges, some tell beneath my fingers. That’s when it happened. Real or unreal, I couldn’t be sure. A slight, impossible little slither below the strata of black plastic.

I dropped it at my feet and Fawn lunged, somehow at the ready. She swiped it up in her arms like a football star and took off toward the bathroom, with Zeke, me, and the dog on her heels. “Ha, ha,” Fawn said through the locked door. “It’s all mine now. And I’m not falling for your trick again, so don’t even try.”

“Why do even want it so bad?” I said. “You said not to unwrap it.”

“I said I didn’t want *you* to unwrap it.”

Zeke and I listened, ears to the door as Fawn squabbled with the bundle, grunting and grumbling while the plastic squealed and stretched open. What did I believe was coming? I must’ve thought the joke would be on her.

When all the noise stopped, I tapped on the door. “Did you get it open? Hello?”

Fawn opened the door to the bathroom, but the dog wouldn’t come in with us. He whined, tapped his claws on the hardwood.

She had set the ripped bundle on the closed toilet seat and pointed. “Look.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know what to do with it,” she said.

I peeked into the top of the bundle. It was a severed foot. Up to the ankle. Sheered off toes. The recoil was nearly instant but my brain suggested alternatives to what I saw. It looked like a prop, an amputation from a wax figure, a deformity of some kind—the sort of image easily sourced online, that made you wiggle your own toes in gratitude. In any case, it could not be real. If nothing else, that seemed clear.

The police came. Zeke was the one who thought to call. For some reason, I kept telling him not to, like it might get us into trouble. You weren’t supposed to prank the cops, but it wasn’t a prank. I reminded myself of this over and over. Zeke’s mother arrived and went with Fawn to show the police the spot where she’d found it. Men in rubber gloves took the bundle and asked us to lock Peanut Butter in the bedroom so he didn’t get riled up.

“He’s an idiot,” I told them. “He never knows what’s going on.” The men in rubber gloves repeated their request.



I tried to call my mother at her friend's place in the city, but it just forwarded to a chipper answering machine message. I left an oddly-worded description of the afternoon's events. I kept referring to the whole thing as 'The Incident', and pronounced each syllable somewhat severely. When my mother called back a bit later, she asked to speak to Zeke's mother, and Nance did her part—soothing her, saying we could stay the night at their place. "I don't want you to worry," she kept saying. My mother asked to speak to Fawn and me. We held the receiver between us.

"Do I need to come home?" she asked us. "I can come home."

I wanted to say yes, or at least waffle enough so that she'd offer herself up more definitively, but Fawn answered first. "It's okay, Mom. It's okay. I don't want you to worry."

She said it just like Nance had, the perfect pitch, a perceptive imitation. Nance was speaking to a police officer, but Zeke was sitting at the table next to us. He'd noticed. I'd seen the surprise on his face.

My mother made us promise to call in the morning from the Heller's house, but when we did, it only went to the answering machine again. I didn't leave a message. I just hung up.

For a few days after, it was all we could talk about. We'd held a dead man's foot in our hands. Movies began with as much intrigue, but the ensuing action never arrived. Still, each time we recapped our discovery, the details expanded. We recalled a phantom whiff of rot, or speculated that what I thought I'd felt—that little shiver inside the plastic—was perhaps a horde of maggots, feasting. But none of us had gotten a clean look at it. It'd stayed mostly encased in the shredded plastic. Even when we prodded

Fawn for more descriptions to animate our version of events, she was mostly mum. She had been alone in the bathroom, holding the bundle, for perhaps a whole minute before she unlocked the door and let us in. She only shrugged. Now, I think she just wanted a bit of the story for herself, a grisly little crumb she didn't have to share with the rest of us.

We were thrilled when we received two calls about appearing on local TV, but the producers needed to coordinate with our mother. By phone, she insisted we not get involved. She thought it would make us targets. "People are sick", she said. They hadn't caught whoever had done the tossing or the killing, maybe both. The postwoman was interviewed instead, but Fawn and I agreed that she only did a mediocre job and did not seem comfortable on camera.

After a week or so, the noir began to fade. Fawn had the idea to go out looking for more parts, to keep the action coming, but it sounded like dirty work to me. And Zeke was too cautious. His mother was keeping him on a tighter leash since our unsupervised misadventure. Fawn didn't need us in order to do what she wanted to do. She went out hunting on her own, took the dog along with her like a trained bloodhound, even though he was just a wiry mutt who tired easily in the heat.

My plan was to return to my standard television routine and stay tuned in through July and August. Then it'd be back to school, which excited me. I was not a passionate student, but I liked the social stimulation. Until then, I was going to live on the couch, sweat through the cushions, and let reruns roll from nine until noon. I had about a dozen video cassette tapes I'd used to record my favorite shows and I'd built a very systematic viewing schedule. The news carried on with bit updates about the progress of the investigation, but other things were happening in the world, and in New York nearby.

Everything went back to being boring, which I secretly delighted in, though also considered it my cross to bear.

Who could've known what was waiting behind all that delicious tedium? Who might've guessed that my months in the loft were limited? Our mother would finally come home. The dog would die. First love would leave me shipwrecked. Zeke would never see seventeen. And all the while, some dark seed was breaking ground inside Fawn's head, behind her bedroom door. If I'd known any better, I would've looked around and pocketed a few things that mattered. I would've catalogued the memories of Fawn when she just a harmless nag, a goof, a fellow body in the foxhole.

## CHAPTER THREE

By now, I've lived enough in places to know. People think bad towns are isolated as desert islands. Deerie's rot was a regional anomaly, something cystic, something earned. And because the villages twenty miles or so north and south of Deerie were doing reasonably well, and because housing prices in the county stayed solid, and the schools were comfortably mid-tier, and the river was not as polluted as it once was—all was well. Deerie was not a symptom of a larger problem. It was the problem itself. People believed that, even those who lived there.

I used to like that others thought of my hometown this way. I felt it gave me a certain gravitas to be from somewhere bleak, that it instilled in me a ruffian's charm and would one day make a fine origin story. I was building a theory about myself back then, that I was born interesting. I wanted to believe I could see things differently. And of course, all of that turned out to be true. It's true of everyone.

One night, a year after I'd moved to the city, having left the Veld Center and my family behind, I went out with a few friends who mostly turned out to be temporary and learned a little something about my personal history. I was trying on a few different lifestyles back then, while I made money at a mid-tier restaurant flanked by edgy galleries and music venues that only opened well after dark. My shift was almost over, and a few cooks and waiters were headed to a fancy party down the block, at a penthouse

loft owned by someone famous. I hadn't been at the restaurant long, but this worked in my favor. People hadn't made their minds up about me yet and they invited me along.

The penthouse looked like the set of a gameshow. Everything inside was needlessly high-tech, all the same shade of luminescent pearl—the quartz countertops, the painted wide-plank floors, the leather sectional that could seat sixteen. All the white gave off a vaguely oiled sheen, like disco club footage from the seventies. As soon as we arrived, a strapping doorman gathered our phones in a wicker basket and didn't give anyone time to protest. We spread out into the party where a cornucopia of booze and powders and pills and smokes awaited. A vodka company was sponsoring the event. Their logo looked like pharmaceutical branding.

“Who owns this place?” I asked one of the servers I worked with. Her name was Steph. We were in the crowded kitchen and she was prying open the white refrigerator, which was empty, like in a showroom. I checked the cabinets and drawers. They were empty, too.

“Some rapper,” she said. “No, actually, I think it's a producer. No. An executive.”

“Cool.”

“He's famous though.”

From thin air, a heavy-bottomed mirror, the size and shape of a dinner plate, appeared between us. An anonymous hand beyond my line of sight proffered a rolled up twenty-dollar bill. It was just like I'd seen in the movies.

Steph took the mirror and the twenty, called out a thank you over her shoulder and snorted three short lines. “Et toi?” she offered.

I shook my head. “I don't think it works right for me,” I said. “Last time I ended

up texting my roommate these really long, intense messages about nothing for like an hour.”

Steph’s eyes were already drifting past my head to see if someone more interesting might be standing behind me. “I’m going to try and find him,” Steph said.

“Who?”

“The guy who owns this place.”

“And then what?”

She shrugged and did a twirl, delighted by the way her skirt fanned out around her, knocking into a few shoulders. She pressed her hands down the fabric, absorbing its velveteen texture, and sighed deeply. “Who cares?” she said. “I need to meet him.”

I thought I liked Steph. I’d heard she dated girls in the past, one of whom had worked my spot at the restaurant before quitting. A dishwasher in the back told me it had been messy. Drama, he said. Though this was the same dishwasher who told me that was why girls shouldn’t be with other girls. The woman makes a mess, he said, so that the man can clean it up. If you have two girls, you have two messes. What kind of math was that?

I didn’t want to feel lonely anymore. I wanted to find someone to spend the winter with. And it wouldn’t be so bad if things didn’t work out. I could carve out a place inside her social circle, and I could learn a thing or two about how the city worked, which places really mattered. If nothing else, the relationship would serve a functional purpose in fortifying the bones of the new life I was building. You had to start somewhere. Steph was pretty, and sweet. She wanted to be an actress. Everyone at the restaurant loved her. She always had somewhere fun to be after her shift. I’d locked onto her as a solid

candidate. She had yet to lock on to me.

“When you find the guy, you should tell him to get some groceries,” I said, struggling. “Because the fridge is so empty.” Yikes.

Steph didn’t hear me. She was game-planning her route through the crowd. Someone on the balcony had just sabered a giant bottle of champagne and was pouring it into the mouths of bystanders. “Be right back,” she mumbled, and disappeared.

I had to last until three a.m. That was the deal I made with myself.

I wandered the loft, tried to find faces I knew from the restaurant. On the balcony, an oversized bottle of Veuve burst when an amateur from the peanut gallery tried to slash it with a samurai sword. I thought security would come to whisk her away, but a new bottle appeared before they’d mopped up the suds and glass from the last.

Like in a dream, I went down a long, white hallway where all the doors were locked, except for one. I thought I’d found the bathroom, but instead I walked into a plush little enclave with a low ceiling, a massive window unto the city as its fourth wall. Every surface was carpeted, and it was dark but for the lights of traffic and skyscrapers and the little blue square of a stereo system’s digital display. As soon as the door closed behind me with a hydraulic wheeze, I realized the room was soundproof. I couldn’t hear the party, but I could still hear music. Far quieter fare, from all sides. I recognized the song. It was an eerie choice with all the revelry just down the hall. Elvis Costello was singing “Almost Blue.”

The stereo system was built into the wall in an elaborate, architectural set-up of glass, matte buttons, and chrome knobs. It was like being inside a spaceship, or in the belly of a giant subwoofer. The whole room was wired for sound. I couldn’t determine a

single origin point. It was an audiophile's dream set-up, but I didn't have the patience or palette to listen to music that way. I liked to plug in and walk, let myself wander. Fawn used to tease me. She'd call it The Move and Groove.

Around me, the dark lifted into a dull, red glow.

"Welcome," a voice said. I turned toward my blind spot and saw a man reclining in the corner, seemingly mid-air. I squinted. The low-slung leather settee he was lounging on almost disappeared in the low light.

"Hi," I said. "Sorry, I thought this was the bathroom."

He sat up to make room on the settee. "Come in. Come sit."

I moved past his invitation and went to the wide window. I tapped the glass.

"What a view. How many birds have bitten the bullet on this thing, you think?"

"Oh," he said. "None yet. That I know of."

I was surprised the party had an actual, human host. He was older, in his late forties maybe. He was wearing a loud cardigan open over a wrinkled button-up, some chinos and sharp-toed boots that were all wrong. At least he had a decent haircut.

"Great party," I told him and tried to think of a reason to leave.

He nodded to the door behind him, gave a neutral hum. "Let me show you something."

For the next half-hour, he walked me through all the components of the room. The programmable lights that erupted in a laser show when prompted. The hidden locations of the floor, wall, and ceiling speakers, which looked like little black saucers, the size of my palm. He tapped a button and a black-out shade rolled over the window, plunging the room into air-tight darkness. "Wow," I said.



He seemed like a nice enough guy. He told me to call him Rod. The shades retracted again and he led me to the far corner, near the settee.

“Now, here is the pièce de résistance,” he said. He felt around the padded wall a moment with both hands, then pressed either forefinger into the lining, just so. A panel popped out. A tube light illuminated a polished wooden nook. A handful of plastic-wrapped records were on display, all in row.

“These are my favorites,” he said. “Really special items.”

“Are they rare?”

“A few,” he said. “A few are quite rare. Others have supreme sentimental value. In that way, they’re rare.”

I leaned in to find the details in the artwork. I recognized a few of the albums. There was David Bowie’s ‘Diamond Dogs,’ just as forward and beguiling a cover as I remembered from my mother’s collection.

“I’ve seen that one before,” I said. “What’s the story?”

“It had a limited initial run that actually included the dog’s genitals, rather explicitly. The label balked and had the offending bits airbrushed. Those in the know kept the originals.” He turned the cover over to show me. I laughed.

“I love it,” I said.

“Me too.”

I was having fun. For once, I wasn’t tallying time until I was home and alone. Steph would be impressed. I could spackle over my earlier awkwardness with an insider’s anecdote. We went down the line and Rod gave me a brief education. There was a single released by The Rolling Stones, “Street Fighting Man,” which initially ran with a photo

from the 1968 riots at the Chicago Democratic National Convention as its artwork. The image wasn't especially explicit, but it showed a handful of cops in white helmets encircling a downed protestor. One of the cops seemed to be smiling, and he had a foot raised as if he was moments away from stomping on the protestor, who already looked lifeless. Rod said there were maybe only twenty available copies in the world, which seemed like an outrageous ratio.

"Why that one?" I asked him. "It couldn't have been cheap."

"No," he smiled. "It certainly wasn't. But I like to consider myself an advocate of free speech," he said, and winked.

He tapped the edge of another record, furthest from me. "See this one? Its real value is in its story. I paid about a hundred for it." When I craned to see it, he moved me closer by my shoulders. "There you go."

I recognized this album. I leaned in closer to be sure, and blinked a few times, but I knew the image as intimately as a family photograph—because it nearly was.

"When I bought this building," Rod said, "it was all divvied up into mismatched, mixed-use spaces. It took a while to clean house, but I always do some extra digging on the buildings I buy. Not just for the due diligence, but because I'm naturally curious. Actually, I believe it's one of the reasons I've enjoyed so much success."

"May I?"

"Of course."

He handed me the album, sealed inside its thick plastic sleeve. I held it gently, like it was made of ash. I hadn't seen it in years.

"I learned all about the building's architect," he said. "No one especially

noteworthy, though prolific. I dug up the contractors, the suppliers, identified unusual period details, the works. With a little more research, I even identified some of the more interesting long-term tenants over the years. That's why I keep this particular record in my collection."

On the album's cover, six young men were posturing on a city street corner. They mugged for the camera, some with hard faces, others goofing off, all in greyscale. They wore a ragtag uniform of leather jackets, leather gloves. The band was called Playa Mala. Bad Beach. The name of the album was *Vieques*.

In the album's far left corner, the letter *V* glowed electric red, almost three-dimensional. I traced the letterform with my fingertip and my father looked up at me from the group photo. He was the one leaning on the lamppost, wearing a black newsboy cap with buttons pinned along the brim, text too small to read. He was tallest. He brooded best. It wounded me to see him so young and alive, locked up in this cupboard. The string-bean with the long face.

"There used to be a neon studio in the basement. It operated there for decades, made some wonderful signs—some of which you can still see around the city, if you know where to look. The group recorded their only record down there, perhaps because the studio was spacious, and cheap. It was a different neighborhood back then. And the group was really more of a gang than a band, really. You can hear that in the music. Sometimes they're a little out of tune, a little out of time. Certainly derivative. I suppose they enjoy a bit of a cult status—a speedbump in city history, but it makes for a good party trick."

And it was. Although, Rod hadn't arranged his facts quite right. The neon studio

had doubled as a residence, and for his first few years in the city, it was where my father lived. He'd apprenticed, learned to blow and bend the glass tubes, to conjure colored vapor and trap it there. He had told me stories. He'd said the studio was deceptively quietly, only the breath of a flame on the burner, the cranial buzz of charged neon. He traded his labor for a place to live. He took one corner of the workshop and hung a curtain, bought a cot from an army surplus store, made a life. Rod was right on one count, at least. It was a different neighborhood back then. I'd moved there on purpose, had taken a job at the restaurant around the corner. I wanted to live where my father had lived. For once, I'd followed the correct instinct. I was holding the proof in my hands.

Track 1: "Perla"

Track 2: "Girl with the Nickels and Dimes"

Track 3: "La Playa del Barrio Lapa"

Track 4: "Bombs Away"

Track 5: "Enserio"

Track 6: "Let Him Live"

I always liked Track 2 best. I used to think it was about my mother and father.

The song is about a newlywed couple who have gone broke. The woman keeps the books and the man does the shopping. He comes home from the market with all the wrong items, but they make do. They come up with recipes on the fly. That's why the chorus is just a list of ingredients. The couple stayed together, thick and thin. I wanted the song to be true. I'd never gotten the chance to ask my father if it was.

I don't think I could have convinced Rod of the truth, and I didn't have to. In a divine act of timing, a crew of partygoers stumbled through the door. On their heels, a

gust of pandemonium, the stink of perfume, sweat, and spilled liquor, and Steph—smiling ear to ear.

Rod plucked the album from my hands and arranged it back in its row.

He stepped out from the shadows. “I don’t think you belong in here,” he said to the group, but no one was listening. They had already dispersed, eight or nine of them, noses to the window or stereo wall. I had seen packs like these before in the restaurant, all teeth and phone-scrolling, a mix of improbably fit and convivial men and women, like a troupe of back-up dancers on tour. One of them cranked a dial and the hook to Stevie Wonder’s “Superstition” shook the room. Everyone clutched their ears. I could feel the notes of the clavinet wobbling inside my chest.

The music cut out. “Enough,” Rod said, and the lights came up. He opened the door to the party and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “Out.”

The troupe didn’t make much of a fuss. There were cheers beyond the door, back in the thick of things. I tried to make eye contact with Steph, but she was too ebullient to be distracted. She looked like she was ready to rush onstage in a long chorus line. Another server I recognized from the restaurant was towing Steph behind her by the wrist. “C’mon,” she said. “Time to go bye-bye.”

Rod stepped in front of the last few interlopers in the line, all women. “You few can stay. You’re cool,” he said. “Hey, let me show you something.”

I hung back in the lowlight while Rod’s tour began anew. Steph was peppering Rod with a dozen ecstatic questions while he pointed out all the hidden speakers. He told my joke about the birds and the window glass and no one laughed except for me. He looked at me suddenly, appalled, as if I’d appeared out of thin air and stepped on his

punchline.

I turned and wandered the little room. I pretended to inspect the flat face of the stereo system, the grain of the carpet. The panel of the record compartment was slightly ajar. There was a sliver of light where it hadn't fully latched. It was almost too easy.

While Rod fiddled with the blackout curtain, the other girls sipped drinks and babbled about the view. Hadn't they ever seen the skyline before? They'd only ever see such views at the parties they crashed, I thought. They'd always be envious, always angling to point out the streets they knew and walked down every day without a second thought. I felt a heave of hatred for them, even Steph. In a year's time, we would get together and fall unceremoniously apart. She said I wasn't good for her. She said she couldn't take it anymore. In two years' time, she would land the leading role on a hit teen drama, a reboot from my childhood. My favorite show of all time. She would become another twenty-seven-year-old playing sixteen for years on end, and I would watch her live inside my dream world every Wednesday night at eight.

Steph looped arms with the other server from the restaurant and pouted, said she was hungry. The girls agreed. They had no idea they were circling the mouth of a trap.

Rod got the blackout curtain working and the room felt like an elevator cab descending. Just before the ambient light was squeezed out completely, I found Steph's face. I watched as Rod took her elbow, tried to turn her toward the settee, the other waitress from the restaurant feeling around for her in the dark.

It was after three a.m. I'd made it. It was time to go.

On Monday mornings, Rochelle goes into the city early for her weekly team

meeting. I am not totally sure what her title is, or what her company does. Some kind of market research, but with fancier snacks and in-office taps for kombucha, beer, and wine. They have modular desks and a company-wide message stream where coworkers share gifs of grumpy cats and babies taking tumbles. At these Monday morning meetings, Rochelle's nemesis is notetaker, a woman who bites her fingernails incessantly and snaps the hard pulp between her teeth while everyone looks around the room to determine the offender. Rochelle dreams of the day when her nemesis is realized as the culprit. Until then, she texts me throughout these meetings with various gripes and death wishes. She believes that everyone in her office is a born idiot, groomed to disrupt her workflow and commit grave derelictions of duty. No matter the hour, I am her listening ear on call.

What Rochelle doesn't know is that I board the train just an hour behind her. There's a patch of track where I don't get service, which is risky, but also easy to smooth over if I lie and say I was working out or hopped in the shower. Since the staff meeting drains her whole morning, she'll stay busy playing catch-up for the remainder of the day. Mondays are my day off from her. I do all the things I used to do before I invaded her life. I sleep a lot. I order too much takeout and make myself sick. I play video games with my roommate Victor, or catch up on the freelance I've been casting off.

"Xoxo," I text Rochelle. "*Meeting with the boss. Talk soon.*" I've never actually met my boss. I don't even know what she looks like. Our relationship exists strictly via emails marked urgent. Rochelle responds with a sad-face. *Call me at lunch.*

My apartment is in Queens. The rent is affordable because the building has been falling apart for years. There are various feuds from floor to floor. The maintenance man lives in the basement and smokes weed every waking hour. The scent and haze rise

through the floorboards and fumigate the halls. One day, bed bugs will come. So will eviction, when the rents rise high enough. The question isn't if, but when.

I hold open the front door to let a woman sheathed in a Moncler puffer coat pass by, then take the steps to the second floor two at a time. I share a place with my roommate, Victor. He is at the kitchen table when I come in, dressed in fresh-pressed business casual and chatting with his laptop. "Funny you should mention it," he says. "I have some interesting ideas about that."

He has been without a steady job for more than a year, but he is always setting up informational interviews to pick the brains of mid-level execs. At night, he drives for cash. "The neighborhood is certainly booming, that's true," he says, and glances at me over his laptop's lens. I take the hint and head to my bedroom.

What do I do with my time away from Rochelle? When I first started living with her, I rarely left the building. I was afraid my set of keys were decoys, that she would have someone swoop in to change the locks. Every time I return, I have the same moment of truth at her front door. I turn the knob and wait for my good fortune to expire.

At any time, Rochelle could cut me out of the wordless deal we've struck. If I had to guess, I would say she considers me a benevolent freeloader, unaware that her little luxuries—the stocked pantry, the sublime bath products, the wardrobe she has curated just for me—are only perks, and not my purpose. I am still figuring out what I'm doing there with her. Sometimes, I think of myself in hiding. But in that case, it would be senseless to return to the scene where it all began.

I always ask Victor if anyone has swung by the apartment looking for me. I try to describe Fawn, but any description I could give would be four years out of date. I tell him



she's average height and weight, a dirty blonde, fair complexion.

“That’s your sister?” he asked, looking me up and down. Though Fawn and me emerged from the same gene pool, we are opposite sides of the same coin. Fawn takes after our mother, who is fair-skinned and green-eyed, short, with a runner’s compact body and quick metabolism. I am the odd man out in our trio. I follow in my father’s footsteps, skewing olive, and tall, and dark-eyed, with a permanent scowl. In summer, during my peak tanning months, strangers at bodegas try to speak to me in Spanish and I’m embarrassed to tell them I’m not fluent in my father’s tongue. Victor and I look more alike, and though he is the closest thing to family I have left, I have never told him the whole truth about Fawn.

He says he hasn’t seen anyone special come around, but I wish I had more identifying information to offer. My sister and I didn’t keep in touch during her time at Veld. At first, she sent me letters. She wrote pages and pages in most exacting cursive, pretending like I’d never found her out, that she was the concerned party and I was the one who’d been sent away for reprogramming. I’d read through each letter once, just to be sure nothing had changed. For a while, I kept them all bound together, organized chronologically and tucked away in a desk drawer. I thought they might come in handy for some reason—future litigation, ephemera I might look back on with a smile for all our youthful dramatics. That was wishful thinking. I had a strong streak of that back then.

Eventually, when I was moving apartments and sorting through junk, I decided to chuck the whole batch of letters. All my friends were ridding themselves of what burdened them. They were moving into tiny houses or vans. I didn’t even save the last letter she sent before her one-sided correspondence ceased altogether, even though it was

different than the others. *I have learned new strategies to communicate my intentions*, she wrote. *I can see now that what I did to you was not constructive to my cause.*

It sounded like Veld phraseology to me, as if someone had been standing over her shoulder while she copied lines from a session handout.

I wake up in my own bed from a power nap spent dreamless, which is rare. The clock tells me it's only been a half hour or so, but the weather outside has shifted to overcast. It feels like the whole day has gone by. My eyes drift to reacquaint myself with the bedroom I've abandoned. My room at Victor's feels more like a furnished rental than a space I once agonized over. I'd salvaged the deco waterfall dresser from the curb thinking I'd found treasure, and I'd paid good money for the barrister bookcase. I told myself I'd have both pieces forever, but compared to Rochelle's high-tier furnishings, the tight edges and gleam, all my worldly possessions appear cobbled together, amateurish, the work of a Craigslist spendthrift.

It takes me a moment of scanning before I see it, or don't see it. The shelf above my desk looks almost innocent with its row of unread books, the dehydrated spider plant, a mug of errant coins all stuck together with grime. Then, the blank spot.

My prized possession is missing. And there's no chance it is gone by accident.

I slide into the kitchen in my socks and wave wildly at Victor, who is wrapping up his call. "I will absolutely shoot you an email," he says. "Absolutely. Sounds good."

He maneuvers one hand out of frame and firmly motions for one more second, still smiling like a politician as he flips me off. He holds his middle finger in position until he closes the laptop and lets out a long breath, eyes bulging.

"That was terrible," he says and heads for the fridge. "What's wrong with you?"

“Something is missing from my room. That album I had framed, above my desk. Playa Mala. Do you know where it is?”

“No,” he shrugs. “When you leave, I pretend your room doesn’t exist.”

“It’s really important.”

“Uh huh. I don’t have it. And also, thank you for asking about my interview. It was stupendous and totally worth my time.”

“Okay, but it’s worth some money.”

“Great. I hope it turns up.”

I start upturning pillows and digging through piles of expired mail, but all my efforts are absent-minded. I know it’s not here, but I have to put on a level-headed show for Victor. When I dropped off the radar in Deerie, I didn’t return his calls or texts for a week. I didn’t know how to tell him I had gone home, when home wasn’t there and I was pretending to be someone else. He’d been ready to report me missing when I finally told him I’d fallen in love, that I was on the wing of fate. So on and so forth. I don’t think he bought it.

No record in the couch cushions. No record in the trash. No record in the flat stack of paper grocery bags piled on the counter.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry,” I tell Victor and try to strike a casual, inviting sort of pose. “Go on. I’m listening now. All ears.”

“Forget it,” he says. He pours a generous helping of cereal into a mixing bowl, but the milk is running low. He runs the gallon under the tap for a few seconds to stretch what’s left, then dives on. A stream of milk dribbles over his chin. No matter how often he shaves, his five o’clock shadow is on the perennial breakthrough. Some days he’s like

a machine, producing projects and proposals left and right, guzzling coffee and Coke Zero while three separate computer monitors blink around his head. Other days, he holes up in his room and plays video games. I used to fall asleep to the sound of explosions and pops of gunfire and battalion commandants shouting orders. I can practically see his fingers itching for the controller now.

“Come on, Vic,” I say. “I want to know. Tell me, and then you can help me look.”

He rolls his eyes and munches deeper into his cereal. “Fine,” he says with his mouth full, “since you are obviously taking an authentic interest my life—the call was bullshit. Some regional manager for Enterprise thinks he’s a visionary because he flipped a rowhome in outer Brooklyn. Please. That’s more than enough to piss me off, but it’s not even the worst part of my day so far.”

I nod along, but I am thinking about how Fawn managed to get inside. Our building isn’t Fort Knox, but Fawn isn’t Houdini, either. Somehow, she got past two locked doors. Also, the record is a pointed object to make disappear. A message. The drama of it all seems both absurd and entirely her signature. A psychological heist, a sprinkle of cinematic flair. She knows what can move me, how best to make me feel.

Victor clears his throat.

“Right,” I say. “That’s crazy. And what was the worst part again?”

“I’m getting to that,” he says, and scrapes his bowl. “I had this A.M. networking thing with this bitch I met at Press. Well, not met. She spilled her iced coffee on me and we got to talking. She said she knew somebody who knew somebody else, that we should collaborate and she’d set it up. I don’t know.” He sighs, scratches his chin. “Whatever. She had the look, you know? Like she knew what she was doing, like maybe she knew

people. I thought: Okay, I'll try anything at this point. Anyway, you just missed her when you came in."

The woman in Moncler. She'd smelled expensive. Her hood was up. I'd been dreaming of my nap upstairs, batting at the buzzing phone in my pocket as Rochelle's name lit up the screen. I'd held the door open for her. She'd walked right through.

"What was her name? The woman you met with."

"Does it matter?" Victor asked. "The funny thing is, I'm really starting to think you had the right idea. I really am."

"About what?"

"I'm tired of the hustle. I want out. My brother owns three houses in South Jersey and he's only three years older than me. He's doing great. He wants to buy a house down the shore."

"Victor, what was her name?"

"I can talk mortgages all day long. I've studied. I know interest rates. But no one would sell me a house. And I couldn't afford one. I'm smart enough to know that, too."

"Victor."

"Jesus," he says. "Her name was May, okay? May. Are you happy?"

Impossibly, this answer is worse than I feared.

Had I snatched the album from Rod's little cave because I felt I deserved it? Because I thought it belonged with me? Yes. A simple question. Taking it had been reckless, but I've never regretted it until now. I would rather it stayed in its plastic sleeve forever, sealed inside Rod's hidden compartment, rather than find its way into Fawn's hands.

“No offense,” he says, “but this conversation is not really making me feel better.”

I sit myself down at the table, but my body itches to run out into the street and tackle every goose-down coat in Queens. I don't because I already know Fawn is long gone. If she wanted to corner me, she would have. Instead, she came to dangle bait and dash.

“If you think I stole your record or something because I'm hard-up, you're paranoid,” Victor says. “You know me better than that, don't you?”

He gives me a look and pushes back from the table. He dumps his bowl in the sink and sulks to the fridge again, begins rearranging some of the word magnets that'd been gifted to us at our housewarming party.

Lovely. Morning. For. Craving. Taste. -Y. Brains.

“That's not it,” I say, but I know this sounds unconvincing. “It's not you.”

“I've done a lot of these calls,” he says. “No one can accuse me of being lazy. I've kissed up to assholes and influencers and know-nothings who think they're Steve Jobs times ten, who think they're doing *me* a favor, letting me in on their master plan.” He shakes his head. “Nothing ever comes from this shit. I should've known she was nobody.”

“Where did things leave off with her?” I ask. “What did she have to say?”

“I don't know. She says she's coming into some money, wants to invest. She kept calling me sweetie. Sweetie this, sweetie that. Like we knew each other. I think she just wanted to feel important. She said to get in touch.”

“And are you going to? No. Obviously not. Right?”

He deliberates a moment, fiddling with the magnetic tiles. “Maybe.”

“After all that?”

“Should I?”

“Victor. No.”

I am ready to set Victor loose, to tell him goodbye for a long while so Fawn can relinquish him as a useful channel. Her *modus operandi*. She had done the same with Zeke, and I was witness to what came of it. I want to to high-tail it back to the cocoon Rochelle has spun for us. Rigid as it may be, I feel safe inside those walls. My pocket twitches where I know she has messaged me and I have ignored her.

“Listen Vic,” I start, but something has caught my eye.

Just beyond his latest poetic masterpiece—Picture. Your. Dream. Moment. -S. & Screw. Off.—there is a sticky note with Veld’s letterhead. Another dynamic V I can’t forget.

I brush past Victor but he is sulking and tries to box me out with his elbows.

“Your missing record ain’t in the fridge,” he says. “Nothing’s in there. I’m broke. Remember?”

Over his shoulder, I snatch the note from beneath its magnet. It’s the same cursive from Fawn’s letters years before, elegant as ever. It’s so like her to move in this way—to leave a missive on the fridge like she was just one of the roomies, only to take off with a souvenir.

I want to read it as a riddle, but the command is straightforward

“Found you,” she’s written.

“Your turn now.

Find me?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

At Veld, they call it a conduct disorder.

Conduct disorder with callous and unemotional traits.

Conduct disorder with impulsive aggression.

Conduct disorder displaying oppositional defiance.

Conduct disorder characterized by deceitfulness or theft.

Your disorder can be hot-blooded. Your disorder can be cold-blooded.

This is what they used to think of me, even if they changed their minds.

Or, they would say I got better. I was a testament to their methods. While other Veld graduates slammed their cars into concrete pilons and oncoming traffic, or overdosed on weekend jaunts to Vermont or Miami, or otherwise killed themselves, accident or not, in any which way you could think of—I was, by Veld’s estimation, thriving.

I had a job that paid the bills. I had some friends, some romantic interests, a nonvolatile relationship with the world at large. Any substance-based revelry rarely outlived the weekend. I had turned down the dial on my life. In Veld-speak, I had learned to stay *on task*.



When the Veld staff comes to take you away in the middle of the night, in a preordained kidnapping complete with an unmarked van and husky guardsmen you can't outmatch, you have been sold for a promise. It's all there on the brochure. Emotional preparation for the outside world in a safe and structured environment.

It's hard to believe any witting adult could fall for a pitch so vague, but I suppose when you're desperate, the mere suggestion of hope is enough.

After they've got you in the van, they may take you to an airport or a train. Maybe they will drive you through the night to wherever it is you're going. You might end up in the swamps of Florida, or the blown-up ranges of Appalachian coal country, or in the remote wilds of Idaho, Arizona, Kentucky. Wherever you go, you will stay there for at least a month, probably longer. Alongside other troublemakers, you will learn to set up camp and cook over fire and trek for miles and miles until civilization becomes a myth, a place and a feeling you dreamed of once. If you want to come to Veld, or if someone wants to send you there, you must begin in exile.

In a masterstroke of branding, they call this banishment a pre-enrollment program. A Therapeutic Wilderness Commitment. It's meant to strip away your bad habits and to whittle down those most primed for success on Veld's formal campus, a hundred-acre compound in southern Virginia. When you are on Commitment, the round-the-clock surveillance and extreme geography are meant to keep you in place while you learn your limits and let the healing process begin. But plenty of campers have made a break for it, only to be tracked down days later, miles adrift in the snow or heat, food gone and defenses at the breaking point. Then, you will start over. Your days on the trail reduced to zero.

They took me to Maine.

It was a long drive, eight hours north of Deerie. The sedatives they gave me hardly made a dent. I remember lying on my back in the rear seat of an otherwise empty sixteen-passenger van, measuring each inhale, exhale, looking up through the window as highway lights glazed by.

My mother had floated the idea of Veld a few weeks before, but she floated all kinds of ideas that never took. She said she didn't know what else to do with me. I didn't care. Zeke had died two months earlier and I'd been on a downward spiral ever since. Later, I would dub this the Supermarket Sweep era of my life. An abundance of time was no longer a promise. I felt I should seize all stimuli from the shelves, devour and run, say yes to everything offered.

We arrived at dawn. I thought I would smell the ocean, but we were nowhere near the coast. It was the end of autumn. All the leaves were gone, but snow had yet to fall. I thought they'd take me somewhere warm. December was baring down on Deerie, and there was no chance it would be lighter fare further north. The site was boxed in by red pines, their long throats threatening at all sides. To see the sky, I had to crane my neck, and the view made me dizzy, like I was inside a tunnel narrowing into darkness, instead of opening to light.

I told the men who'd driven me that I needed to sit down, but now there were new faces, staffers I didn't recognize herding me this way and that. They told me to change my clothes into trek gear. To gather my pack. To wolf down a bowl of cold oatmeal. To submit to a search so no contraband remained in my possession. I had nothing to

surrender. Soon, I was at the end of a line of girls just like me, one counselor in the lead, another bringing up the rear, eight bad seeds between them.

Now that my time in the wilderness and Veld are in the rearview mirror, I sometimes ask myself: did it do me any good? It's hard to believe you've been healed when you never thought you were sick to begin with. But something spoiled inside me when I watched Zeke die. Later, my father told me you don't win against grief, that coping is, in some ways, unnatural. When awful things happen, you are supposed to feel awful. Attempting to triumph in the face of grief was hubris. So American, he said. You can mitigate the pain, but we have power to do little else when dealt a bad hand, he instructed. Hold on tight. Ride it out.

Even now, I try to forgive myself for all the things I've done. I try to attribute my riddled past to misplaced mourning. I am an imperfect being, I reason. I am still in recovery from all of life's shrapnel. But no matter where I am, or who I'm with, I still hear it in my head, on a never-ending loop. Stay on task. Then I find a stolen record in my hand or wake up in Rochelle's clean bed, the smear of blue above me like a dream extinguished. I wonder: who made me this way. Am I my own fault?

I know there are certain Veldisms that'll stay ingrained forever. For instance, if you are considering behavior that is not on-task, or you find yourself questioning your motivations, allegiances, even the most basic behavior of yourself or others—the counselors say, "It doesn't matter if it sounds obvious or silly. Ask the question. Require an answer. Spell it out for yourself and see where the truth shows itself."

What is the truth?

One truth is that after our father died, all his money went to me. He had been broke as a boy. He had arrived to the mainland at age nineteen without a pair of shoes to his name. It was why he was so good at socking away cash as an adult. He left his sizable nest egg to me, his eldest, to divvy up appropriately, with Fawn's portion to be delivered when she turned eighteen.

Another truth is that the money is all gone. Maybe Fawn cares about that, or maybe she doesn't. If that was all she was after, I'm sure I would've seen her face-to-face by now. Instead, she has instigated a game of cat and mouse. There are so many scores to settle between us. I know she has not forgotten. Grudges run long and deep in our family, and we are nothing if not the products of those that made us. That is something Veld and I agree upon.

On Channel 11, there was a particular show I watched religiously. It was called *MAYDAY*. It followed the life of a sixteen-year-old girl. The eponymous May.

She works part-time in her family's dockside diner, in a little salt-flecked village on the Pacific Coast. In secret, and mostly for fun, May hosts her own amateur radio hour in an ad hoc studio carved out of the diner's basement storeroom. These broadcasts narrate each episode in voiceover—a motif I sometimes found myself emulating in my head. May spins records for no one, dispenses advice to imaginary callers, waxes poetic on life's lessons. Each night, at the end of her show, she sends out a salute to her father. Years before, he'd been lost at sea, but she cannot accept his fate. She is alone in this crusade. All the while, she juggles the romantic advances of not one, but two brooding

boys: the tackle shop manager's bookish son, and the ne'er-do-well rich boy who zips through the marina in his speedboat.

I was hooked. The show was basically a rip-off of the movie *Frequency*, with more girl power and fair isle sweaters and juvenile heavy-petting. I collected every magazine that featured the show's stars, and I went through each actor's filmography, renting videos from the store and fast-forwarding until their bit scene played out, rewinding, watching again.

The summer the body parts arrived, the same summer of Fawn's big unveiling and Zeke's death, *MAYDAY* had just completed its third season. I had taken care to tape some of my favorite episodes using the VCR. If I wanted, I could've walked over to the development Zeke lived in, floated around his pool, raided his fridge full of fresh, perishable groceries—but I'd fallen in love with the girl his stepbrother Kent was dating, and she was always there. Antonia.

Her mom was a nasty gambling addict who smacked of cigarettes and hairspray, so Antonia spent most nights camped out in the Heller's basement. Seeing her was too tortuous, my adoration too revealing. In the right light, she almost looked like May. Once, we'd all been watching a horror movie in the basement, and I couldn't take my eyes off her unmade cot across the room, the unzipped gym bag spilling tank tops and jean shorts, a brush matted with her long hair. I knew she snuck upstairs to Kent after everyone in the house fell asleep, but being so close to her private things made my brain short-circuit. I felt like a camera was trained on me in close-up, and it tracked every twitch of my eyes as I watched Kent's hand on her bare leg, the frill of lace peeking from her gym bag's side pocket, the gum turning inside her mouth.

I wanted love the way May had it, at her disposal and say-so. Otherwise, it was just a nasty compulsion. It was enough to make me feel unwell.

On any other day, I would've kept a safe distance from Zeke's subdivision and been quite happy to watch my shows until dark, but it was the Fourth of July. The brood of Heller children had been unfolding chairs and balling melons since dawn. There was a party to attend. I felt uncharacteristically buoyed by the day's festive agenda. The two weeks following the dead foot ordeal had felt comparatively limp. She was still hunting for more body parts every day, a point of tension, but I was feeling magnanimous. After I was done with breakfast, I thought I might even invite her along for the festivities.

I was finishing my Pop-Tart and watching the Season 3 finale of *MAYDAY*, titled "High Seas." May's father has mysteriously resurfaced but will only reveal himself to his daughter. At first, she thinks he is being stalked by an escaped prisoner who's plastered all over the news, but she confronts the shadowy figure one night while she's taking out diner's trash. Her father is back, and May is stunned. Though it is her dream come true, she soon senses the truth within her heavy heart. Her father is not the same man.

"What is it, May? Please. You can trust me." It was the penultimate scene of the episode, in which May and her primary love interest, tackle shop boy, are tragically torn apart. He knows she is lying to him about something, but May has been sworn to secrecy by her father.

"Reed, I can't," she says. A tear coats down her perfect cheek and bursts on the dock beneath their feet. "I'm not doing this to hurt you. You have to know that. I just—"

This is the moment when Reed turns May roughly by the shoulders and kisses her to shut her up. I don't know this yet, but truly, it's the last gasp of May and Reed. She'll

choose her father's confidence over Reed's devotion, and this will mark her irrevocably. She'll start keeping more secrets, from her mother and the friendly line cook she goes to for advice. Her radio hour dies. She begins dating the rich boy with the speedboat, because he demands so little of her.

Just before May pushes Reed away for good, he tries one last time to keep her. He'll say something like—"We can handle this together," or, "You don't have to do this alone," or "Nothing you could say or do could ever make me stop loving you." But the tape cuts out and the screen empties into blue.

I dropped my Pop-Tart. The VCR was old, so I tried not to panic. The tape had been used again and again to record years of Olympic games and Academy Awards ceremonies and 60 Minutes exposés. I took the tape out, blew dust from its reels and from inside the flap of the VCR. I popped the tape back in and pressed play. Only blue.

"Keep watching," I heard.

Fawn was standing behind the couch. She was still in her pajamas, a Mickey Mouse t-shirt that belonged to our mother and went past her knees.

"What did you do?" I asked.

Fawn could barely contain her excitement. "I promise it will be your new favorite show."

The tape jumped to life again after a moment, the scorched blonde of the African savannah onscreen. A lion with a scarred face had a baby gazelle in his clutches. The gazelle still had its fluff. Its brown eyes bulged as it tried to free itself from the lion's jaws, but with another firm chomp, the calf went limp as a chew toy. The screen went

blue again. There was a flash from *MAYDAY*, the lighthouse and the bluffs, and then another cut: this time to the jungle.

A fleet of chimpanzees was screeching through the treetops. An austere British voice was mid-narration. “The red colobus monkey is a favorite meal of the chimpanzee,” he said. A colobus female dashed toward the tree canopy, an infant clutching the wiry underside of its mother. “The vitamin-rich organs of the colobus, especially the fatty liver and the brains of their young, provide chimpanzees a wealth of nutrition to supplement their diet of fruit and insects.”

The mother colobus and her infant were alone on a high tree limb, seemingly out of harm’s way, until the tape cut crudely to an advanced frame where a chimp was holding the flaccid body of the colobus mother in one hand, her baby in the other. He slurped at its broken head, like an egg he’d cracked. The jungle screamed.

“What is wrong with you?” I said to Fawn.

The tape kept playing behind me, but I wouldn’t look. How long had it taken her to compile such a gruesome reel? If I wasn’t so disgusted, I might’ve been impressed by the meticulousness required, the patience. But all I could think of was the rest of the long summer, the *MAYDAY* finale erased from my life. “I’m going to kill you,” I said.

“I told you I would get you. Now you know.”

“This? This is what you came up with? You’re such a freak.”

“But a baby water buffalo is no match for a pack of hungry hyenas,” the voice from the tape said. I felt behind me and punched the power button on the TV. The room went quiet except for the drone of the highway, the loft’s built-in white noise. I didn’t take my eyes off of Fawn, and she didn’t take her eyes off of me.



“I have all your other tapes, too,” she said. “Now who’s the freak?”

I went for her. The couch between us was a hurdle easily cleared, but Fawn was quick. She rounded past the sectional, the trunk coffee table, the tufted ottoman, while I scrambled in my socks to keep up. She sprinted into the bathroom and slammed the door. The lock turned.

“You have to come out eventually,” I yelled, battering the door with both fists so that it rattled inside its shoddy frame. “You’ll get hungry. You’ll miss the fireworks.”

“So?” she yelled through the door. “I don’t care about stupid fireworks.”

“I’ll take the dog then,” I said, surprising myself. Fawn was quiet, but I could hear the gears turning. “That’s right. I’ll take him right now and let him go. And good luck finding him. That dog is dumb as a doornail. He’ll probably wander right into traffic.”

Recently, Peanut Butter had taken up residence in my room. He’d made my dirty clothes basket his new bed and no matter how many times I tried to shoo him out, he stayed put. I was impressed with myself for using the dog’s new allegiances against her.

“Fawn,” I tried, this time softly. “Come on. Let’s trade. I won’t even tell what you did.”

The door banged from the other side, like she’d thrown a shoe at it.

“Take the dog,” she said. “I don’t care.”

I went careening through her room, yanking clothes from drawers and junk from the closet. I kicked through her pile of stuffed animals and tore the blankets from the bed. I found Fawn’s journal when I lifted her mattress. I’d skimmed through it a long time ago, and inane as its contents had been, I pocketed it for leverage and kept looking. The tapes were nowhere. I heard Fawn, muffled from the bathroom. She was laughing.

“You won’t find them in there,” she called. “You’ll never find them.”

It could’ve been that the glass figurines on top of her dresser were the closest thing at hand, but if I’m being honest, it wasn’t their proximity that made me do it. I knew she loved them more than anything, even if none of them had names. She called them all her sweeties.

I started with the Dachshund. There were more than a dozen. I smashed a few to the wood floor and they broke into chunks. The others I swept from the dresser in one swoop and let them shatter where they may. “Hear that?” I shouted. “Say goodbye to your sweeties.”

The dog was yapping in the living area. The bolts and locks on the front door were in motion. I thought Fawn was making a break for it.

“My god,” I heard. “It is absolutely brutal out there. Where is everybody?”

Fawn and I slid into the front room at the same moment. Our mother was in the doorway, an armful full of groceries obscuring her face. “Hello? I’ve got bags here.”

She had been gone the last three weeks. Safe inside her circle of fair-weather friends, our mother hoped to fling herself into a kind of fugue state. Her ex-boyfriend Billy had gotten married in the spring. Out of all the boyfriends who’d come and gone, his personality had been most detectable. I was sad to see him go. Now he’d gone off and married a very tidy woman from Connecticut. That was how my mother described her.

I waited for Fawn to make the first move. She leveled her shoulders and kinked her neck just so. With eyes clear and bright, she looked at me and smiled. “Coming,” she chirped to our mother. It was a tick I would see her do countless times thereafter, like an

athlete loosening up on the starting block, except instead of dialing in to some wellspring inside, she was dialing back out—returning herself to the innocent surface once more.

She flicked her hair over her shoulder, skipped to our mother, and took a bag from her arms. “I missed you so, so much,” she said.

My mother beamed. I could see her face now. She looked puffy, like she’d just woken up.

“Thank you, Fawny,” she said, and looked to me expectantly.

I didn’t have a trick like Fawn’s. I couldn’t slip in and out of anger and terror like an eel through the reeds. “What?” I said defensively.

My mother frowned. “A little help?” She thrust a grocery bag in my direction like a peace offering. “Sooner we unload, the sooner I can tell you some juicy neighborhood gossip.” She cocked her head. “Actually, it’s awful news. I don’t know why I said juicy. That was crass.”

“Tell me, tell me,” Fawn cheered behind the counter. I thought of the glass scattered on the floor of her bedroom, the baby animals being snapped in half by apex predators.

My mother was still wrangling the bags and her keys, waiting for my help, waiting for me to tell her I missed her, to beg for whatever news she brought home.

“I’m tired,” I said.

“Oh, come on. I just got back. Let’s all have some breakfast.”

“Yeah,” Fawn said. “Let’s have pancakes.”

“I ate,” I said. I remembered my Pop-Tart fallen somewhere between the couch cushions. “I’m heading out soon anyway.”

“Heading out to where?” my mother asked.

“To Zeke’s? The party?”

“Right,” she said, and set the groceries on the counter. “You’re planning to go then?”

“Yeah. That’s what I just said.”

“Even though your mother just walked through the door?”

“You didn’t tell us you were coming back today.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry I didn’t provide you with an appropriate amount of notice that I would be returning to the home I own.” My mother sighed and turned to Fawn. “Look like it’s just you and me then, kiddo.”

Fawn nuzzled into our mother’s side and looked past her hip to me. I rolled my eyes and moved toward my bedroom, tripping over the dog at my ankles. I hadn’t even seen him there.

“C’mon, boy,” I said, and let him follow me. His paws clicked across the hardwood, the slope of back swaying side to side like a hammock as he went. Poor Peanut Butter. Just before I closed my bedroom door to change into the outfit I’d selected for the occasion, I watched my mother and Fawn as they made a game of putting the groceries away. Fawn was pulling pasta boxes and reading the obscure Italian varieties in an over-the-top accent—*strozzapretti*, *cavatappi*, *mafaldine*. She tossed the box across the kitchen to my mother, who tucked it away. When she got home from a long trip, she always reorganized the cabinets. Every box and jar would soon come out again. I’d have to relearn where everything was.

I heard my mother say, “What a sourpuss, huh? Aren’t teenagers the worst?” She made a face and Fawn nodded emphatically, then looked over her shoulder. She seemed unsurprised to find me looking back. “I wish I didn’t have to be a teenager,” she said, and waited for my mother to laugh. She did. “You’ll still love me always, no matter what.”

My mother pried open of a pint of blueberries and popped one in her mouth. “You are my most precious gift,” she said. “Nothing you could say or do could ever make me stop loving you.”

Imagine yourself in a Cessna Skyhawk.

It’s a Sunday afternoon and the skies are clear. Your father is at the pilot’s yoke. Your mother sits beside him. Her hair is tamped down by a flowered handkerchief she wears on windy days. In the rear seat, you watch as flat farmland skims by, tidy as a book of stamps.

It’s not every day your father invites you along for a family outing in the friendly skies. It’s spring. You coast high above a field lit with tulips. When the rattle and grind of the propeller engine cuts out suddenly, you are alert to the stillness before the quiet.

In the cockpit, your father is wrestling the yoke in his hands and jabbing the control panel while your mother clings to his shoulder. The nose of the Cessna tips and a balloon rises in your stomach. The plane is your dad’s favorite thing. There are pictures of it in his office and at home.

The equator tilts, like you are being dumped out of the sky. Wind roars and you

wonder if you're plummeting too fast to see a bird go by, to sense a cloud as you pass through it. Your father is like a ragdoll in his captain's seat. Your mother has stopped screaming.

Just before, you catch a whiff of humidity—like wet grass, or a pot set to boil. The roads below are dilating. You can see the color of the houses. You can see the people driving in their cars. You can see their faces, staring straight or up into the blue.

This was the story our mother brought us. News of the neighbors. Dr. and Mrs. Wepler, and their only son.

When she told us what had happened—the prop plane downed at an airfield just outside Deerie; the Wepler family, all lost—I saw the whole scene projected onto the front wall of my brain, wobbly like home movie footage, and as intimate. Whether it was mechanics or human error, my mother didn't know. And the accident had actually happened a few months earlier. I had walked by the Wepler's house a dozen times since then, none the wiser that their Cape Cod style was sitting bereft, automatic sprinklers fizzing on every morning, porchlight glowing through the night. The estate was in limbo.

Dr. Wepler was a dentist. I'd visited him once for a filling. Mrs. Wepler was the receptionist. I didn't know what their son did, but he was a grown man and he lived at home still. I thought that was all I needed to know.

Theirs had been my favorite house on Alden Avenue. They kept their lawn lush and all those mature trees leaning in the yard made for the perfect frame. Sometimes their heavy drapes were drawn back, and I could see through the front windows to all the overstuffed furniture that'd been fashionable a decade earlier. During the winter, there was

always a lilt of smoke coming from their chimney. One year they repainted their house a charming yellow, and though I liked the color, I felt betrayed.

I liked to imagine myself in the bedroom on the second floor, the one tucked under the eaves with the lone window facing the street. If I was lucky enough to live there, that was the room I would've chosen.

I remember walking by once on the way back from Zeke's. It was autumn then, on the verge of evening, and the lights in the Wepler's backyard had been switched on. I was going at a good enough clip to see through the slats in the fenceposts, a quick-moving image like a flipbook. Mrs. Wepler was wearing a flowered handkerchief over her hair. She was in her house shoes, raking the leaves. She looked up at the sound of my footsteps on the sidewalk and held her rake still until I passed.

It was a plotless kind of memory, it was set in amber all the same. I thought of the Wepler's house as a favorite bit of B-roll in my own life. In that way, I thought, it belonged to me, to my story. And the Wepler's last moments had appeared like prophecy in my mind—even if too late. Maybe that was why the idea offered itself up to me so naturally. I knew the house was sitting empty. It just felt like mine to give away.

My bike had been stolen earlier that summer, so I set off for Zeke's house on foot. I'd seen the look on my mother's face as I left—that washed, forced-neutral expression she deployed when she wanted me to know she was working very hard to respect my autonomy, but it only ever made me feel guilty.

Fawn and my mother could have their own Fourth of July. They would climb up

to the roof to watch the whole valley spew fireworks, while they drank sparkling cider from the champagne coupes my mother inherited. I didn't want to sit around and listen to her tell an endless series of homecoming tales, recapping her city excursions and newfound wisdoms.

I especially didn't want to spend the night with Fawn, who was my mother's most fulsome audience. Fawn's trick with the video tapes was not the first transgression in what was soon to be a long line, but it was the flashiest, most calculated yet. Just imagining the two of them feeding off one other while I sat there, the designated eye-roller, was enough to make me pick up the pace. The walk was a little over two miles from the warehouse. My mother had offered me a ride in the Volvo, but I refused. Better to walk than weaken myself with her favors.

Anyway, I'd made the walk a ritual of my own. At about the halfway point, there was a particular house that had been abandoned since before I was born. Over the years I'd tracked a ravenous shrub as it swallowed the structure whole. It had the building by the throat now. A plume of bristled greenery stretched like a barrel of smoke from the flowerbed into the second story window, where it seemed to climb inside.

I passed the brick signage of Zeke's subdivision, called The Gables. The paint colors and exterior add-ons and landscaping shifted from house to house—but all the structures were variations on the same handful of prototypes. After every fifth house, the pattern regenerated.

Just as I was coming up on the last turn, a rickety Dodge Caravan went by. I wouldn't have noticed its make or model, but its brake lights flared. The van reversed



decisively and stopped beside me. There was a glare of sunlight off the van's metallic trim. I shielded my eyes as the power windows rolled down.

“Hot one,” a man said from behind the wheel.

“Yeah,” I said automatically. “Hot one.”

He looked normal enough, though I couldn't see his shoes. That was something our mother had taught us. You could tell a lot about someone by the state of their shoes. I kept walking and the man eased his foot off the brake and rolled alongside me, keeping pace. The AC was blasting inside the van.

“I live just around the corner,” the man said. “I was going to see if you needed a ride out of this heat.” He squinted up into the sky as if divining the weather. “My boys are out of town. They're down the shore for the Fourth with their mother. But you know how the beach gets.

You'd step off the boardwalk and have to sit right down. That's what I told them. Not a spot left on the sand. But hey, kids never listen.” He laughed and knocked on his temple. “Listen to your parents. That's my advice.”

He was wearing a blush pink Tommy Bahama shirt. His chest hair ruffled from the open buttons at the top, and he had a gold snake chain buried in the bramble there. It embarrassed me to have noticed.

“My friend lives just there,” I said.

“Oh yeah?” The wheels of his car munched against the blacktop in a slow, sticky roll as he followed. “It's important you be safe out here,” he said. “You don't want a ride? It's no bother.”

He had brown hair parted down the center and was wearing a tarnished silver earring. I tried to log the details I could. I thought they might wind up being useful. Maybe when his face appeared on the news.

“That’s okay,” I said and pointed. “That’s where my friend lives. The green one. They’re having a big party right now. I think they invited the whole neighborhood.”

He looked past me to the house, the Dodge’s engine ticking, and finally nodded. “Please be careful,” he said. “I know this seems like a nice neighborhood, but you must stay alert.”

“Thank you. Bye,” I said over my shoulder. I cut across the front yard of the house Zeke’s and told myself not to look back or else I might reopen the conversation.

“So long,” he called after me. “I’m just going home now. I hope you see some great fireworks tonight. Can’t wait for that finale!”

He cranked into drive and pulled away. Maybe he was going home. Maybe not. I tried to memorize the digits on his license plate, but as soon as he rounded the bend, I could only recall with confidence that first letter: V.

I told all this to Antonia while she rolled a cigarette, something I’d only ever seen my mother’s city friends do. Her dexterity was impressive, and its subtlety was somewhat unlike her, like a spider turning its web. A vice assembled on the fly. She lit it up and blew the smoke from the Heller’s bathroom window, which was covered by a blue tarp. There was exposed subfloor and loose wiring all around. The upstairs master bath was mid-renovation. Antonia was sitting on the decommissioned toilet that had yet to be carted away.

“My mom’s renovating the kitchen,” she said. “She said buyers love modern kitchens. We’re trying to sell.” They would never sell.

I remember she was wearing a khaki bandana around her neck because it reminded me of Jane Goodall. A week before, I’d taken down the hardcover of *In the Shadow of Man* from my mother’s tallest shelf. I thought Antonia had the same aquiline nose, the same slippery hair. Inside the front cover, I’d found my father’s name scribbled in red ink. Ulises Estrada.

“In my dream kitchen, I’m going to have one of those built-in breakfast nooks? All cushioned and cozy, next to a big bay window where you can read the paper or whatever. I also want an outdoor kitchen. With a pool. And a tiki bar.” I was going to explain what I wanted in my dream kitchen, but Antonia remembered the man in the van again. “Wait a second, what an actual creep,” she said. “Oh my god. Do you think he’s still out there?”

“I don’t know. He could be.”

She plucked an errant tab of tobacco from her tongue and flicked it out of the window. “I hate predators,” she said. “Don’t you think someone should do something?”

“I don’t even know the plate numbers, or how we’d find him.”

Antonia peeked past the tarped window. “Don’t you have a little sister? You should care that this guy is out there. I care. He can’t just go around telling girls to get in his van. His *van*.”

Outside, Zeke and Kent were dumping ice into coolers while their mother Nance directed. A half dozen folding tables were arranged around the yard, and each had been decorated in red, white, and blue. The chairs had been sashed. Nance had even erected

sculptural fruit centerpieces, with pineapple shooting stars and the letters U-S-A stamped from watermelon—all jabbed into place with sparklers. The result was lopsided and attracted ants, but the Fourth of July was an event of Olympic proportions to the Hellers. Nance burst into tears each time the national anthem played, and there was randomized marching band music blasting from the outdoor speakers. Three different renditions of “76 Trombones” had already gone by.

“You’re right,” I lied. “We should do something.”

In the heat, smoke streamed from Antonia’s cigarette. She waved the cloud toward the open window, but it was all escaping upwards, hovering. The bathroom would probably stink. I worried someone would smell it and find us where we shouldn’t be.

With her free hand, Antonia picked up a lock of her hair and showed it to me.

“See?” she said. “I can’t stop the split ends. The shampoo here sucks. Okay. Let me finish this cig and we’ll go. I’m getting a Coke first, though.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll get the boys, and then, if this sicko lives in the neighborhood, we’ll find him.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll find him.”

There were flecks of ash in the folds of her bandana. I didn’t know if it was worth saying anything. Normally, Kent or Zeke or some other roving brother was in the mix, making noise I couldn’t compete with. But all the Hellers were in management mode. It was what I dreamed and feared. Just us two. I leaned against one of the unfinished walls. Above Antonia’s head, there were three test swatches of blue paint, going light to lighter, but just barely. Each one was labeled in pencil. *Robin’s Breath. Sunday Celebrity. Middle*

*Distance.* I recognized Nance's handwriting from all the lists tacked on the fridge, the scrawl of *Happy Birthday Zeke!* across a sheet cake. I liked Sunday Celebrity best.

Antonia followed my eyes.

"Robin's Breath," she said. "Definitely."

"Definitely."

"Can I tell you something?" she asked. She ached beyond the tarp, but it did nothing. It was just a tic. A spigot was jutting into my hip and I pretended not to care. I was standing at the angle I believed most flattering. "Of course," I said.

"I think Nance hates me."

"What? Why?"

She sighed. "We don't see eye to eye, I guess. And why should we? We're completely different people."

"Did you have a fight?"

"It's all in her body language," she said. "I think she's going to kick me out. And you know what? Whatever. I don't think I could last another week here if you paid me. Every time someone flushes the toilet I hear their shit surfing by my head. And Kent? I don't know. I feel like I have no idea what goes on inside his head. Sometimes he says things that make me want to punch him in the face."

Her cigarette was almost through. I was careful to mute any heightened interest from my voice as I asked, "What's going on between you two?"

Antonia laughed, and I stayed very still.

"Kent and me? It's complicated." She stubbed her cigarette out on the lid of a

paint can and tossed it out the window before I could ask if that was a good idea. “Isn’t it always though?”

On TV, people described things this way all the time, especially when it came to romantic prospects, or telling the whole truth. “Complicated,” I echoed. “Always.”

“Have you ever noticed how this house smells like raw beef? Raw beef in a men’s locker room. Ha. At least I won’t miss that.” Antonia reached out her long leg and nudged my thigh with the tip of her sneaker. “It’s nice to have you around to talk to,” she said. “Thank god.”

The screen door downstairs whooshed open. There were stomps through the kitchen, and we heard Kent call for Antonia, then Zeke called for me. I could sense the moment closing up before me. I wanted to say something memorable to bookend the conversation, but I had nothing.

“Well, if you know any other places to crash—I’m looking,” she said. “Always looking.”

She gazed out the window again. Behind her, the tarp flapped and I caught a glimpse of another two Heller boys across the yard, lighting baby firecrackers and batting them at each other with badminton rackets. Antonia was inspecting the tips of her hair again and frowning.

Kent couldn’t appreciate Antonia, I thought. She and I were more alike. The Hellers drank a glass of milk with every meal. Their house was the #3 Colonial

Style in The Gables’ masterplan. Kent scratched himself in public like it was a tic and liked to insert himself into conversations to play devil’s advocate, though he never had anything nuanced to say. It occurred to me that I could offer what he could not.

I moved without thinking then. The spigot left a dent in my hip and I rubbed the skin below my t-shirt as I stood opposite Antonia, the window between us.

She looked up at me and I took a step closer, closer than I needed to be. Carefully, and slowly as I could make myself, I used the tip of my finger to dab the flecks of ash from her bandana. One flake at a time. Concentrating on the task so that time ground to a halt. “You had a little something,” I said, and realized she was blushing.

Who was I in that moment? I can’t recall. Someone from TV. Someone I invented for myself. Did it matter? I knew what to do. I thought of the Weppers’ house on Alder Avenue left empty, the little bedroom on the second floor I had never entered, but felt I could offer up as my own. All the other pieces would sort themselves. I believed that.

I told her: “I know a place you can go.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

On the train back to Deerie, I picture the version of Fawn I saw last.

We were in West Virginia, living with our father then. She was holding his hand, which she never did, and they were waving goodbye to me from the top of his long gravel driveway. I was headed back to Veld for my second stint, courtesy of Fawn and my father, a newly allied force. I remember Fawn squeezed her eyes extra tight so that tears coursed down her cheeks. It was a shrewd performance. The cherry on top of the whole charade.

Even then, a part of me understood her tears meant nothing. Another part of me, buried and beyond my control, held out the tiniest glimmer of hope. I knew who my sister could be. I'd been bitten by her razor-sharp toddler teeth. I was there when she learned to high-five, and use the toilet, and sit through a whole movie without getting bored. She had favorite jokes she'd make me tell over and over again, and then she'd tell them right back to me as if they were brand new. When she sleepwalked in circles, trapped in her bedroom and searching for the door—mine was the name she called in the dark, and I went to her always. No one else knew what it was like to live inside our loft. No one else knew the scalding intensity and resentment of our mother's love. The chaos everywhere, like space junk orbiting our lives. That's why I chanced to wonder if she might've meant those tears at the top of the driveway—even if just a little bit, even if she didn't know it.

I'd seen it at Veld. Plenty of troubled children mellow out, or get medicated, or



find some wild outlet that siphons away their hostility toward the softer, human world—via motorcycle racing, extreme fitness, meditation, watercolors. A lid for every boiling pot. Whatever chemical imbalance derailed their young lives was somehow neutralized, and they were returned to the world rehabilitated.

One girl from Veld used to terrorize the staff and students so obscenely that they locked her away on the solitary floor. We only ever saw her for special assemblies, or through the window when they let her out for solo walks along the grounds. Eventually, she was fed the right cocktail of medications, paired with a counselor she liked, and now she works at a non-profit crisis hotline in the city. We met for drinks when I moved there. She looked well. She reflected on her time at Veld with fondness. “It was difficult, really touch-and-go for a long while,” she said, “but they helped me pull through.”

Did a light inside toggle on and off? And if so, who controlled the switch? I felt at the mercy of some cellular agenda. I didn't think there was anything wrong with me, but what if some exercise or therapeutic session or trauma tripped a wire and suddenly I became a waking nightmare. Or, worse even, I became well when I thought I already was.

Fawn is still young, I think, and scan the train car for girls who could be her, a teenager looking to get lost in the city for the day. Right now, she could be starting her spring semester at college, or moving out of the loft, hunting for an apartment of her own to split with friends. Maybe she would follow in our parents' footsteps. She could get a head start with the money I owe her, become a connector of artists, movers and shakers. A social butterfly, like our mother. Or, she could be a rebel in an imported rock band, a woman of science, a veterinarian—as our father once was. She has the aptitude. What

had Victor said about her? She looked like she knew what she was doing. Why shouldn't it be possible? After all, we are not so different. Nature and nurture had their way with the both of us.

There are thirteen text messages waiting from Rochelle. She has invited her nemesis for dinner. She writes: *Can you pull something together last minute? Don't say yes unless you're sure.* It's framed as a question, but that's not what it is. I imagine how she might react if said something like no, it wasn't a good time, maybe some other night. Impossible.

I write: *Of course. Don't worry.*

She responds immediately. *Why didn't you answer? Where are you?* She finishes with a classic. *I'm always going to worry, but I know I can trust you. Kisses.*

I thought Rochelle and I might hit a bump around the holidays. After all, I had turned up just a few weeks before Christmas. I thought the whole experiment might soon be over, that I'd be tossed out with the advent of the New Year, but a week before the holiday, she finally dropped a hint. She would be alone this year—and what was I up to?

On Christmas morning, we slept in and woke up to snow. I cooked omelets. We drank French press coffee and marveled at the highway, which had transformed overnight into a sheath of white, near-trackless, almost camouflaged inside the bleached vista we saw from the living room window. Fawn's bedroom window. We put on our good snow boots, mine fresh from their box, and went out walking along the unplowed pedestrian path at the edge of town. The woods were snow-tipped, all heavy boughs, and the deer were out in force to enjoy the quiet while Deerie celebrated indoors. We passed a few

grueling joggers and spotted tracks from cross-county skiers who'd come and gone, but otherwise the world was quiet.

Rochelle and I never spent much quiet time together. She liked a steady diet of anecdotes and there were two genres she preferred: light and funny fare that kept her entertained, like a breezy infomercial, or stories of someone else's misfortune. She liked the latter for the same reason she liked the mini fashion shows I put on for her. I'd put together an outfit from my old wardrobe and model it for her inspection. In front of her full-length mirror, she would circle me like a master tailor, tugging a sleeve or fiddling with a collar, before she declared exactly what would make the outfit right, which was another way of saying I'd done it wrong. She liked to spitball about the adversities of others and how she would've avoided the same traps.

Once, I told her Victor's professional woes, though I mentioned him in name. I told her about an old friend who'd been fired from his job a while ago because he wasn't a *team player*. That's what the boss at his start-up had told him. Rochelle listened respectfully, then said, "He probably deserved it. Attitude is everything. If he wanted results, he should've been more vocal and demonstrated his value. People who don't see that aren't winners. It's like natural selection."

Amidst the professional buzzwords, I heard a conclusion I took issue with: that Victor should've said *Thank You, More Please* while he worked his ass off for peanuts and waited for stock options that never came. At the restaurant, I said thank you so many times in a day that it began escaping my mouth for no good reason, at all the wrong venues. Sidestepping someone on the street, I'd say thank you instead of excuse me. At the bar, a sloppy college guy spilled his drink down my back and when he slurred a sorry,

and I said thank you—twice. I dropped a dollar bill in the hat of an older woman who was puppeteering in the park. She said thank you. I said thank you. We chirped the phrase back and forth to each other until I forced myself to walk away. Even if I disagreed with Rochelle, I never took issue with her appraisals. It wasn't my job.

Out on the footpath, the cold was welcome. Any escape from the talking walls of the loft had become a relief, and at least the weather reminded of what was real and still beyond my control, like the snowstorm that had rippled across the doppler. I hated the route we walked. We passed by old sights that had no business in my present. The lot where the Weplers' house used to stand, or the stretch where a rusty fence had once divided Deerie proper with the telecom company's land, its infinite row of high-tension towers connecting the world on a string.

It was on that particular section of fenceline that Zeke had gotten strung up and bled out. It happened extraordinarily fast. Fast enough that he didn't even know what was happening to him, and neither did I. It was pitch-black that night and unusually brisk for the end of summer. I heard him trip while he climbed the fence, but I just laughed. I thought he was being clumsy. I couldn't see the life draining away from him as he struggled upside-down, his femoral artery perfectly nicked by galvanized steel.

I looked it up. It would've taken three or four minutes before he went into cardiac arrest from all blood loss. This time frame didn't compute. To me, it seemed only a few-second tussle before the cold quiet. That was how I knew he was gone. When the world within the clearing resettled, there was no breathing but mine. And though I heard the inhuman commotion of the woods and the traffic—and that fainter sound: the buttons on his jacket brushing against the metal fence, like the lightest tinkling of a bell—I

understood I'd been left alone. If I waited for the sunrise soon coming, I would see what I didn't want to see. I turned and ran.

All that wreckage has been cleared away and beautified since, but somehow, I find this more disturbing. There are no indications of what was. Mothers and fathers and children run the loop none the wiser. And the chain-link fence that's long gone was probably sold for scrap, or dumped in a landfill, the fibers and trace DNA and young blood dried to scales, all clinging alongside the rust and rot. As we walk by, I keep a straight face, and nod along while Rochelle pried into personal territory for the first time.

I was surprised she'd taken an interest all the sudden. We were passing by the drinking fountains and trail maps, the pet waste bin with its pictorial reprimands. She asked about my parents, if I had any siblings. Alarm bells were ringing in my head. I turned the question around easily and without any additional prompting she launched into the saga of her three younger sisters, who are all married with children and celebrate the holidays back home in Michigan with their parents. No one wanted to brave a plane ride to see her, Rochelle said.

"It's about the principle. I won't get on a plane if they won't get on a plane. And why should I? Just because I haven't made children the center of my life. But no one in my family knows how to compromise. That's the way it is, the way it's always been."

Sometimes, Rochelle receives a text or a voicemail or an ornate greeting card and will gripe away the rest of the evening, nursing old wounds. When she is in those moods, I know to shut up and nod along. Or there are other recourses I can take—draw a bath, pour a drink, take her to the bedroom. I move down the list until I sense a shift, the spotlight of her affections finding me again. After she finished her family spiel, it was my

turn. “You can’t be an orphan,” she reasoned.

“My father passed away a few years ago,” I told her. That part is true. “And I never really knew my mother,” I said, which was almost a lie. “And I’m actually an only child, so, I’m not that interesting. The holidays are always pretty quiet. I don’t mind.”

“You didn’t know your mother?”

“Well, we weren’t close.” I said. Rochelle seemed pacified by this adjustment. Better to have relationships run cold than to carry baggage. We walked home in quiet and I keep my eyes trained ahead the whole way.

The rest of Christmas Day was spent lounging. I cooked a fabulous meal. We drank too much of her best wine. That night, I toed the edge, peering down into what’s waiting for me if Rochelle ever realizes who I really am and has the locks changed, returns me to my prior life, which I am not even sure I want anymore, or if it can even go on existing the way it was.

We made a bed of pillows and blankets on the floor before her fireplace. The mantle recedes from the eye and the hearth is composed of flat, untextured concrete poured into a perfect mold. California Modern Minimalist, she calls it. I could feel the heat of the fire on my cheeks, my shins. Shadows flickered across Rochelle’s face and gathered in the roots of her dyed blonde hair. It’s Christmas, I told myself, and poured another glass. It had been a long year.

With the tip of my finger, I traced Rochelle’s chin and lips and didn’t notice the curiosity sparking in her eyes. “You know, I never asked,” she said, “but sometimes I can see it—like now, in just the right light.”

“What?” I asked, and propped myself up. My elbow slipped out from under me

and I caught myself just barely. I must be careful, I told myself. Sloppy is not neutral. Sloppy is not quick on her feet. Sloppy has no silver tongue.

“You kind of look—I don’t know, I don’t know.” She cocked her head, like she does when she is looking at her own reflection. “What *are* you?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like,” she took my chin between her thumb and forefinger and turned my head to profile. “You have this look about you sometimes, like you aren’t really from here.”

“From where?”

Rochelle sighed and clacked her glass of wine down on the concrete hearth. Usually, I won’t ask clarifying questions unless I know Rochelle wants to teach me something. She thought I was being uncooperative, obtuse. “I’m from around here,” I shrugged. “I grew up in the city.”

“That’s not it,” she said, and pursed her lips a moment while she thought. “I had a friend in elementary school named Martha? And I always thought she looked totally average, but then one day she invited me over for a playdate, and I go over there, and her mother is a nice blonde, blue-eyed lady, but her father is the darkest of the dark. Couldn’t believe it. Jet black, basically. He came over from the U.K., but he wasn’t really from there. Do you see what I’m saying?”

“I think so.”

“I have nothing against it. I just find it surprising when you can’t tell and then somebody turns their chin and suddenly, you know—you see it. There’s a clue right there.”

“Oh. Maybe it’s because I have some French-Canadian blood. A little Sicilian, too,” I told her. “Sometimes people think it makes me look exotic. Like I’m from Europe.”

I could tell I supplied an acceptable answer.

“French-Canadian,” she muses. “Like from Quebec?”

It’s not that I think Rochelle would’ve run screaming from the truth necessarily—the truth being that after my father came over from Puerto Rico and my mother inherited her warehouse money, they ran face-first into each other and out of their unlikely, cross-cultural union, I appeared: a half-batch baby, mixed up in more ways than one. I just know what Rochelle wants. I know it the way I know the building we’re living in.

We brushed our teeth before bed, spitting out gory swill from the red wine we’d been draining all night long. The vanity bulbs in the marbled bath were blindingly bright, like they’d pop at any moment. They smeared together into a single powerful beam, a neon sign whose dead center I stared into. I blinked slowly and did what I always do when I’m completing some mundane task inside the loft. I thought about its former blueprint, the old layout I know by feel and muscle memory.

The bathroom replaced the library nook, and the space that used to be there lifted forward and toward me, like a hologram. I looked deeper at myself inside the light of the mirror. There was toothpaste ringing my mouth. Rochelle was beside me, her own toothbrush wedged in her molars as she leaned heavily on the vanity for balance. If I reached high enough, if I strained for the upper right corner—I knew exactly which library shelf I’d be reaching for. It was where my mother kept the books she did not like to open or remember. Some were novels, like the cowboy westerns or detective books



written in Spanish. Others were oddly specific anatomy tomes that diagramed every organ and muscle and ligature of a quarter horse. The books belonged to my father. French Canadian, I laughed. For the first time, I thought about going back to Queens.

Rochelle slipped against the vanity and nearly nailed her chin on the marble. It was time for bed. I spat into the sink again and wobbled over, helped her up by the elbows and into bed. I left her with glass of water and two ibuprofens. She sank into the sheets and began to snore.

I had the house to myself for the rest of the night, and I decided to celebrate the holiday any which way I pleased, as if the loft were mine and mine alone. In this fantasy, it had never changed hands, and the old blueprint was the only blueprint. I wandered around drunk, feeling the walls, listening for music that wasn't there. I snapped one of Rochelle's sleeping pills in half and chewed it up, hoping for relief. I wanted to call someone. I thought of the night on the platform, my first return to Deerie and the impulse to dial. Who had I wanted to call? My mother had exiled herself to Canada. My father was dead. Victor only befriended the new me. All I had left was Fawn. I wanted to hear her voice, if for no other reason than to see how it had changed.

When the sleeping pill didn't work, I took another and uncorked the bottle we'd put away earlier. I carried it around with me as I moved from window to window, looking at myself, looking through. I was wishing for someone on the other side, down in the service alley or on the sidewalk, on the highway belt watching through high-powered binoculars. But not everyone gets so lucky, I thought. Not everyone has someone like me.

Rochelle's nemesis arrives for dinner. They've been paired together for an

upcoming project, and Rochelle wants the upper hand.

“Smart move, babe,” I told her.

She nodded, like she already knew that, and said, “I need to get the lay of the land.”

I make branzino, and everyone loves it. Conversation flows. I am in Rochelle’s corner, performing above class. She squeezes my thigh under the table. We get to talking about town.

“We miss you in the city, Rochelle,” her nemesis says. Her name is JoAnn. There is the tiniest sprig of parsley stuck between her bottom teeth, but I can only catch a flash of it when she says words that move her lips a certain way—like *seriously* and *feeling*. As in, “I *seriously* can’t believe you decided to move up here to this quaint little village, Rochelle. I can’t imagine what kind of *feeling* came over you to pick up and move like that.” This is what JoAnn the nemesis has to say. “Won’t you ever move back to the city with the rest of us?”

Rochelle tells the table she wanted a different type of life. “But you know I’ll always be a small-town girl at heart,” she says. We all clink glasses and laugh.

I know there are other reasons she took her good money and went to the new suburbs. She was hoping to meet someone. Perhaps a smaller pond to fish from—a more family-oriented atmosphere with thirty-somethings strolling everywhere, squeezing juice and hiking—might help her meet her the right match. Dating in the city was harder. I knew from experience. Everyone was holding out for something better, and either something better came along, or they burnt out and bought a spacious house in the tri-state area for pennies on the NYC dollar. Rochelle’s plan wasn’t a bad one, but she is a

highly specific breed. Her move to Deerie wasn't yielding the results she wanted. Not until me.

Conversation is beginning to die down, so JoAnn admires the loft. "What I'd give for a kitchen like that," she says. It sounds like she's being self-deprecating, but the comment implicates Rochelle in some other way. "All that space. Rochelle. Have you learned to cook?"

JoAnn has asked only a few cordial questions of me, but she soon arrives at a new one. "What do you think of it here?"

I see the parsley has come loose and is now floating around on her tongue. "It's lovely," I say. "Plenty to love here." I give Rochelle a purposeful, fleeting look.

JoAnn smooths a wrinkle in the tablecloth. "But is it home?" she asks.

I hem and haw and launch into what I think will be a fun, mindless anecdote about Deerie. I even preface it by saying that the grocer down the street had told me the details—and wasn't it so funny, so fascinating the tidbits you stumble upon when you live somewhere with history? I tell them about an oddball case back in the early 2000s, when a city mobster's flunky took a joy ride north with a pick-up truck full of body parts. He got loaded on pills and booze, then unloaded his cargo off the side of the highway, the very one our guest could see through the window in the living room.

"This idiot is flying upstate and he's tossing pieces left and right, thinking its marshland down here—because he can't see the lights," I say. "They all blend in on the road, and he's hammered to high hell." I'm thinking this is a great story, something absurd to shock and amuse. A little bit of true crime is a thrill, and anyway, it had happened more than a decade ago.

Rochelle's hand flicks away from my thigh. I slow down enough to realize that neither are laughing. JoAnn steals a lurid glance at Rochelle, of all people. Instead of backtracking, I press on in the wrong direction. I can't stop.

"Some bits were so decomposed that they couldn't make sense of what was what," I say. "Did this guy even have a face left? Not likely." More and more details spew this way and that—which body parts they found, in which order, down to the sternum that surfaced in the retention pond under the highway. "They never found his genitals, not ever," I say. "I mean, I guess if they tortured him first, they might've—you know—taken the liberty to do a little impromptu slice and dice. Teach the next guy a lesson, right? They could've tossed those precious bits away in the city, at least, while they were still going to town on the guy. Toss the bits in a tub of acid? Toss the bits down the garbage disposal? As long as they're gone in the end, who cares where the family jewels end up."

Rochelle is tipping the bottle of Lambrusco for herself and JoAnn. The angle is extreme and the bottle makes a little *glug, glug, glug* sound as it decants rapidly. Some sloshes onto her good tablecloth and I think I'm being kind, distracting from her error by forging on, telling them about the little girl who found a foot with no toes. The mob flunky had been careful enough to worry about prints of all kinds, I say, but not careful enough to look where he was dumping his victim. "Nasty surprise for a little girl, isn't it? That's enough to scar her for life."

Rochelle tries to change the subject, but if I can finish my story, I think I can save it. I tell them they caught the guy before I remember he was shanked in prison. I switch gears then, pour more wine though there is little room left in their glasses. I ask new

questions in quick succession, like a timer is about to run out. I rattle off the topics I know are safe and self-involved. “Tell me about work,” I say to JoAnn. Tell me about your boss. The commute. Your fitness regimen. Your New Year’s resolutions. Your hairstylist. Your car. The pants you’re wearing. Control of the moment is already beyond me.

We get up from the table. Rochelle whisks away my wine glass when our guest turns her back. I offer to do the dishes in the kitchen and am mercifully released. Soon, I hear laughter trilling from the other room while I’m up to my elbows in suds. I think I hear the word sorry, but I can’t tell who is saying it.

Everything had been going over just fine. What a catch, JoAnn had probably been thinking. How lucky for Rochelle to find someone so much younger, but so erudite, magnetic, an unconventional ingénue. The perfect kind of handsome a pretty girl should be. Above all: devoted. She might’ve wanted one of me for herself.

Later that night, I am getting ready for bed while Rochelle is paging through work papers on the luxe chaise in the corner of her bedroom. I go into the bathroom, shut the door, and tell the story again. I whisper it into the mirror glass, trying to match all my earlier inflections while I look and see which notes were out of tune. I’m ashamed it’s so obvious. Far too much detail. Too much excitement. Too much bitterness when I talk about the town that disappears under the highway, how easy it is to overlook.

When I get to the part about the foot and the little girl who finds it—another mistake. They had asked: “What happened to her?”

“Who cares?” I’d said, flippant as a ticket-taker, and moved on to tell the bit about the other rancid elbow found that August. Where had my head gone?

I peak into the bedroom and Rochelle is sitting there, shadowed by the lamplight. She has put down her papers and is staring at me. “Bedtime,” she says.

“Just a sec.”

I gargle until my throat burns. I dawdle with the potions and serums and sprays arranged inside the medicine cabinet. There are at least half a dozen orange pill bottles, no names or labels. I usually make it a point not to go poking around, but I pop a lid and peek inside a bottle.

The capsules are the size of nickels. Whatever gift it gives must be powerful.

When I finally slip into bed beside Rochelle, the lights are off. Her back is to me.

“On your bedside,” Rochelle mumbles into her pillow. “I put them there for you.”

I turn over and feel around for what she has left. Vitamins. Potent as seeds.

“More?” I say to her.

“It’s the New Year now,” she says. “Good to begin on the right foot.”

If she’s making a joke, I can’t tell. Instead, I scoop all four of the capsules into my palm, throw them back into my throat and swallow dry, almost gagging.

“I love you,” I say to the dark, to the ceiling, to the room that used to be mine.

Rochelle sighs into the designer foam pillow she’d bought on special order. One for her and one for me. She pats my shoulder.

“Okay. Go to sleep now,” she says, and tells me goodnight.

## CHAPTER SIX

The ferry was called The Chip, and we were taking it to Nova Scotia.

Before Veld, the furthest from home I'd gone was Philadelphia's Main Line, when my mother fired up the Volvo and took us to see our grandfather on his deathbed. I thought he looked like Frank Sinatra. After, we went home and I listened to "One for My Baby (One for the Road)" on repeat. Now we were off to Canada.

The Chip had three decks: the bottom for cars, the top for people, and the middle for slot machines. It was my dream to pull the lever, but I was only thirteen. Fawn and I went out on the observation deck and watched the sea slink by. I had been to the ocean, but never on it.

"Don't get so close," I told Fawn. She had her feet up on the metal railing and was teetering over the edge for the best view of the water.

"Would I die if I fell?" she asked.

"You'd probably get sucked underneath by the propellers, like those people in *Titanic*."

"I can swim better than that."

"It's not like a swimming pool."

"Would you jump in to save me?"

"What good would that do?"

We were visiting my mother's college roommate, who lived in a primitive inland cabin with her two children. I asked if we would have our own rooms and my mother scoffed. "That's not the way they live," she said. The whole structure was rough-hewn and wide open, with two exposed sleeping lofts you climbed into by ladder.

That was a detail Fawn could appreciate. "Like a pirate ship," she'd said.

She was so little. Half her teeth were missing. Her light hair had been cut only a few times her whole life, and it mousetailed down her back in tangles.

I glanced through the speckled windows of the ferry's main compartment, looking for my mother. She'd brought with her a dime store romance novel and was nearly halfway through. Love was on the brain. She had just met Billy. Fawn was spitting over the railing.

The Chip docked in Yarmouth. Dusk powdered the sky and we drove the Volvo another hour, until the ocean disappeared and we turned onto a lonely road, on which heavy-duty trucks revved thirty miles above the speed limit and passed us even if it meant breaking the double-yellow of the two-lane. We were coasting by a whole lot of nothing. The woods on either side were so dense it was like two curtains pulled close. No telling what was in there, I thought.

What did I know about the world outdoors? I hadn't yet climbed mountains, or toed ridges, or hacked through the ice of a creekbed for fresh water. I thought of bugs and mud. That's what nature looked like to me. And though she'd spent a year of her life hitchhiking across the country, eschewing her good breeding to live rough—I knew my mother felt the same about the world alfresco. Dirty.

Since leaving Deerie, she had nibbled her fingernails to the quick. She kept



suckling the blood from her ripped cuticles, and when I fooled with the radio, she batted my hand away. I didn't understand why we were going north. I'd been forcibly introduced to dozens of my mother's friends. There were a few mainstays who visited the loft and sent birthday cards, the same familiar faces we met for lunch when we went into the city for a show. We never traveled for anyone. I'd never heard of this Candace.

I asked my mother, "Do you like her? Are you close?"

"I've known her for years," she said.

"But is she nice? Are you good friends?"

"She's a very competent woman."

"Okay."

"What do you want me to say? Candace has always been a very reliable friend to me. You know, I used to be very different. I had a very strange idea of fun, I can tell you that. But if I was ever in a jam, if I know she would be there for me. No questions asked. I'd call *her*."

"Mom."

She glanced into the rearview mirror. Fawn was dead asleep in the backseat.

"Okay," she said. "She's not my favorite. But who cares. Also, I think she might be in love with me."

"What?"

She jabbed the radio button and static blared. "You know not to repeat that," she said, fumbling with dial until she found a station blaring Tammy Wynette. "Obviously."

When my mother dropped out of college to hitchhike across the country, it was

1974. My grandmother was the one who let her off near the highway ramp. This was not a show of support. My mother slammed the door of the station wagon, waved one last time through the window, and started walking with her thumb pointing west, no other idea in her head.

She moved along the shoulder for about an hour with no luck. There were a few false alarms. Drivers would slow down to chuck trash, or shout at her, though the barreling traffic smeared their expletives into unintelligible noise. She flipped them off, only for a half-second, in case they pulled over and made sure they were heard.

Along a jagged route, my mother worked her way south and took anonymous gigs as she went. She moved on to the next place when she had enough cash to give her confidence. Now and again, she sent letters to her parents with a sanitized version of her travels. They wouldn't, and couldn't, write back. Even she didn't know where she was headed next. There was some comfort in that fact. She wondered how they were keeping up appearances. Instead of attending Princeton's lectures and eating club formals, their little girl was diving dumpsters outside of grocery stores, slurping cold marinara from expired jars. Instead of bringing the new boyfriend home for holiday ham, she cowered in ditches when rural men stalked the roadside. They'd stand in the bed of slow-rolling pickups and fire their guns into the sky and the brush. Hippie Hunting.

She had a fling in Georgia and took the graveyard shift at a twenty-four-hour waffle house. When a coked-up trucker refused to pay his bill, she pulled a butter knife and held it to the man's neck, told him to cough it up. He punched her in the face and walked out. Her nose was broken, but her vanity was intact—which meant she needed more money if she didn't want to live with a bent beak. Suddenly her boyfriend wanted

nothing to do with her. Who could she call? All her bridges had been burned with the Ivy League set, after she got drunk at her own going-away party and called them all narcs. But her old roommate from freshman year picked up the phone. Candace wasn't even my mother's closest friend. She was just a number my mother knew, a voice willing to listen.

When Candace wired the money to fix my mother's nose, she also floated a caveat. If my mother agreed to call from each place she landed, Candace would send along another modest cash injection. The whole reason my mother started hitching was to escape the world of invisible strings, but money was money, and anyway, Candace let her talk about herself the whole time.

She was always greedy for stories about the drivers who picked her up, the places she slept.

"I can't wait until you get back," Candace told her. My mother was somewhere in New Mexico by then, looking for her next ride. She kept it to herself, but she had no plans to return.

Still, there were moments when she thought seriously about going home. When faceless men followed her, or her stomach burned with her hunger, or she was forced to toss dirt and leaves over her body, to go belly-down in the mud and camouflage herself from the Hippie Hunters—she would've bought the next bus ticket back to Philadelphia. No question. But other girls who hitched had worse stories, she knew. Toughen up, she told herself.

She only had a pocket knife for protection, and it was no more than a few inches long, dull as the lip of a pan. While one hand beckoned for rides, the other gripped the blade. But if something were to happen, what would she really do with it? Throw it at the

perpetrator's face? Prick them to death? It was more a good luck charm than anything. By Missouri she'd copped a silver chain from a thrift store and hung the knife around her neck, hidden beneath her shirt, always within reach.

Later, she would teach us how to determine if you were in the presence of a true crazy person. Check their shoes, she said. And then their eyes. "There's obvious-crazy," she said, "and there's sneaky-crazy. It can be hard to tell the difference sometimes. And it's usually the sneaky-crazy that's worse—because you can't be sure how to play it, or you might not notice until it's too late."

The man who took her to San Francisco had a VW Westfalia Camper Van, gleaming new, and she couldn't believe her luck. They stopped off for dinner and he bought her anything she wanted off the menu. It had been a long week of jerky. She ordered a bowl of soup, a hamburger with a runny egg on it, and a chocolate milkshake, peach pie for dessert. At first, she treaded lightly in case he was floating this friendliness in exchange for something she was not willing to give. But he asked genuine questions of her and was kind to the waitress and busboy.

He was an ex-realtor from Indiana. He was trying on a new life, just like her.

They talked about what San Francisco was going to do for them. The man planned to get himself a dog. What else did he need? If he wanted protection, if he ever got lonely, he would have his own furry companion in the Golden City. My mother couldn't argue with that. She wanted the same things. To be safe. To no longer walk alone.

Like clockwork, she called Candace from a rest stop in Fresno and gave her new instructions on where to send her payout. Everything stunk like dirt and shit, she relayed,

but that wasn't unique. Candace listened attentively, but when my mother mentioned her new friend with the VW van, Candace cleared her throat.

"Who is this guy?" she asked.

"Oh, you know," my mother said. "You see all kinds of faces out here."

"Do you like him?"

"Sure."

"No, I mean—in *that* way. Do you *like* him?"

My mother looked across the lot. The man was stretching his calf against the rear bumper of his bus. He caught her eye and waved. He looked like a townie, though from where she couldn't say

"He's not my type," she said.

"Do you have a type?"

"Who doesn't?" Candace was possessive, but she was thousands of miles away. My mother could put up with a little prying if it meant she had funds. She didn't like going without shampoo and conditioner for too long. If she rationed Candace's allowance for a few weeks at a time, she sometimes sprung for a highway motel, ordered a pizza, did her nails.

"Candace, I've got to go."

"Already?"

"Well, what're you doing over there? Aren't you busy?"

Candace sighed. "I'm supposed to be studying, but what's the point?"

"Okay. Isn't that why you're there?"

"Yes," Candace said quickly, then wavered. "I had a new idea though."

“Yeah? Okay. Hurry up and tell me.” The man with the VW was doing jumping jacks in place. He was a good ride. She didn’t want to lose him.

“I was thinking you’re due a visitor. I could come out to San Fran for the summer.”

“No one calls it San Fran.”

“Whatever they call it then. I thought I might come see it for myself.”

“Interesting,” my mother said. Sometimes she forgot what Candace looked like. A few years had passed since they shared their shoebox dorm room in Forbes College. When Candace spoke, my mother pictures the same eighteen-year-old who wore a headband every day, who’d been on a lifelong diet and rationed her snacks. Candace never seemed to leave their room. Every time my mother returned from a house party on the Street, or from Saturday night trips into the city to go dancing, Candace was awake, sitting there cross-legged on top of her comforter.

“I’d love for you to come out,” my mother said. “We’ll chat about it soon.”

She figured once she was in San Francisco, she would settle down for a while, find a job, a place to live. She wouldn’t need Candace the Benefactor anymore. Maybe this would even be the last time they spoke. She hoped.

The next day was my mother’s last day of hitching. She and the man with the bus were in the last eight-hour stretch when he offered her the thin mattress in back. She tried to read his face, but the sunset was ahead of them, all yellows and golds. The view made her sensitive and trusting. She climbed in the back and used her pack as a pillow. As she drifted off, she believed she would wake up arrived. When she opened her eyes again, it was his she saw.

They were nose to nose, his breath in her mouth. The man was sprawled out beside her on the mattress, one leg hooked high and tight between hers. He was brushing his hand over her hair, saying *shh, shh*, as if to soothe her, though she wasn't saying anything at all.

"I think I love you," he said, then—"I think I'm in love with you," as if that qualifier might make his declaration ring true. He nudged his knee deeper between her legs and moaned, yanked her chest to chest. "Let's not talk," he said.

It didn't matter if they were on a mountainside, in the desert, on a single-lane bridge with a sheer drop of a thousand feet on either side, she grabbed her pack, yanked the side door open, and leapt out of the van.

She found herself on an empty road, long and flat as any road she'd hitched. No tall grass to dive into. No signs to tell her where she was. There were only massive clusters of bramble, dry and supersized like tumbleweeds, but rooted in place, going on and on. She took off running across the dirt prairie, backpack hiked under her armpits. She ran until she dared to look back, and there was the van, puttering away, dust and exhaust rising into the sky like a smoke signal.

As she walked in the direction she believed was west, she would reexamine this impulse to run. If she had said no, maybe he would've broken into apologies, skirted back to the front seat while he tripped over himself with shame. Perhaps she'd been sending signals. How much had she eaten at the diner? She'd let him unfurl a twenty-dollar bill while she wiped the corners of her mouth, so pleased by her full belly. But she reminded herself of the broken nose. The time all her cash got swiped from her pocket when she

fell asleep on the Greyhound. The Louisiana boarding house where the landlord used his skeleton key to sniff around her underwear. All those miscreants and worse were her learning curve. Fuck the man in the van, she thought. Guilt was too heavy to carry.

In four days, she made it the rest of the way, from Turlock to San Francisco. And when she finally set foot within city limits, pounds lighter and wind-whipped, the soles of her feet so tender she walked on her toes the whole last mile—the fog obscured everything. San Francisco was a walk in the clouds.

The dream held for four months. And it probably only lasted so long because she showed up to Haight and Ashbury and still possessed the brains to leave. She was still spooked by strangers, and everything stunk. The people, the gutters, the flap of pigeon wings stirring up a filth that felt toxic, calcifying the flower children into acid-ravaged zombies. Their arms were open. Their tongues were out. They tried to beckon her into the crusty fold.

She absconded to the neighborhoods where family friends were holing up, keeping their heads down, clerking and interning and cutting their teeth. Soon, her stay in San Francisco felt like a lifetime and no time at all. She worked as a checkout girl at a health food store. They paid her less than hourly, but it was under the table in cash and she was sent home with scraps. She was grateful. She crashed on couches and met people at bars, when closing time came and a pack set out for the all-night donut shop. Together, they ate half-priced crullers and made plans that never materialized the following weekend.



She bought a used bike and rode it everywhere, taking each hill as a challenge, failing, coasting back down on a high. She got stronger. Someday, she would dub this period The Era of Steep Thrills. She quit her job to ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles. No hitching, no favors. Just a straight shot beside blue waters. James Taylor was in Laurel Canyon. If she just got the chance to meet him, he would see she was different from the rest. She set out with a pack full of dried fruit and bulk nuts from the health food store, and because the journey was north to south, she reasoned that her ride would be downhill the whole way. This logic was dispersed quickly, but her stubbornness kept her going as far as Big Sur, when she made herself sick with exhaustion and called it quits. James Taylor seemed like a bore anyway.

She sold her bike at a loss and took the bus back up. Poof. Her plan and newest passion went up in smoke. Anyway, she was sure the city would provide. How could it not? She had bargained her way across the country. Money was just math. You added two and two together and it was supposed to work out just so.  $Work + Hours = Living Wage$ . But the health food store wouldn't hire her back because she'd quit on a whim. The cousins she crashed with were getting engaged, or moving to cities they considered higher tier in their quest for corporate dominance—Dallas, Chicago, New York, D.C. Plus, people were getting murdered. The Zodiac Killer. The Zebra Killings. The whole city had a knife to its throat.

Meanwhile, my mother was starting to look the part she'd been angling to play. She no longer looked like an upper-crust girl with a flat tire. Now, she had a tramp's muscled legs and dried-out suntan, like fruit leather. Luck was harder to come by. There were so many people just like her, who wanted all the same things. She wished there was

some kind of line she could stand in at least, some outward signal she could give the world that said: I'm here for my cut. Even if the wait was long, she could take comfort in the fact that she was pointed in the right direction.

Her first week back, she walked the city until morning broke. Sleep was surrender. She decided to become nocturnal until things sorted themselves, only relenting for naps in public during daylight. She knew she couldn't go on like this after deciding to rest under a bushy tree in Golden Gate Park. When she woke up, her hair was wet. It stunk like ammonia and burnt coffee.

She ran her hand through it and sniffed her fingertips. Piss.

It could not have been the man with the camper van who'd done it, but in her head that was who she pictured—unzipping his fly in the dark, chuckling about local inventory as he released his hot stream and shook himself off over her face. He would tell the story to his new friends, she thought. They'd laugh. She felt bad for herself, but she felt worse for whatever dog he would make his.

My mother no longer felt like herself. The world around her lost its brilliance and dimension. Everything seemed like a mirage that might swallow her just before it disappeared altogether, taking her with it. She measured the great distance between herself and a cash injection and did what was obvious. She called Candace, who picked up on the first ring.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

We thought no one was home. Candace's long, private drive snaked and bent around boulders and fallen tree trunks. Tufts of moss and giant ferns blazed radioactive in our Volvo's headlights. At the end of the perilous drive, the cabin was dark.

"This is scary," Fawn said.

The stars were brighter than we'd ever seen, and the light looked bewitched. The night sky cast the cabin, and the forest, and each other's faces in the hue of the undead.

"You look like a swamp creature," I told Fawn.

"Stop," she whined "Stupid idiot."

"Girls, please," our mother said.

We dug through our luggage for jean jackets and sweatshirts, while our mother circled the house for signs of life. There were rocking chairs on the front porch, and Fawn and I sat and swung them as we waited to be told what to do.

"I can hear the ocean," Fawn said. "I can smell it."

"We're not even near the ocean."

"We're on an island, aren't we?"

"I hate Canada," I said. "Who even lives here?"

There was a flicker in the trees. The house was surrounded by woodland. I had asked already; there were no neighbors for miles.

“Did you see that?” I said. I stopped Fawn’s rocker, mid-swing.

“I see it. What is that? Is that them?”

“Why would they be out there?”

“I don’t know, but they’re going to get ate.”

“Do you think there are bears here?”

Fawn shrugged. “Probably.”

Our mother rounded back to the front of the house and called toward to the woods. “Yoo-hoo. Is that Candace?” And it was. On the porch, we all got acquainted. Candace and her handsome twins.

“So sorry to have missed your arrival,” she said. She looked much older than my mother, but far healthier somehow. She had the look of a woman who could gallop away on horseback. She also looked familiar. “We were just taking a moonlight stroll. It’s something we like to do all together on occasion, when the stars are just right. It really is a wonderful experience. We should all try while you’re here.”

I thought this sounded insane, but my mother clapped her hands together and said, in a register I’d heard from her only once before, “That sounds delightful.”

While my mother and Candace caught up in the kitchenette, we were shoed away to make friends with the twins. They were a few years younger than I, a boy and a girl. They looked like catalogue models for an expensive coastal clothing brand. Their hair shined feather-soft. They were dressed in seersucker and white linen and denim jumpers with oversized buttons. They looked like Scandinavian dolls, but slightly feral.

“Do you want to play a game?” the girl asked.

Fawn and I looked at each other.

“Sure,” I said, and the twins scurried away up a ladder into their little lofted area.

“Come, come,” they said from above.

“You first,” Fawn said to me. I flicked her on the elbow and went.

They called the game Crackers. Its rules were indecipherable and blended the glass pebbles of Mancala and the playing cards of Candy Land. New rules and objectives sprung up with every roll of the dice, of which there were three.

I rolled a three, a six, and a two. “I don’t think I get how to play,” I said.

“Yes! Ha-ha,” Fawn said to the little boy. She and I were on a team.

“No. That means you go to jail,” the boy said.

“But I rolled that before. Last time I got an extra turn,” she said.

“*We* got an extra turn,” I said.

The boy and the girl looked between each other and giggled.

“Well, this time you go to jail,” the girl said. “Sorry, those are the rules.”

That was pretty much how the first few days at Candace’s cabin went. Our twin chaperones towed us around and invented parameters on the fly. They took us to their lean-to fort tucked away in the woods, but to earn entry, we had to complete an arbitrary set of tasks—hop on one foot for thirty seconds, spin around until you were dizzy. And once we were inside, they put us to work—sweeping dirt from the dirt, organizing old Tupperware containers filled to the brim with rocks and twigs. We were not allowed to speak each other’s names, they said. Guests don’t have names, only the names given to them by their host. They called us Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Don’t. If I didn’t despise them so much, I might’ve said they were clever.

It was embarrassing being bossed around by kids closer to Fawn's age than mine. And because there were no walls, I could never pinpoint a moment private enough to take the problem to our mother. She seemed embroiled in her own battle. She and Candace ping-ponged around the kitchenette while keeping a polite, choreographed distance, batting back and forth empty remarks meant to demonstrate engagement. *I see. Interesting. I can't imagine.* They hardly seemed like friends at all. I got the sense I wasn't supposed to like Candace, though nothing my mother said or did specifically suggested this.

A few mornings in, the boy stopped me just before the bathroom. There was no door there either, just a drawstring curtain at least a foot too short, so that you could see the bare ankles and shins of whoever was on the toilet. It was my worst nightmare.

"You're not allowed to close the curtain," the boy said. He was wearing a matching pajama set printed with tugboats. I felt like kicking him. I knew the right angle that would cause the most damage. The heel of my foot to the flat, utterly breakable bone of his shin. Tempting.

"Oh really?" I said. "And why is that?"

"Those are the rules."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"It doesn't have to make sense to you. You're the guest and I say so."

From the loft overhead, Fawn peeked her head out and called down. "Hey," she said to the boy, "You're being disgusting." She lisped a little on the *s*. "Why do you want to watch her pee so bad?"

"I don't," he said. "That's a lie."

He eyed the picture window at the far end of the house. In the brush outside, My mother and Candace were picking blueberries. The girl trailed behind them in a flowy skirt sown by her mother. I wanted to kick her, too.

“I’m not letting you watch me pee,” I told the boy. “I’m just not.”

“I never said—”

“Pee is private,” Fawn insisted from above, and I almost laughed. “I heard you. I could tell on you, you know.”

“You’re trying to get me in trouble,” the boy said. He stomped toward the front door and began pulling on his hiking boots, pajamas and all. “I’m going to the fort, and you’re not allowed in anymore. New rule.”

“Fine,” Fawn snapped. “I’m going to break down your fort then.”

I looked up to tell her to cool it, but the boy said, “You’re being mean. Take that back.”

“No,” Fawn said. “Have fun in your ugly fort. We’re going to build an even better one, and you won’t be allowed in. Not you, or your pig-face sister.”

“Okay, everyone,” I said. “Let’s just calm down and—”

“We’ll see about that,” the boy said. “Oh, we’ll see. I’m telling.”

He struggled with the zipper on his jacket a moment. I considered offering my help, but thought it might’ve been insulting. “I’m leaving,” he announced. “Don’t follow me.”

When the door closed behind him, I waited at the picture window to see if he’d report us to the mothers, but he’d gone off into the woods. What would they say about us

when we left? I knew what I would say about them. I couldn't wait for the ride back to the ferry so I could air all my grievances.

I looked up toward the loft, but Fawn's face had disappeared from view. I felt a droplet of appreciation for her. She'd been defending me. I heard her singing a little song to herself, and I was going to tease her, invite her outside to play.

I might've missed the song completely if it weren't for the arched roof of the a-frame cabin, which caught and amplified the sound like a cathedral ceiling.

“Going to burn it, going to burn.

Down, down, down.

Burn it all, burn it, burn it.

Down, down, down.”

As advertised, we set out for a moonlit ramble beneath the stars. It was our last night on Nova Scotia.

At first, the woods made me paranoid. I thought daddy-long-legs were climbing up my jeans, into my hair to nest. I confused the sound of my own footfalls for some interloper in the woods. A man with a knife, waiting behind a tree to pounce as we went by. Meanwhile, my mother and Candace had launched a deep-dive into the past. Their flashlights kept meandering into the trees, turning shadows new shades of malice.

“And what does your latest paramour have to say about all this?” I heard Candace ask my mother at the rear of the pack. “Let me guess. He has no idea.”

My mother was running out of money. That was what I guessed. I'd heard snippets of conversation all week long and strung the pieces together. Bits about my



father, the woes of getting in touch with him. The warehouse and its leaky roof. My mother played the meek patient, while Candace opined on the virtues of a self-sufficient lifestyle. No grid. No TV that told you what to think. No men.

The trail split before us and I called back to the mothers. "Which way?"

"This way," the boy said beside me. He'd been keeping a cautious distance since our run-in at the bathroom. Up ahead, his sister was off on another planet, babbling about the constellations, while Fawn dragged a long stick in the dirt behind her.

"It's a lot to saddle someone with," my mother said softly. "Especially someone I'm still getting to know."

"Communication," Candace said. "That's the problem in a nutshell."

My mother sighed. "I hear you, but I'm backed into a corner."

"That's why you came to me," she said. "And here I am."

Did I sleepwalk the rest of our route? Candace's words were my last landmark. I'd fallen into my own rhythm, anticipating my footing, muscles warming to the trek. My ears were like satellites receiving the screech of the woods in stereo. My mind had left my head. I blinked and we were back at the treeline and the cabin, dark as the night we first arrived. I was impressed with myself. Why didn't we do things like this all the day? My brain felt pleasingly empty, relaxed, like it'd taken a dip in a warm bath.

It was Candace who sensed it first. Without speaking, she drifted toward the house, my mother briefly forgotten. The girl danced off toward the porch, singing to the stars, a carousel in motion inside her blonde head. Candace called the boy's name.

"Well that was fun, wasn't it?" my mother said to me, bumping shoulders. "I liked that."

I didn't respond. I was too busy watching it all unfold, just as I knew it would. They weren't in the house. They weren't in the vegetable patch. They weren't in the storage shed by the creek. They were out in the woods. Inside the lean-to in the bramble-hidden hollow, inside another envelope of darkness. That's where Fawn and the boy were now.

My mother's childhood home was called White Hill. It was like a museum. Stately, trimmed, no tableau amiss. Every third piece of furniture, cross-stitch, painting, plaque, or bookend had a story. A cane that belonged to a cousin who'd sank on the Titanic. Rare books from an uncle who vacationed with the Lindberghs. It all sounded noble and shiny, like the plaque on a desk in the corner office. Someone who owned a railroad. Served as Vice President. Threw himself off a skyscraper when the stock market went bust. Owned a Triple Crown winner. Made Knight of the Order of the Lily in France. Built a racist castle in Barbados. Blew up in a foxhole and saved the life of a future Nobel Prize winner. Had a major city named after him. Owned the biggest yacht in Newport Harbor. Dined with the Kennedys, thought Jackie O. was a ditz, a snob.

It amazed me that just one family had produced so many artifacts and anecdotes of note. That they'd catalogued and cared for each one, packaged them up neatly for the next generation to tend, keepers of the same cause. All those swords and greyscale photos and warped tomes and oil portraits, the ships in a bottle and pocket watches suspended inside their bell jars: Fawn and I were the conclusion, intended or not.

I felt a great swell of power. Then, someone breezed by with pâté.

The afternoon had been catered. Servers knew to whisper and tread

solemnly, and they moved like wraiths with trays of chicken salad finger sandwiches, cocktail napkins in tasteful black. There were scattered islands of people in their darkest shades of business casual, talking low and nodding urgently. The occasional yelp of laughter would dart from one of the circles, and the culprits would turn to the huddle closest to them and apologize profusely.

We were standing alone.

Fawn was four and asleep on a pile of coats in one of the guest bedrooms. My mother sipped ginger ale and looked around the living room. People kept asking how old I was, what my mother was up to these days. They cited, as if on cue, the last time they'd seen her and whatever factoid they'd recalled from back then.

“You were in San Francisco, weren't you?” said one woman. “Staying with Heath's kids. That's right. You and your bicycle. It's been a long time, hasn't it?”

Another, this one with pearls. “The wedding. My, that was ages ago. And you looked stunning. No matter what happened, that's a nice memory to keep, isn't it? And the rather unusual reception venue. I was so astonished when I walked in. I kept saying *those windows, those windows.*”

And another, this one teething on a lozenge. “I was sorry to hear it, but you know, that's the way so many marriages go these days,” she said. “I think the generations see it differently, which is despicable—in my opinion. I think it's wonderful you have the freedom to extricate yourself when the situation warrants it. And look at this young lady you have here. Hello there.”

The women played emissary and the men stayed away. Outside on the bluestone

patio, three white Labradors gnawed on tennis balls and looked up at me when I tapped the glass. No one there knew my name. It was not a funeral. It was not a party. It was not the Super Bowl.

A Latin woman my mother's age, dressed in pink smiley-face scrubs, kept reappearing in the living room at irregular intervals. It was her job to find faces in the crowd, touch their elbows gently and usher the chosen back to say their goodbyes to my grandfather. My legs ached from standing. I'd seen a TV in the den, sitting blank on its little cart with wheels. I asked my mother if I could go and watch for five minutes.

She looked down at me, frightened. "Please don't leave me alone," she said.

Before I could reassure her, another woman appeared at her elbow. This one was blonde like the rest, but suspiciously untidy, a little too forceful as she gripped my mother's arm.

"Oh," my mother said. There was that register again—measured, adamant in its pleasantness. "What a surprise. I didn't expect to see you."

"Here I am," the woman said.

Years later, I would put the pieces together during an exercise at Veld.

I was on campus. All the girls were in rows, on our knees, each of us curled into the shape of a boulder. That's how we were told to think of ourselves. I was fresh from my pre-enrollment trek, and my body was like a loaded spring. It had got me thinking back to Nova Scotia, the walk through the woods. From some distant corridor in my mind, the link between those two moments had been delivered. Candace. An ensemble character forgotten.

At the center of the otherwise placid living room, people were beginning to look

nervous.

Candace—who could've been anyone to me then—was tugging my mother away into the corner. My mother was towing me with her, but the woman in scrubs appeared, tapping on my shoulder.

Before she even spoke, I was following her to the rear room. I could tell she was someone official. It wasn't just the uniform. My mother watched me go while Candace began talking her ear off.

"I'm taking you to him," the nurse said, and ushered me down a long hallway.

Inside the homemade hospice suite, everything was connected by a cord. They were everywhere, like a net pulled from rubber and strewn across the immaculate Persian rug. A monitor thrummed steadily, its data indiscernible. It smelled like diapers, plastic, apple juice. If I inhaled too strongly, I'd gag. And there was my grandfather, staring at me like I might say something. I wondered if I was supposed to present an offering of some kind.

The nurse said, "Go on, give your grandfather a kiss," but my grandfather growled before I got too close.

"I'm not some dreadful exhibit," he spat. "You don't need to come in here and gawk." There was a football game playing on the TV angled toward his sickbed. The jerseys and pads and TV grain told me it was an old match-up captured on tape. The VCR was rolling.

"Don't mind him," the nurse said. She patted a spot at the end of the bed. "Sit here. You don't have to say anything."

"Which one are you?" my grandfather asked me. His eyes were icy blue,

clear as arctic water, the only contrast against jaundiced skin and the yellow spittle gone sour at the corners of his mouth.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“The older one.”

“Ha. And what plans have you got?”

“I don’t know.”

“All right then,” he said.

I looked over at the nurse. She was in a chair in the corner, still as a statue. Her eyes were closed. I couldn’t tell if she was trying to give us privacy or if she’d fallen asleep. I asked my grandfather what he was watching.

“Well, the game.”

“Which one?”

“You follow football, do you?”

“Not really.”

“It’s nonsense. Bunch of boys colliding with each other. I used to play.”

“Were you the quarterback?” It was the only position I knew.

“How did you know?”

I shrugged.

“A quarterback has to see the field better than anyone,” he said. “They have to be smart. They have to have a good sense of timing.”

“I think I would want to be the quarterback,” I said.

“Maybe you would’ve been,” he said, and looked at me as if for the first time. I

thought he might say more, but he began to wheeze. “Why don’t you go into the freezer in the garage. We have ice cream sandwiches.”

“Where’s the garage?”

“You’ll figure that part out. Just run and get two.”

“Okay,” I said. “Is one of those for me?”

“One for me. One for you,” he said. “And tell your mother to come in. I’d like to see her.” He tapped his nose twice and smiled then, like it was a code between us.

“Okay. Be right back.”

Once I navigated the living room full of adults, it took me a few tries to find the garage. I stumbled upon other rooms, like portals—a windowed studio the size of a walk-in closet, where a master’s spread of watercolors and canvasses and paintbrushes were arranged. Another room paneled in dark wood, with an imposing stone fireplace. Another room was dedicated to the dogs. It stunk like them, and there were an array of beds and crates and a dozen tennis balls in various states of obliteration. When I finally stumbled upon the garage, it was occupied already.

My mother and Candace were having it out beside the pristine gardening bench. They hadn’t even heard me come in.

“I told myself I wouldn’t do this here,” Candace was saying.

I assumed Candace was some cater-waiter with a screw loose, that my mother was reaming for her lousy service. “Then let’s not do this,” my mother said. “Please.”

Candace sniffed. “The invitation is always open, you know. I gave my word and nothing changes that. It was just like you said it would be—I can’t stand that you’re not able to enjoy it.”

“Please get yourself together,” my mother said. Candace collapsed in her arms and my mother patted her on the back politely.

I lingered a moment longer, and did some more lingering outside the door to the garage. I was too ashamed to return to my grandfather empty-handed. Catering staffed breezed by and I tried to hold out until my mother and Candace the cater-waiter left the garage. When I finally gathered the courage to peek back in, they’d gone out the side door.

I grabbed the ice cream sandwiches, but by the time I returned to the back bedroom, my grandfather was gone, too. The nurse stopped me gently at the door.

Over her shoulder, a cluster of the elderly wept at his bedside. The taped football game was still playing. A receiver had just caught a long toss. The commentator was revving up as number thirty-nine sprinted toward the end zone, opponent on his heels—a dive and a miss and the whole field suddenly wide open. The nurse leaned down to eye level, gave me a big squeeze of a hug, and told me to find my mother. She closed the door behind her.

I checked every room, so many of them like exhibition spaces, well-lit and full of echoes. The ice cream sandwiches were softening inside their wrappers, inside my hands. I got to the den, where I’d seen the other TV, and my mother was there, sitting in a side chair with her head in her hands. Fawn was tucked into the corner of the loveseat, watching cartoons and sucking her thumb. I handed her one of the ice cream sandwiches and she took it, unmoving, eyes transfixed. Acme-branded anvils were falling from the sky. “Turn it up,” I told her.

She tossed the remote into my lap. I tore open my ice cream wrapper and bit in,



but I wanted it to last. I told myself to chew twenty-seven times before I let myself swallow, which was impossible, but somewhere I'd heard that was the magic number.

I asked if we could put something else on, but Fawn didn't blink. Wile E. Coyote had walked off the edge of a cliff and was now plummeting to the desert floor. He'd made the grave mistake of looking down.

An hour had passed since my mother and Candace disappeared into the woods, a two-woman search party. Downstairs, the girl was waiting at the front window, desperate for any movement at the treeline. I'd picked a book from a shelf at random and brought it up to the loft.

Every now and again, she would call up to ask what I was doing. I knew she did not want to be alone with her worry. I could feel its insistent pulse radiating from the ground floor—the tap of her toe, the swish of hair as her head turned right and left looking for her twin.

I told her I was sleeping, or didn't answer at all.

Once, I'd seen a show about twin-sense. It was on one of those channels in the high-forties that always plays wonkier fare you have to be in the right mood for: unsolved murders, medical marvels, special features on the Bermuda Triangle. A twin could hear the other's thoughts, the episode's host claimed. They could sense each other's feelings from afar. Joy and shock and hurt. Like a nail driven up through the sole of a shoe, one twin was pierced by the extreme feeling of the other. However, this phenomenon was not without its glitches.

The episode featured two sets of twins. The first pair were from England. Two

otherwise staid women went insane simultaneously and dove headlong into a thirty-six-hour rampage together. They set fire to trashcans, punched unsuspecting strangers in the crotch and the face. Eventually, they were kicked off a public bus for spitting on passengers. When the police arrived, one of the women sprinted into the busy road, found the path of a semi-truck and flung herself toward its grill. She died. After they brought in the surviving twin in for examination, she appeared lucid, back to herself again, if not grief-stricken. They let her go. Within a day, she'd killed a convenience store clerk with a knife, then leapt from a bridge. There was no apparent rhyme or reason. One day, the women had been going about their lives, and the next—they'd cast off reality together, mind-melded accomplices hellbent on destruction.

The next twins featured were brothers separated at birth who wound up leading parallel lives. Both married women named Betty, then divorced their first wives for women named Jennifer. Both served in the Coast Guard and went on to become lieutenants in their local police forces. Both were left-handed. Both styled their hair the same way. Both joined the Elks. Both preferred hockey to football. Both drank Budweiser, King of Beers, and nothing else.

It didn't matter if the twins grew up side-by-side, drooling over the same blocks or wearing matching onesies. It didn't matter if they'd been pried apart as infants, set on distant courses, on opposite coasts. Whatever was written in their DNA pulled the strings, became their lives. A chromosome for chromosome match made the pair into a closed loop—whether they liked it, knew it, or otherwise.

I wondered if the girl sensed the boy out there in the forest. If his aura emitted some distress signal only hers could receive. Did she feel it in her gut what was being

done to him? Or maybe the sensation was less specific, like a throb. Maybe she could only sense that something wasn't right, but was unable to discern more—which might've been worse, the suggestion of pain but no clues to its source or extent. I wondered why I wasn't I like her.

I looked out the window and practiced an expression of grave concern. I thought of Fawn cold in the woods, lost maybe, wandering in darkness. There was a flit of anxiety in my throat, but I pulled away from the image and the turmoil dispersed almost instantly. I went back to my

book. It was called *Begin to Keep Bees*. Its spine had never been cracked.

*“Between inspections you will probably be watching the activities of the bees at the hive entrance nearly every day. You will find it fascinating and relaxing, so pull up a lawn chair and enjoy it. As the season progresses, some hive activities will begin to occur that may cause you concern and may lead you to the conclusion that your bees are about to swarm.”*

I fell asleep with the book in my hands. When I woke up, I wasn't sure I was awake at all. I thought I'd dropped down into the strangest dream of false awakening. The kind of dream where you turn off the alarm and swing yourself out of bed. You go about the business of getting ready for your day. All the while, your true self is still fast asleep. I thought it was one of those.

The cabin was dark. Wind and rain swept slantwise against the windows and walls, so unlike the clear night sky we'd walked under. And the girl was snoring softly beside me on our mattress on the floor. The spots where Fawn and the boy would've slept were empty.

I went to peek over the ledge of our sleeping loft and saw the glow of the nightlight beside the bathroom curtain downstairs. Something in the dark moved. I wanted to wake up. I went to pinch myself and heard my name whispered up into the eaves. Fawn was standing at the edge of the opposite sleeping loft. She waved at me.

I was about to ask what she was doing, but she held a finger to her lips. It took her two tries before I understood what she was mouthing. *“He’s here, he’s here.”*

She gestured over her shoulder and I could make out the shadows of my mother’s body, of Candace’s body on the thin mattress, silhouettes rising and falling in sleep, a little lump between them that must’ve been the boy.

I mouthed back, *“What did you do?”*

She smiled. So bashful, so proud. It was the same face she made when she returned home with an A+ and a pat on the head from her teacher. So advanced, they all said. So mature for her age. It was the same face she would make years later, when I asked what she and Zeke weren’t telling me, when I grilled her about her solo trips into the woods ringing Deerie, and later, the woods that banked our father’s property. It was a move she learned in Nova Scotia. The lean-to situated off the beaten path. The private power inside the folds of nature. She could stake out a corner for herself, to hide away what she didn’t want seen.

When I woke up again, my mother was standing above me.

“I let you sleep in a little,” she said, “but now it’s time to get going.”

“What?”

“Time to get up.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Downstairs having breakfast. Are you hungry?”

I sat up on my elbows. I was alone in bed. The other sleeping loft was empty, too.

“What happened?” I asked.

My mother sat on the edge of the bed to brush a tangle behind my ear. “Maybe I should’ve woken you up when we got back,” she said, “but I didn’t want to disturb you. Everyone is doing just fine. We found them.”

“They’re okay?”

“They got turned around out there, but they’re just a little shell-shocked. That’s all. Come down for breakfast. Your sister will be happy to see you.”

Candace only kept Muesli in the cupboards, which I found offensive, so I pretended I wasn’t hungry. It was my version of a protest. Instead, I watched Fawn and the twins banter at the table, the trio friendly as ever, as if the whole week had been one long bonding session and

now they were all aggrieved that their time was up.

“Where did you guys end up last night?” I asked the table.

The boy looked to Fawn before he looked to me.

“We got lost,” he said evenly. “I stepped off the path and got turned around.”

“That’s right,” Fawn said. “It was very dark.”

“And what?” I asked. “You were both just wandering around until they found you?”

The boy looked to Fawn again, his cereal spoon hovering.

“Yep,” she supplied. “They found us. It was really scary though.”

“Really scary,” the boy agreed.

My mother and Candace were packing upstairs. Candace was chatting away, asking when we'd be back again. Next to me, the girl was humming and chomping through her Muesli.

I asked her, "Have you ever gotten lost before?"

She kept humming until I gave her a light kick under the table. "Ow," she said. "What?"

"I said, have you ever gotten lost in the woods before?"

Fawn dropped her spoon with a clank and said, "There's a first time for everything." Everyone looked at her. She picked up her spoon again and scooped up another mound of cereal, courted it to her mouth with the ease and smile of a commercial actor. "Delicious," she said.

"We haven't gotten lost before," the girl said, "but my mom says the woods are huge."

The boy wasn't looking at any of us. He had the fretful, resigned expression of someone waiting for the hammer to fall.

"Hey," I said to him. "Did you get scared out there?"

He looked to Fawn again, but she only slid her spoon around the rim of her bowl.

"Yes," he said carefully. "I was scared."

"Why did you wander off?" I asked, and I could sense the girl tuning in for his answer.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know why I did it."

"Did you go to your fort?"

"Well," the boy said. He picked up his spoon. He put it back down. He glanced at

his sister. “No, we didn’t go to the fort. Well, I guess at first we did, but then—”

Fawn slid back from the table, chair clattering behind her.

“Everything okay down there?” Candace called down from the loft.

“Yes,” Fawn called back. She was standing before us now, gripping her spoon. “It was an accident. Everything’s fine.”

The boy bowed his head against his chest. Finally, the girl seemed to have woken up to the moment. She scooted closer to him, tried to pry his chin up, but he turned his face away.

“Let’s everyone play a game,” Fawn said quickly. “Let’s play Crackers. That was fun.”

The girl and I said nothing, and the boy bowed his head deeper.

“Yeah,” he said into his shirt. “Let’s play a game.”

Upstairs, I heard Candace say to my mother, “You know my door is always open. I said it once and I’ll say it again. And if this thing with the new guy doesn’t—”

Fawn took the boy by the elbow and stood him up. “Great,” she said. “Let’s go now. You guys put the bowls away. We’ll set up. See? That’s fair. Then we’ll all play until it’s time to go.”

She smiled again to reassure us and turned the boy toward the loft ladder. “We’ll be upstairs. Just give us one minute to set everything up perfect.”

The mothers carted the bags down to load up the car. They were chatting by the open trunk. In our sleeping loft, Fawn was making rules. Crackers was her game now.

The girl rolled a two, a six, and a four.

“That means you have to do five laps,” Fawn said.

“Laps?”

“Five of them. Around the house, all the way. Quick, quick, before it’s your turn again. If you don’t make it back before your turn, you lose.”

The girl looked to her brother to rekindle their alliance, but he’d been silent since the game began. Fawn stared expectantly at the girl, who finally stood and climbed carefully down the ladder. When the front door closed, Fawn swiped up the dice and set them in the boy’s hand. It was his turn. A three. A two. A one.

Neat in a line, like it was meant to be.

“What does it mean?” the boy asked.

“Stand up,” Fawn said.

“Okay.”

“Now spin in a circle for ten seconds.”

“I don’t want to.”

Fawn laughed. “Why does everyone want to forget about the rules all the sudden? That’s so unfair. When it was your turn, I played by the rules.” She turned to me then. “We both did, didn’t we?” If the boy broke down, or if he ran to the mothers and told the whole truth, whatever that was—I didn’t want it leading back to me.

“Just do it,” I told the boy. “Let’s get it over with.”

He took a steadying breath, like he might begin to cry. Fawn stood up next to him and got very close, her forehead almost against his. The gesture struck me as intimate, but as far as I knew, they’d shared a harrowing experience together, perhaps believing they’d be lost for good, that they’d have to forge a new life, bound together for survival. It was like *The Adventures of Swiss Family Robinson*. I’d slept through so much, I thought.



Now, Fawn had the room under her thumb.

“You want to play, don’t you?” she prodded the boy.

He nodded.

“Okay then,” she said. “Spin.”

The boy held his arms out straight like propeller blades. He turned in measured revolutions while Fawn counted and the floorboards rasped. Through the downstairs window, I saw the girl dash by on one of her laps.

The boy was being very careful, watching his feet, going slow. Fawn was standing close to him. She was keeping time like a choreographer while the boy made his shuffling, three-step turns, blank blue eyes waiting for his time to be up. I was counting along quietly in my head. All it took was one nudge. Fawn put a hand against his chest at the right moment. Drove him back with the right amount of force, and will.

I’ll never forget the sound of it. Body to floor. Flat. A smack to the eardrum, like a sack of flour let drop. What had I seen? The boy: pushed. The boy: off kilter, one foot slipping and the body following behind, like someone had jerked his pantleg and down he’d gone.

Things happened quickly then. The girl huffed inside from her five laps around the cabin, and before she screamed for her mother and dropped down by her twin’s side, she let out a whoop of sudden shock—like she’d been scrabbling along at a great height and her foot slipped out from under her. The mothers came running.

“What happened? What happened?” they yelled back and forth. My mother looked up to the loft where Fawn and I were peering down, side-by-side.

“It was an accident,” Fawn said. “He fell.”

The boy was gasping on the floor, eyes wide and bright white, looking up straight at the ceiling as if there was something looking back. He reached for his head. He began to cry when he pulled his hand back and saw blood. His fingertips were thick with it.

He dragged his palm down the front of his t-shirt and left a streak of red that I couldn't make any sense of. I thought, *what is that?*

Candace swept the boy off his feet and loaded him into the backseat of her double-cab truck. "Try not to move," she was saying. She told the girl to sit with his head in her lap, to hold his head still. The girl was not crying. She was someplace far beyond that, within the static eye of shock, the same kind the boy was in. Twin-sense, I thought.

Candace got in the front seat and cranked the engine.

"Should we wait here?" my mother said at the driver's side window. "Or, we could go with you?"

"I don't know. I can't think right now," Candace said. "No. Actually, I do know. Come with me. Please." She lowered her voice. "I don't want to do this alone."

"Oh," my mother said. "But, the kids." She shrugged. "Maybe I shouldn't. We have the ferry. But if you want, then we could. If you need me to."

Candace glanced past my mother to Fawn and me. I smiled, though I don't know why. It was just what I did when adults went searching for me with their eyes. Fawn looked pale, and shaken. I didn't know if it was real, but it was right. Righter than my face could perform.

"Mommy," the girl said from the backseat. She was eyeing us like we might rush the doors and rip them all from their seats. She didn't know us. We were just the moody interlopers who'd crashed their little birdhouse and hypnotized their mother, turned the

woods into a terror and dropped her twin from great heights. Candace shifted into drive.

“We’re going, sweetie,” she said. She swept a hand through her hair and looked at my mother a last time. “You know what? Do what you want. That’s what you always do best.”

It was a line she’d had been waiting to fire at my mother for years. I could tell. Good for her, I remember thinking.

“Hey,” my mother said, but gravel was already kicking up behind the truck as they roared toward the main road.

It was just us then. All in the family. We stood there watching the air settle, listening as the truck disappeared inside the quiet. It was like the woods zipped up behind them, behind us too after we closed the cabin door and went, first wondering aloud to each other if it was all right to leave the cabin unlooked, if we should keep a light on, leave a note saying goodbye.

It was not until the ferry pulled away from its moorings and slid back into the current, a hunk of continent sloughed off and set adrift, that my mother dared to ask the question. She found me in line for the snack bar.

I was going to get a dollar hot dog. I felt I deserved something after the whole ordeal. And I wanted a reason to get away from Fawn, who’d been glued to my hip since the cabin. She was guarding our seats in the far corner by the trash cans. I saw her eyeballing each face in the crowd, looking for ours.

“I’m going to ask you something,” my mother said. “I want you to be honest. And I won’t be angry.”

“Okay.” I had my dollar bill in hand. I was next in line. But when the teenager

wearing the paper cap told me to step right up, my mother took me aside.

“I think it was an accident,” she said. “But if it wasn’t, if something got a little out of control up there? I need you to tell me. Now is the time. Understand?”

I nodded.

“Okay,” she breathed. “Tell me truthfully. Did you push him?”

“What?”

“Go on.”

“No. I didn’t push him.” I thought this might offer her some relief, but it only seemed to trouble her more. She asked, “Are you sure?”

“Did Candace say something?”

“No. Should she have?”

I thought I might cry, but feared that if I did, I’d appear guilty. And maybe I was. I’d been there. I’d watched. I’d told the little boy to just get it over with, and when Fawn said it was all an accident, I was relieved she’d taken the lead. “I didn’t do anything,” I said finally.

In the months leading up to Veld, I should’ve had this phrase tattooed on my forehead. It was much different than the comparatively precise *I didn’t do it*. Or the incredulous *I didn’t do that*. I didn’t do anything. Nothing at all. A perfect phrase for me.

My mother pursed her lips. All I wanted was my hot dog. I wanted to dress it the way I liked and take it to the corner, to eat it lovingly while perusing my *People* magazine.

“I’m disappointed,” she said. “I’m really disappointed.”

“Because I didn’t push him? Thanks a lot.”

“Because I know you’re not telling me the whole truth.”

I squirmed a bit and watched the links on their steaming carousel. The whole truth. My mother turned my body toward her to make sure I was giving my full attention. Her head tipped a sympathetic inch as she asked the question, gently, so as not to send an honest answer running.

“What happened up there?”

I located Fawn over my mother’s shoulder. She had one arm flung across our small herd of suitcases, and I could see she’d tried to make her body bigger—a full stretch of her legs, shoulders set broadly. With her free arm, she held my backpack to her chest, as if someone might snatch it out of her grip and she would go down fighting if it was what she had to do.

“He just fell. It was an accident,” I said. “I have nothing left to say.”

I took comfort in how naturally those last words sounded. I’d said them with just the right diction, like I’d heard delivered a hundred times on courtroom dramas. It only occurred to me on the way home, with Fawn asleep beside me, her body limp and leaning with the sway of the Volvo, that it was what the guilty party always said.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Day One on the mountain.

We hiked ten miles and the cold climbed with us. Each breath was a raw wheeze. Winds snaked inside the stitches of my outerwear, and the soles of my boots felt frozen, like two discs of ice I skated on. Just when I thought my heart would fail inside my chest, our pack leader held up his fist at the front of the line and called it a day. “Make camp,” he said. His called himself Shine.

One time only, he showed me how to string up my tarp. As soon as it was flapping in the breeze and he was satisfied that I could shelter myself from the elements, he handed me a letter from my mother. A Veld rite of passage. Before the Juvenile Transportation Services come to spirit away the bad apples, parents are told to pour their hearts out. Outline their grievances. Be specific. Any other contact with the outside world is prohibited for the first three months of treatment, so the letter is both tell-all and sendoff.

I pictured my mother at her desk, her face in the lamplight. I imagined her left hand scrawling and scrawling as she downed a glass of wine and read aloud what she’d written. I stuffed the letter into the pocket of my cargos. I wanted to keep it there a long as possible, potent for as long as it remained unread. Shine told me it was my job to dig

the latrine, an inaugural honor I undertook with a pint-sized shovel, huffing and puffing while the other girls waited to shit all over my sweat equity. With every thrust of dirt, the letter pulsed.

Someone got the fire going. Someone cooked the rice. I kept thinking about the preposterousness of it all. Yesterday, I'd been at Antonia's. After The Wepplers' place burned down, she'd been forced back into the gaudy pink house she shared with her mother. I didn't like visiting her there, but there was no alternative. She'd been banned from the loft. When Zeke died, both of us had forgone any contact with the Hellers, which was its own tragedy.

The night before, I'd been walking home high. I eyed every treetop like a great creature might swoop down and snatch me up. I wanted that. I wanted to be on the wing of something, to be taken away—and soon I was. Stuffed in a van, dropped off at Commitment. Fawn had watched with an utterly blank face as the men from the retrieval service carted me through the living room by my arms and legs. My mother was crying and apologizing. I was shouting obscenities while trying to make my body into dead weight, which was a difficult simultaneous task. Antonia wouldn't even know what happened to me, I thought. There one day and gone the next. I wondered if she would forgive me, or even care.

When dinner was done, it was time for Share Circle.

I stared into the faces of the girls around the fire ring. They all look bleached out and bloated, some completely chinless—the side effects of extreme exposure and happy pills. Half stared back with the absent eyes of the frequently harangued. They knew how to check out when someone was scolding them and check in to their own heads until the

speechifying ceased. Others looked like spirited campers, veritable girl scouts. They rocked in place and assessed the circle eagerly, like they could barely hold their tongues until it was their turn. How long had they all been out here? I thought of my mother's lesson about the different breeds of crazy. I wondered what the other girls made of me.

Since I was the newest, I was up first. Shine drew himself into a lotus position and brought his fingertips together, aimed them at me. "Okay," he said. "We're ready."

"Ready for what?"

He shook his head and smiled like I was trying to trick him, but he wouldn't be fooled. "Tell us why you're here."

"I don't know," I said. "My mother put me here."

The other girls snickered. They knew the drill.

"So, you're here because of her?" he asked.

"Technically speaking."

"I see." Somewhere in the trees, an owl cooed and for a second, I thought one of the girls made the noise as a joke. Shine turned to the girl on his right and asked her, "What's Share all about, Gia?"

"Sharing," the girl said flatly.

"That's right," Shine said and turned back to me. "When we're on Commitment, everything we do is about sharing. That's why we're here. You see? Sharing the load. Cooking. Hauling. Making camp. Even digging the latrine." He winked. "So, let's collaborate." He pointed to me again with his arched fingers and announced very clearly, "It's your time to begin."



To begin.

In her letter, my mother told me the story of Candace. The hitchhiking. The broken nose. The man in the van. San Francisco. The life she never led.

I read the letter alone inside my tarp that first night. The headlamp they outfitted me with was like a third eye fixed to my forehead. The wind battered the tarp and somewhere far off an animal howled or hooted. Every time I reached the end of one page, I told myself I'd tuck away the rest and ration them, one sheet for every day on the trail. But no one had ever written me a

letter before. I couldn't put it down.

There were more than two dozen pages, handwritten. My mother began philosophically. She wondered if the saying *Like Mother, Like Daughter* always had to be true. No, she reasoned within her stream of consciousness. She was nothing like her own mother, who she described as a woman with many hobbies. To me, that sounded exactly like my mother. But no one was there to joke with me at her expense.

She told me about the questionnaire Veld had her complete before she signed me away. She rewrote every inquiry for my benefit, as if to prove that she'd only been following the rules, and that sending me away was just the qualitative outcome of the test she'd taken—like those flowchart quizzes in magazines that pinpoint your dream career, or celebrity beau, or the most flattering style of jean for your body type.

Even if some of the questions seemed overly broad, I couldn't take issue with her responses. She had been honest.

Does your teen struggle with basic family rules and expectations?

Yes.

Has your teen lost interest in former productive activities, hobbies, or sports?

Yes.

Do you have difficulty getting your teen to do household chores or homework?

Yes.

Has your teen had problems with the law?

Yes.

Do you find yourself picking your words carefully when speaking with your teen?

Yes.

Do you suspect your teen has taken money or other valuables from your home?

Yes.

Are you concerned about your teen's safety?

Yes.

Does your teen exploit the insecurities of others for his/her own gain?

That last line item was my mother's greatest fear, probably because it landed so close to home. If she could have rewritten the last question in her own words, it would've gone something like: does your teen skirt friends and family around his/her personal chessboard, only to knock them out of rotation when his/her purpose has been served?

That was how my mother described her friendship with Candace. *I'm not proud of how I behaved*, she mused. *I broke a promise to her. I left her high and dry.* She also wrote, *Darling, I don't recognize you anymore.*

My mother and Candace spent the whole summer in San Francisco. Candace's family had money from the nuts and bolts business. Manufacturing. They were from Ohio. My mother thought this explained a lot. Candace rented a pied-à-terre and before

long, she knew how to get from place to place. She discussed the weather, the traffic, and the neighborhood buzz like she'd been there as long as my mother, longer even. At first, this annoyed my mother tremendously, but Candace had her virtues. She picked up the tab. She was a world-class enthusiast when it came to my mother's ambitions. And, as a bonus, her capacity for forgiveness appeared limitless. She'd proven that.

Rankled by the failure of her great San Franciscan experiment, my mother was on the hunt for a new sense of purpose. When had she been happiest? She liked the long stretches of country, the light of the morning so immediate there, how remarkable the smallest scenes became when there was nothing but nature to entertain you—the squirrels dashing through the trees, the crane balancing in the water, deer haunting the mist, so elegant, so big-eyed.

She decided to find an empty space where she could devote herself to the holiness of the simple and quotidian. She told all this to Candace one day over lunch in Nob Hill. And to her surprise, Candace bit. *If I'm being honest*, my mother wrote, *I lost interest in the whole idea the*

*moment she agreed to go along.*

Despite this, they began scheming. Where would they go? What would their homestead look like? How would they stock their new survivalist lives? An epic garden. An outdoor shower. Fresh honey from a hive of their own.

Candace fretted over the call, but come August, when she was supposed to be heading back east for her senior year, she phoned her parents and told them her plan. She asked for some seed money at my mother's behest, and her parents couldn't believe she was serious. A few months before, Candace had been prim and proper, a sure thing that

would soon yield an investment in the form of a good marriage and well-bred grandchildren. While my mother patted her shoulder, Candace assured her parents that her mind would never. She and my mother had found their calling. Of course, I knew how that turned out.

Then the letter got really good. Once my mother recounted all the years she spent aimless, using people and making perilous choices off the cuff, she was ready to dispense advice.

*You need to get unstuck*, she said, then went on to list all the ways I was in a rut, and all the deeds I'd done to get me stuck there in the first place.

*When the Weplers' house burned down, I wasn't just worried for your safety, and for your friend's safety, and for the safety of the neighborhood you put in jeopardy with your thoughtless actions. I was also embarrassed. What happened to the Weplers was already tragedy enough, but because of your unfortunate decisions, anything that was left of that poor family was destroyed. I can't begin to explain to you the shame I feel just going around town, or simply existing in my own home. I know you are hurting, but I've become frightened of you.*

The letter went on and on in this vein—vacillating between recriminations and computations of the toll I'd taken. She wrote of her choice to send me away.

*I even spoke to your father. That's how much thought I put into it the decision before I made my mind up. In the end, I knew I had to do what was right. One day, I hope you will understand the position you put me in, and that I am just trying to do the right thing as a mother. I know you may not sympathize with me until you have children of your own, but because I love you, I am willing to risk your good graces, my sweetheart.*

Finally, she concluded on an egalitarian note. As I read her last words, headlamp glaring, incredulously far from all the people and places and things I knew and once brought me comfort: I had to laugh at the irony.

*I also need to think about your sister, who is just as deserving of my attention, despite the fact that she has been forced to take a backseat since you began acting out. It is only fair to consider her safety and wellbeing, especially at this tender age.*

*I know all this is difficult to hear from your mother, but I am sad to say I am out of options. You have put this family in an untenable position. I am now forced to act. But it is not all doom and gloom, my sweet. This decision is one made with hope. I really do believe, deep down in my heart, that this is the right choice. In the end, it is what's best for us all.*

Veld tells us it is helpful to think of our lives in terms of before and after.

You might say it was actually a series of events that led to your bad behavior and/or sullied worldview. You might describe it as a gradual process, like slow-moving shade, the sun ticking across the sky until the horizon light has blown out into nothing. They won't believe you. We are fallen angels. No matter who you are or what you've done, there is a root transgression buried in your psyche, a precise moment in time in which you committed your original sin.

Every Veld girl has one. Every Veld girl is split in two. Before and after.

The goal of treatment is to return each angel to Higher Ground, which is what Veld calls the moral, upstanding world of functioning adults. When they tell us stay *on task*, they're referring to our prodigal journey to the land of recovery. Higher Ground is

also a moving goalpost. You think you've made progress. They say you've fallen two steps behind. Go figure.

If you want to graduate from Veld, you have to spill. Gab and gab until your stream of consciousness gushes. If they can keep you talking, they may be able to identify the moment you broke. And to keep you loose-lipped, there's Share Circle. There's also Face-to-Face Share with a counselor, Peer Share with an assigned partner, and Creative Share, involving some avant-garde form of therapeutic release—like rehabilitative abstract posing, in the shape of boulder, for instance. Finally, there's Solo Share, which requires a lot of journaling and zero privacy, since all written materials, doodles and all, are reviewed by your Face-to-Face counselor and later dissected ad nauseum.

If you're smart, you will learn to accept this premise quickly and fish out some moment your counselor can latch onto. It makes everything easier. That's why there are two versions of my break from Higher Ground. The version I tell my counselor, and the version that is true.

I tell my counselor about the first time Antonia and I break into the Weppers' house.

We find a window in back that is closed but unlocked, above the sink in the kitchen. Though I know there is no one inside, I am careful to slide the window open very quietly. I brace for some fetid stench to come uncorked once the window is open, like a sarcophagus unsealed, but there's none. Everything inside is tidy, if not cramped by the accoutrements of the living— cups and bowls set to dry on the rack, a fridge door

cramped with tourist magnets. There are stacks and stacks of mail, all addressed to Dr. Gene Wepler, Mrs. Fiona Wepler, or Mr. Gene Wepler Jr.

Many of the letters are unopened, and may stay that way forever. We leave muddy sneaker prints on the tile and I remind myself that I don't have to care.

Antonia races up the steps to claim a bedroom, as if there's any competition. I reacquaint myself with the living room. I've only ever glimpsed it from the sidewalk. The TV is huge and empty, imploring as the eye of a camera. The couch is slightly concave where an audience once sat, and between two of the cushions, the remote is wedged—as if someone has only flitted off to the kitchen for a snack between commercials.

Antonia yells from upstairs, "This place smells like shit, but I kind of love it."

I think it smells fine. I think it smells like real people. Like cereal boxes, and dryer sheets, all the ash in the dormant fireplace, some lemon-scented polish.

I sit on the couch. I turn on the TV. It zaps alive to the cooking channel, probably the last thing the Weplers ever watched. A woman with a maniacal smile and a constrictive ponytail is making calzones.

In addition to the mass-produced oil paintings and landscape prints cluttering the walls of the Weplers' living room, there are several family photographs. I can see them out of the corner of my eye, but a closer look seems like asking for trouble. Three other sets of eyes seem to be watching the TV alongside me, spirits trapped inside their picture frames. I deserve to be haunted, I think. If the roof fell in, if the ground floor dropped out: I would deserve it.

I go upstairs and find Antonia, who has decided to move into the master bedroom with its sizable en suite. Secretly, I'm happy she has not chosen the little bedroom under the eaves, with its dormer window facing the street. The room I always wanted.

While Antonia digs through Mrs. Wepler's armoire for anything valuable, I run my hands along the walls of Gene Jr.'s bedroom. The wallpaper print is ominous in death, but fitting for a family of aviation enthusiasts. Prop planes. Three of them soar through cloudy skies before the pattern repeats. Yellow plane, red plane, blue. Paired with the more adult accessories in the room—the suit rack, a prim bedspread—the wallpaper is glaringly infantile, but it feels like a message from beyond the grave. From Gene Jr. to me.

When I told this to my counselor, Dr. John—not an MD, but a Ph.D. in Poetry, of all things—he asked me, “What do you believe Gene Jr. was trying to communicate?”

“Oh, I don't know,” I said. “Maybe that we're all hardwired, that our fates are coded from the start, like a video game. And the cruel trick of life is that the warning signs are everywhere, all the time, as obvious as the wallpaper you picked out as a kid and woke up to every day of your life, until the thing you found most comforting in the whole world, all those pieces you gathered to nest a personality of your own, to make you feel invested in the life you're living—you know, actually wind up killing you in the end.”

Dr. John crossed and uncrossed his legs.

“That's quite a read,” he said. “Is that how you really feel?”

“Not really.”

“Be specific.”



“Specifically, I believe in entropy.”

“Think that’s an original idea, do you?”

“I didn’t say it was original. It’s just what I see when I look around.”

*“I don’t care. It’s all a wash. Woe is me. That’s not a gameplan.”*

“Is that a question?”

Dr. John huffed. “I believe it’s a fact,” he said, building up steam. “I believe you use your past mistakes as an excuse to give up, to *not try*—both here in the present, where you are right now, but also as a way of evading the future at large. Have you considered that?”

I didn’t answer.

“You can fight it all you want, but I’d bet my bank account that life is not planning on making any special exemptions for you, my dear. And what do we say to that? How do we go on? How do we stay on task despite all this?” He leaned forward with his secret. “We remind ourselves: the past is a place of reference, not a place of residence.” Classic. End scene.

“Right,” I said. “Of course.”

Dr. John sat back in his chair. “I see you’re unconvinced.”

“No, no. That’s good stuff,” I said. “I’ll definitely mull that over.”

I looked purposefully out the window beyond Dr. John’s salt-and-pepper head. A trio of Veld girls were kneeling in the communal garden, squabbling with the dirt, working away. There had been a late season frost that morning. I could feel Dr. John willing me to resume eye contact, to be cowed by his brilliant insights, but I kept staring out the window. I wanted him to know that I would not be mulling anything over. I didn’t

think of things in terms of before and after, not like he did. I thought of things as here and not here. All I wanted was to be gone.

He tapped the blunt tip of his nose and said, “With all the reminiscing you’re doing, I’m surprised you didn’t bring up Zeke.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” I said.

“You feel quite free to bring up others. Antonia is a favorite. Your mother. Certainly, your sister. I feel I know her quite well by now. Perhaps the best out of all of you.” He smirked. “I’m asking about Zeke because I think your hesitance to speak of him is rather telling. But you’re bright. I’m sure you guessed that. Why do you hold that mistake inside?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said. “I mean, it wasn’t my mistake.”

“Was it an accident?”

“Kind of,” I say. “Mostly. Yes.”

“*Mostly*. Okay, then. The bit that *mostly* doesn’t cover. Who does that belong to?”

I didn’t say anything. Neither did Dr. John. We circled this same cul-de-sac all the time, and I always go back the way I came. I bring up something comparatively innocuous—getting loaded with Antonia, throwing a party on the roof. I wouldn’t let Zeke’s last moments become fodder for Veld. It would’ve initiated a domino effect. I might’ve lost myself there for good.

“Zeke knew something about my sister,” I said. “She targeted him. She does that, makes you think you’re a team. She twisted things all around and tried to make him think I was crazy.”

“I understand,” Dr. John said. “You’ve covered this ground before.”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Your sister believed you were crazy and tried to warn your best friend. Do you think that was her truth?”

“The truth isn’t mine or hers. It just is.”

“Time’s up,” Dr. John said. I thought this was another institutional platitude to become acquainted with, but he just meant our session was over. I glanced out the window again and the girls were leaving the garden, on the hour, slouching back toward the main building. A drizzle must’ve begun, because they all looked up at the same moment and held out their mottled palms to feel for droplets. One girl stuck out her tongue.

“Until next time,” Dr. John said and swiveled around in his chair. I closed the door behind me and went back to kitchen duty, a phrase streaking across my head, on repeat. Yellow plane, red plane, blue.

Now, for the truth. If there is a Higher Ground, I know the night it crumbled under my feet. It begins in The Gables and ends on Geronimo Street.

Fourth of July. The heat has peaked, but there are a few more hours until it’ll be dark enough for fireworks. The troop of us have set out on our vigilante mission—Antonia and Kent, Zeke and me—in order to track down my own man in the van.

There are misgivings among the herd. Kent must be dissuaded from the barbecue spread, and Zeke, ever the boy scout, wonders exactly what we’ll do if we find what we’re looking for. These concerns do not deter Antonia, who has taken up the cause as her own. She begins to draw out details in my story that weren’t there before.

“And the way he was looking at you,” she confirms. “Like a total skeeze, right? Like he wanted you, right there.”

“Yeah,” I say clumsily. “Total skeeze.”

I’ve always had this meter in my head. It’s built into the front of my brain and detects when someone is upset with me, or bored, or just wishy-washy, like a Geiger counter. I can’t rest while the dial wavers. Otherwise, a distinct, blaring pressure builds, a panic of lost control. I must say and do all I can to drive the dial in the right direction. I enact the proper combination of gestures and sentiments until I see it on their face, hear it in their voice. The pressure dissipates. For a little while, I can rest easy in good graces. Dr. John said this was just my own mechanism for wanting to be liked, but that sounded one-dimensional.

I tell Antonia what she wants to hear and feel the dial tilt in my favor.

“I’m disgusted,” she says. “I really am. And he told you to get in his van?”

“Yes,” I say. “He was pushy.”

“I’ll kill him,” she seethes. “I’ll kill that pedophile piece of garbage.”

“Calm down,” Kent says, which only riles her up more. Oh, Kent. He had no idea how quickly Antonia would discard him, and how poorly he’d take it. Soon, he’d be ambushing her with long, confessional emails stuffed with song lyrics. Sprawled out on the Weppers’ couch, Antonia would do dramatic readings of them for me and talk about the weird shape of his penis. She said he looked like a monkfish when he came. I had to look it up later, but I was embarrassed for him. “Assholes love email,” she would say.

We wander The Gables for more than hour. At first, it’s like a game. Man Hunt. We stalk down the center of the street, drift toward the curb when cars roll by and we

wave. The neighborhood is draped in banners. Charcoal smoke rises from every backyard and the air tastes like grit. I know my clothes will stink later.

Sensing a lull in our allegiance to The Plan, Antonia says we should spread out, keep searching, stay the course.

“That’s what happens in horror movies before everyone gets chopped up,” Kent says. “Chop, chop. The slut dies first.”

“I’ve heard you say that exact thing at least two times,” Antonia snaps. “*That’s what happens in horror movies right before—dot, dot, dot. We get it, okay?*”

When Kent sniggers at this, Antonia rolls her eyes in my direction and says, “*Men.*”

I guess she is imitating Zeke’s mother Nance, or perhaps her own. I nod in agreement and roll my eyes theatrically. What a world, I think. A world crawling with men.

A Dodge Caravan putts by on a side street called Coronet Court. I know it’s not the van from earlier, but I wonder if the man in the festive Tommy Bahama is still out there, lamenting his beach-bound sons and looking for little girls to warn about the dangers of a neighborhood clean as this.

“Let’s stick together,” Zeke says diplomatically. “If this guy is dangerous, we’ll have more power in numbers.”

“Fine, but this is like a public service,” Antonia says and bumps hips with Kent. He says something obscene and she folds over laughing. I tell myself not to look back, but I do. I pretend to scan the front yards of the Dutch Colonial, the Split Level, the Tudor Revival, until I realize Antonia is looking right at me. Kent is draining his beer. I

stare back at her as she wipes a tear from her eye, breathless, and flicks it toward the curb. She rubs the wet salt between her fingers. I'm not ready to go home.

When it finally happens, it's like a glitch. We've seen a half-dozen Dodge Caravans so far and all have been harmless, the wrong color, driven by an innocent. We have almost looped back to Zeke's street, ready to give up, when another minivan glides towards us from the opposite direction. It is going slower than the speed limit and it has one headlight out, like a wink. There is something familiar about the sound of its engine, arriving in waves down the block—some loose belt clicking, giving off the faintest whine.

Though it's why we set out in the first place, and I know the discovery will nourish Antonia's innate rage and thus please her, I am hoping no one will notice the van at all. I am hoping we will feed back into the Hellers' party, cool off with a cold beverage. The man in the van can go haunt someone else. I'll have my night, and it will stay mine until I go home and face Fawn, the scatter of glass, my mother and the dog moping.

"Is this the one?" Antonia says.

She puts a hand on Kent's chest to stop him in his tracks. Per usual, any touch between them makes me want to swallow my own tongue, but this time I see the look on Zeke's face, too. Repulsion. Longing. Gut in a vice. Same as mine. I realize I am not the only one in love.

"Hello?" Antonia says. "Is this the asshole? He's coming toward us."

"Maybe," I say. "I don't know. It could be, I guess."

The van decelerates as it draws closer, and Antonia moves from the side of the street to the center, holding out her arms until the van creaks to a halt.

There is a long moment when nothing happens. Antonia keeps her arms steady, face straight. “Kent, do something,” she says.

He goes to the driver-side window to knock politely. “Excuse me, sir,” he says. “Sorry to bother you.”

Even from my spot on the curb, I know it’s the man from earlier. *Kids never listen*, he’d said. I didn’t expect to see him again. I’m almost embarrassed. I’m thinking I must’ve misremembered how it all happened. Perhaps he was just some concerned do-gooder. Was that so hard to believe? I stare at the Dodge’s hood ornament, electrified. I have no idea what will happen.

Beside me, Zeke nudges my arm and I let my jaw unclench. “That’s the guy, isn’t it?” he asks. “It’s him.”

I nod.

“Sorry,” he says, shaking his head, like he is the hall monitor who has let me down.

“It’s no big deal.”

“Don’t worry.” He smiles reassuringly. “I’m memorizing his plates.”

I am going to tell him something like: you’re the best friend I ever had. Or, I wish you could stay so soft-hearted forever. Or, the whole world is before you, and how lucky the world is because of it. But I do not have the gift of foresight, or time.

Instead, I say nothing, because suddenly Kent is yanking the man from behind the wheel of the Dodge. He chokes him by his collar while Antonia shouts in the street, "Get him, Kent!"

Kent forces the man onto the ground by his shoulders. The man cowers, and backs himself into the panel of the driver-side door. The engine is still ticking. The single headlamp casts a beam down the street that dead-ends in someone's living room window, drapes drawn.

Kent calls me over to take a look. "This him?"

"It's him," Antonia answers for me, and I agree. The man is whimpering, so she tells Kent to shut him up. Kent gives him a swift kick meant for the ribs, but the blow lands on his hip and the man wails.

"Easy," Zeke tells his brother. I search the windows and yards of neighboring houses for any witnesses. Up the street, a few younger kids are on bikes, but they are circling their own driveway.

"I'm sorry," the man is gasping. There are tears pouring down his cheeks. Clearly, he is unwell. I'd only seen adults cry like this when they were drunk. "I didn't hurt anyone," the man says. "I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything."

"Stop talking, you sick piece of shit," Antonia says. The way she is hovering over him, I think she might kick him again while he's down. "I know what you do. You think you can just drive around trying to pick up kids? You think you'll get away with it?"

"Dirtbag," Kent says.



“Dirtbag,” Antonia says, and calls me closer. We form a huddle between the two of us. Antonia’s cheeks are flush and a loop of hair has fallen from her ponytail. She looks like an athlete, dialed in. “What should we do with him?” she asks.

By daylight on the empty street, the man had seemed like a menace, devious, the eyes of a jaguar. Now, he’s weeping, his body improbably petite. Though he has a gut, he sports two narrow chicken legs, the weak chin and hunchback of a man who sits all day. He’s won’t stop blubbering, as if he believes his life might end tonight on Pioneer Crossing—an unthinkable conclusion to the light stalking we’ve been up to for the last two hours.

“I don’t know,” I say.

The man hiccups and says excuse me. He goes quiet then as he examines my face. I think he is recognizing me for the first time, weighing whether my presence will help or hurt.

“Let’s teach him a lesson,” Kent says, which almost makes me laugh. What movie does he think he’s in? And why would he ever pick that part to play?

“Please,” the man says softly. “I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”

“You didn’t scare me,” I say.”

Antonia kneels close to him. “She’s not scared of you. You disgust her.”

“I shouldn’t have stopped to chat like that,” the man says. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sorry. I was just looking for someone to talk to. Sometimes I just want someone to talk to.”

“Ew,” Antonia says.

“My house is close,” he says. “I was just driving home is all. No harm, no foul. Okay? Let me drive home. No trouble, no trouble.”

Antonia looks to me and shakes her head. “It’s your say-so, boss.”

“What street do you live on?” Zeke pipes up. “If you really live here—what street?”

The man looks between us. “Pine Shoal,” he says carefully, as if we have the answer and he is only guessing at it.

“He could’ve just said any street name,” Antonia argues. “He could be making it up.”

“Then take us there,” I say, and surprise myself.

Antonia latches onto this idea immediately, which convinces me that it must be the right one. Zeke’s eyes are boring into the back of my head, but I won’t look. After all my hand-wringing, I’ve finally moved to the front of our pack.

We tell the man to leave his van parked on Pioneer. He resists, but Kent is at least a foot taller and surprisingly game to play enforcer. Kent has the man by the collar and we all walk toward Pine Shoal, a few blocks deeper into The Gables.

The man stops us in front a Ranch-style with no lights on, no car in the driveway.

“This is it. Home sweet home,” he says, as if he’s forgotten what we’re all doing in his front yard. The four of us look between each other. We hadn’t planned this far. No one wants to follow him inside, that seems like a reversal in the power dynamic, and an irrevocable escalation.

“Go on,” I say. “Unlock the front door then.”

“I’m taking down the house number,” Antonia says. “31 Pine Shoal. Don’t think this is over for you.”

Kent shoves the man toward the stone walkway. He rights himself and fiddles with the keys in his hand. “I’m going in now,” he says. “I’m saying goodbye.”

He opens the screen door first, unlocks the deadbolt, the knob. It takes him a few tries and he glances over his shoulder, laughing nervously. Finally, the front door opens to nothing, interior black. “Goodnight,” he calls, once the screen door is shut behind him, but he does not disappear inside. He stands there behind the perforated scrim, staring at us. His face looks like a composite of many faces. He does not look like the man from the van in daylight, and he does not look like the cry-baby we’ve been forcing down the street. He stands straight as a sentinel, eyes tracking. He only turns away and closes the door when we are halfway down Pine Shoal, back toward Pioneer, all of our engines revving and nowhere to go.

It is in this vein that the second half of my night unfolds. I am a primed pump, inclined toward distrust and remedial action. I want to sprint home and unleash all my antipathy before it bleeds away with the adrenaline. I would give Fawn a piece of my mind, give one to my mother, too—for being gone so long, for returning without warning, for making her absence and resurfacing a labor I have to lift myself.

I tell Zeke I have to leave, and he does not question why. He is too busy inside his head, flexing and unflexing his fists, reclaiming his level head. Even Kent is stalking around for someone to punch. He grips Antonia’s hip and draws her to his lips roughly. Zeke looks like he might faint. The fireworks will start soon.

When I make it back to Geronimo Street, there is black smoke wafting from an open window of the warehouse. Second story. Kitchen.

I sprint up the concrete steps in action-hero mode, but when I burst through the front door, it's all smiles. My mother is flapping a dishcloth toward the window.

"Sorry, sorry," she says. "Wee little accident with a roast chicken."

At the long table, Billy the ex-boyfriend waves hello. Beside him, the tidy woman from Connecticut.

I haven't seen him since he and my mother broke up months ago. They'd shut themselves inside her bedroom for a marathon of heart-to-hearts. During that week, every movement inside the loft felt tense, like even the mildest of interactions could be seen as choosing sides. I didn't know how to behave. How could I tell him that I was rooting for him? I liked Billy. Once, I'd woken up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, and I almost tripped over him in the living room. He was sprawled face-down in front of the record collection and subwoofer. I thought he'd had too much to drink, or that he'd had a heart attack. It seemed adults were always having heart attacks. He turned his head dreamily toward me and gave me a thumbs up from the ground. A Brian Eno song was on. "Killer bass," he'd said.

When he moved out, I brought down the last box of knickknacks to his old hatchback. My mother had devoted herself to organizing closets for the day and would not come down. Billy put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a firm hug, a couple encouraging claps on the back. I planned to watch him drive off until I couldn't see him anymore, but he stalled behind a parallel parker and hit a stoplight, so I just went inside and cried. Now he is back at his customary spot, and he has brought company.

“Hi Billy,” I say warily. “Long time no see.”

The woman from Connecticut introduces herself. Billy is smiling too much. He keeps glancing toward the kitchen, waiting for my mother to intervene, but she’s busy darting around, chopping this and that. Billy and his newly minted wife had been traveling down from upstate. My mother had sent friendly well-wishes the day before. The route lined up, so did the timing. My mother insisted. Voila. That’s what Billy says.

“Is Fawn here?” I ask my mother. All the fire I’d been carrying in my belly is buried. Now, I just want reinforcements.

“Dog got out. Your sister’s looking for him in back,” my mother says, referring to the vacant lot the warehouse borders, and beyond that, a small copse of trees between industrial plots. I think about the man in the van from The Gables, the threat we believed we neutralized. Across town, my mother has let my little sister wander. It is almost dark.

“Should I go get her?” I say. It’s not the first time the dog has gone loose, but I want out. I can see it on Billy’s face. He knows he has made a mistake in coming back here. When my mother play hosts, it either draws out her most magnetic self, or flips her manic.

Without answering my questions, she begins prattling on about the eye-opening experience of pet ownership, and Billy stares straight ahead. His wife has pulled her whole body in close, making herself as small as possible. I realize there is a small swarm of ants on the far end of the table, overrunning the cheeseboard.

“I’ll be right back,” I say and toe my way towards the door.

“Be back for fireworks,” my mother says from the kitchen, suddenly alert. She has her favorite chef’s knife in hand, the one with the wooden grip, and she brandishes it

animatedly while she describes the night's plan. "We'll all head up to the roof, and we'll cart up the beer and champagne and wine and gin and put it all on ice, so the heat doesn't get to it. And we'll just forget about this silly chicken. We'll light sparklers and stake out the best view of the valley so we can see every single firework go off. The best spot in town is right up on our roof, isn't that right? Billy remembers, I'm sure. It's going to be a blast. No pun intended. Ha. Ha. Get your sister, will you? I've got crudités here. What's the point if we miss the show?"

"Right," I say. "I'll go and get her."

Billy and his bride are on their own.

I find Fawn in the back lot. She is standing at the edge of the clearing made of concrete, framed by an old dumpster and a few tangled trees wild with neglect. I call her name and her she jumps. She squints across the lot and waves.

"I found something," she calls, and I go to her.

What's she's found is a headless duck. No feather is out of place. Each frond is oiled and glossy, in shades of dappled gray. I almost expect the animal to stir awake as I draw closer—a peek of the head from between its scapulars, a shudder of wings as it flies off in fright, having overslept while the rest of the flock left for the river two towns south. That's how clean the decapitation is. The shape of its body is so perfect that I want to take it in my arms, like a bread boule, or the hull of a tiny boat.

"What happened to it?" I ask.

Fawn shrugs. "Don't know. I was looking for Peanut Butter and I saw it. I thought it was alive, but then it didn't move at all." She points her toe toward it. "It's definitely dead, right?"

“I think so,” I say. “Do you think the dog got to it? That doesn’t seem right.”

“No, Peanut wouldn’t do that,” Fawn says. “Is Billy still in there?”

I want to be mad at her. I remind myself of the tape, the chase around the loft. It seems like it happened last week, not this morning. “He’s still there,” I say. “So is that lady.”

“Great.”

“Yeah.” A breeze wisps across the lot and a few of the duck’s feathers ripple.

“I’m supposed to come get you for the fireworks. We’re about to go up on the roof.”

“I thought you were going to be at Zeke’s?”

“Decided to come back. Should we go in?”

“I guess we’re supposed to,” Fawn says, “but I don’t want to.”

“Me neither.”

Fawn looks over her shoulder. The warehouse looms large. The spill of concrete between us and it seems immense. What had occupied the lot before? I couldn’t remember, though I recalled the summer they tore it all down. A team of bulldozers did the job in a few weeks, followed by a caravan of dump trucks that rolled through town one after the other, like a line of worker ants. The lot was left tidy for prescient developers to scoop up and build out, but none have come. One day, they will.

“Are you still mad at me?” I look down at Fawn expecting to see her best show of penitence, but she is only asking because she wants to know, not because she is hoping for a certain answer.

“Not as much as before,” I say.

She nods. She can work with his. “Want to look for Peanut before we have to go back?”

“Mom said to hurry up.”

“Five minutes?”

“Okay,” I say. “Five minutes.”

We walk downtown together. The sun is on its way down, but bursts of last light shoot down alleys and empty plots between buildings. Halo light flushes all the ancient cornices, friezes, mansard roofs. A few firecrackers rebound off the long planes of abandoned buildings, all those boarded windows and doors.

“Look there,” Fawn says, at two cats grooming each other on an old stone stoop that leads nowhere. The house it once belonged to has already been demolished. I could walk up the steps and right off the edge, drop back down into the center of a dead lot. Life goes on, I think. It could all be made handsome again, if we were the sort of people who knew what to do with what they’re given.

We call out, “Peanut! Peanut Butter!” and I think of what Zeke said once: never name a pet something you don’t want to go around screaming.

Fawn and I get to talking about Billy, the awkward stutter-stop of finding him back at our kitchen table. The longer we walk, the more we shift the blame from our mother to him. He loved her once. He should know better. And who will be there to clean up the mess when he drives off again? The carcass of the roast chicken dumped. Empty bottles trashed. So many sticky surfaces. That’ll be us, we agree. No one appreciates that.

“Good riddance,” Fawn says. “I hope he drops dead.”

I laugh and say, “Me too.”



The ensuing quiet is tender, and Fawn announces suddenly, "I'm sorry about your show. I don't even know why I was so mean. I like that show. I like May."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry about your figurines."

"I forgive you," she says, and does a little skip.

I think of my erased episodes and a knot tightens in my chest knowing I'll never get them back. I remember the rest of my collection. "I can have the rest of my tapes back though, right?" I ask. "You still have them somewhere?"

Fawn is smiling straight ahead, like someone she recognizes is walking down the street toward us. "Sure, sure," she says. "I have them. I'll give them to you. They're fine."

"Okay. Thanks."

"And you'll give me some of the figurines."

"Well, they're broken. I think they all might be done for," I say. "I thought you knew that. Maybe there's some we can fix? I don't know."

Fawn's smile falters. "All of them are broken?"

"I didn't get a chance to look around but, I think so."

We go the last few blocks in silence, rounding back toward Geronimo Street. I call out for the dog with renewed enthusiasm. I whistle and make kissy noises and take extra care to eyeball alleys and side streets for Fawn's missing pet. She says nothing, only keeps pace and stares. The meter in my head flashes. Unfavorable, it reads. Though Fawn is the one who wronged me first, I find myself clamoring to coerce the needle. I shout for Peanut Butter again and again, though the light has snuffed out completely, the sky a dull shadow. I begin to dangle bribes that might tip Fawn in the right direction.

“Let’s make fancy sodas,” I say, which is what we call Coca Cola in highball glasses filled to the brim with crushed ice and lemon slices. “Or we can make a pillow fort on the roof and bring up snacks. Or both.”

Fawn shrugs. “I’ll think about it.”

Does your teen exploit the insecurities of others for his/her own gain?

Struggling teens. Troubled teens. Teens in jeopardy. Teens in the wild. They never worry about the children. A firework whistles up into the sky and explodes, raining down like gunfire on tin. Elsewhere, the show has begun.

“Ready to call it?” I ask Fawn at our front door. “We can look again after the fireworks, I promise. I bet Peanut is just scared of all the noise and is hiding.”

Fawn is quick to agree. “Oh, it’s okay. He’ll come back when he’s ready.”

“You think so?”

“Sure. I’m ready to go inside now.”

“Are you all right?”

Fawn turns the knob on the warehouse’s double doors. “Why wouldn’t I be?” she says brightly. “Thanks for all your help. Everything is going to be fine.”

I am about to ask what she means, but she is already scampering through the entryway, up the steps to the second floor. I linger on our front step a moment longer, trying to soothe myself before I face the music inside. My meter is all haywire. I want to go into my room, click around the computer for news and promo photos from all my shows. I want to read interviews with the stars. I want to be alone.

Down the street, a pair of floodlights blink on. They’re motion-triggered, arranged to illuminate the defunct bay of an old ice storage depot. I wait to see what set off the

bulbs, but nothing appears amiss. There's a pile of junk and overgrowth at the base of the brick building, but it's all junk I've seen before.

After a moment, the floodlights blink off again with a dull *tink*. There is a quick double-tap of fireworks popping in the distance. The lights flick on. I don't know what it is that compels me down the street—curiosity, a death wish, a more pronounced fear of what's inside the warehouse instead of out. I find myself standing at the edge of the beam. That is when I see the dog among the rubble.

I notice him because there are three pins sticking out of his hip, near his tail. They catch the light like tinsel. Peanut Butter's nose twitches, but he does not lift his head when I fall down on my knees beside him. I can't tell if he's been buried in the detritus on purpose or if he has burrowed there for cover, or a place to die.

"Peanut Butter," I murmur, and the dog whines. He is sprawled on his side but tries to nudge himself closer to my voice, though I can tell the motion pains him. There are little pockmarks on his underside, coins of pink flesh charred a few layers deep, raw and leaking. Burn marks. Like a flame has been held to his belly.

His long side ripples, as if to displace water, or an irritant from his fur. I go to remove the pins stuck in his hip and he cries. I apologize. I am crying, too. Lights off.

I wave one hand and soothe Peanut Butter's head with the other. Lights on.

His breath is coming faster, which allows a glimmer of hope while his side rises and falls beneath my palm. Besides the obvious wounds, I don't know what's wrong with him, but then he starts to gag. His gums are gray as he heaves. Bile curdles in his lips, the smell like burnt milk.

I shout down the street but a series of fireworks explode and the boom triples itself down the block. The far-off pomp and circumstance of “America, the Beautiful” strikes up, blasting over a loudspeaker at the high school’s baseball field. Peanut Butter is panting. One of the sores on his belly seems to come loose, as if it was stopper for what’s inside. My hands hover over his body. I don’t know what to do. I hold his head in my hands. Fireworks explode in a torrent that seems to go on outrageously long. One after another, sometimes many at once. Car alarms join the thunder as the finale strikes up.

The dog licks feverishly at my palm, my knuckles, the space between my fingers and up my wrists, giving the tiniest nibbles from his flat front teeth, a ravenous little suckle of desperation. “What’s wrong with you?” I cry.

I think about leaving him. I could toss off the responsibility, and who would really know? He is an animal. Another species. We don’t belong to each other. Lights off.

I imagine I’ll sense the life leech from the tips of his fur, how quickly his scruff goes cold—but everything feels the same. One breath he is here, and the next never comes. How unceremonious, I think. How arbitrary.

The fireworks stop. The song is over. A rat scuttles by, unbothered. Lights on.

I hear my mother and my sister, our guests. They’re all clapping and cheering on the rooftop. I sit and listen to the chatter. I hear Fawn’s name. Everyone seems in good spirits, and no one asks where I am. They’re all laughing about something.

Lights off.