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One Bruised Apple

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One Bruised Apple

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY


Stacie McCall Whitaker

2017


THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

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We hereby recommend that the thesis of Stacie McCall Whitaker entitled *One Bruised Apple* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



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Abstract

The Quinn Family is always moving, and sixteen-year-old Sadie is determined to find out what they're running from. In yet another new neighborhood, Sadie is befriended by a group of teens seemingly plagued by the same sense of tragedy that shrouds the Quinn family. Sadie quickly falls for Trenton, a young black man, in a town and family that forbids interracial relationships. As their relationship develops and is ultimately exposed, the Quinn family secrets unravel and Sadie is left questioning all that she thought she knew about herself, her family, and the world.

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To my incredible family: Jeremy, Tyler, Koralynn, Damon, and Ivan for your support, encouragement, sacrifice, and patience. I've learned more than I ever imagined in the course of two years, but no workshop or seminar could've taught me that success depends largely on a writer's family. At times this was a difficult journey, and I couldn't have made it without you beside me. Thank you for always believing in me. This thesis wouldn't exist without you.

–With Love and Gratitude

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Preface

I was born a “navy brat,” which is to say that I was born into a culture of storytelling. The first page of my story began in 1980 in Norfolk, Virginia. My mother carried me two weeks past her due date and went into labor just moments after my dad’s ship, a guided missile destroyer, pulled into port. He’d been underway for six months.

I was stubborn from the start, I was told—refused to come into the world until my dad returned. When the ship’s crew learned of a potential delivery on the pier, they retrieved my father from the engine room and the Captain ordered him off the ship.

I was born at Portsmouth Naval Hospital, where I became the third of four children in my family. My father left the military when I was eight years old, but I can still recount stories today as though I were with my father in Spain or Greece; beside him in the stuffy engine room or standing starboard as the destroyer crossed the Prime Meridian; with my mother at another wife’s house when she cracked her husband upside the head with a cast-iron skillet for sleeping with a Mediterranean woman on a liberty pass. Though my parents didn’t write, they were the first, and most important, storytellers in my life.

In the years after my dad left the navy, we moved frequently—occasionally fulfilling a full year’s lease, sometimes picking up again after just a few months—and our moves were often cross-country. My dad held a variety of blue-collar positions, and we went where he could find a job. When the work ran out, we did too. Books became a source of stability for me; characters were my friends and confidants. The people outside

of my immediate family lacked permanence or depth, and fictional characters provided that.

In many ways, I viewed each move as a new story, not a new chapter, but a new story. Although the plot remained largely the same, the characters, setting, and language changed. I learned regional dialects, understood where and when to use which words: Pop or soda; couch or sofa; supper or dinner; howdy or hello; wicked or mad; go or come with; you guys, you's or ya'll. Words held more weight than their definitions. Syntax and diction and subtext were studies I conducted outside the classroom. These literary elements were an everyday part of my life even when I didn't know the terms.

I began writing at an early age as a way to make sense of the world, to understand myself and my life. At the start, my stories were just a revised version of my own life with snappier comebacks, happier endings, bigger houses, better food. But it was a place where I could speak without consequence. I have always felt as though I had my left foot in one world, my right in another, and that I occupied some static space in between. I never felt as though I truly belonged anywhere and I didn't subscribe to the same set of beliefs that my family and neighbors did. My parents called me stubborn and rebellious, said I'd make a great attorney because I made it my mission in life to challenge everyone on everything, but it wasn't defiance. I just didn't believe what they believed, didn't see the world as they did. I liked to create hypothetical situations and challenge their views.

In fifth grade, I was elected as Secretary of Student Council. I quickly became bored with taking notes and reading minutes at meetings and decided instead to interview teachers and staff about world events, then write weekly columns for the elementary

newsletter. The first article, an environmental piece about what we could all do to preserve resources, went well. But I was demoted back to Secretary in week two when I tried polling teachers to determine how many were pro-life and how many pro-choice. My mistake might have been trying to use my hypothetical situations to persuade teachers. It might also have been that we hadn't even taken sex ed yet and they thought it inappropriate to discuss abortion with a ten-year-old. Whatever the reason, I realized that like my parents, all adults, it seemed, became quickly agitated by anyone trying to challenge their beliefs.

My (almost) two weeks as a journalist taught me that I wasn't well-suited for neutrality. In tenth grade, however, I experienced my first puppy love: being on the debate team. Finally, a place where I could discuss critical issues *and* try to persuade. I'm not sure how debate teams work in most schools but our coach was also the creative writing teacher, and he encouraged my story-telling approach to arguing a point. Each person on the team had a role, so to speak, and mine relied heavily on emotional appeal. I only debated for one season because my family moved out of state shortly after the final competition, but I believe that experience shaped my writing. I enjoyed creating fictional scenarios but I didn't especially love the time limits or public speaking aspect of the debates.

At my new school, I enrolled in my first creative writing course which ultimately landed me in the guidance counselor's office. The first story I wrote for the class was about a teenage girl who contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion after a car accident. The girl, who blamed herself for her parents' divorce, moved with her mother to a new school for a fresh start. At some point in the story, the girl wonders if her parents would

reconcile if she were dead. As with most of my work, I wrote the story in first-person POV and my teacher believed the story to be true. At length I was able to convince the guidance counselor the story was fictional and by the end of the semester my teacher realized it too. My stories centered on topics of teen pregnancy, suicide, child abuse, poverty, and sexual orientation. My teacher's feedback often focused on theme. I was repeatedly asked to "tone it down," and she expressed concern over my "preoccupation with death, heartbreak, and tragedy." I became very self-conscious about my work, didn't write fiction for at least ten years after that.

My poetry from that time reflected similar sentiments to my fiction. The titles, while not terribly inventive, are suggestive of the themes: "New Place," "Confined," "Insanity," "Silence," "Lost," "Blind," "Abandoned," "Alone," "Nobody," and so on. There weren't a lot of happy titles, but that's because writing was my method of processing negative emotions. It provided a sense of control that I lacked in my life. I wrote primarily for myself and, after that creative writing course in high school, rarely shared my work.

I didn't always want to be a professional writer. I'm not someone who claims to know this was my calling from an early age. Though I've always written creatively, I did so because it helped me understand the world around me. I didn't expect to share that with an audience. I was twenty-three years old—married with two children—before I enrolled in college. It was 2003, I was married to a U.S. Marine, and we were stationed in Hawaii. Even when I started college, I had other plans in mind. I studied Criminal Law, Forensic Science, and Psychology before studying English Literature and Creative Writing. It took me ten years to complete my undergrad degrees, partly because I had so

many interests, partly a result of personal events—constant deployments, childbirths, divorce, major surgeries, remarriage, additional surgeries, etc.—but I graduated in 2013 at thirty-three years old as a mother of four, a U.S. Navy wife, and still no clear plan for what I wanted to do. I worked as a copywriter and scriptwriter for years, but it wasn't until I began my novel that I realized writing is what I wanted to do, what I needed to do.

I didn't set out to apply to MFA programs. To be honest, I didn't even know such a thing existed. I knew I wanted to go to grad school but my sights were set on social work or mental health counseling—I wanted to help people, empower people, motivate people to express themselves, and it never occurred to me that I could do all that in writing. After half a day researching programs online, Google suggested a low-residency MFA program in Creative Writing, and I clicked. When my husband left for work that morning I planned to narrow down grad programs in psychology. When he returned, I had a list of MFAs. I can't explain the certainty in my decision other than to say that once I discovered what the programs offered, I never looked back. I researched extensively and applied to only four schools. I think it was better that I knew so little about MFA programs. I didn't consider rankings or alumni, and I had no preconceived notions about what the curriculum should entail. As a result, I selected programs that I felt were best suited for my goals. I wanted to attend a program that allowed me the opportunity to work on a literary journal, study abroad for one residency, and study cross-genre. Additionally, I only considered programs with an element of critical analysis and those that encouraged writers to openly explore social themes. I also read faculty work, weighed tuition costs and available scholarships, and studied the language used to describe student/mentor interactions. It was important to me that I be challenged, not

judged. With that information, I created a rating system on a five-point scale and assigned a value to each of my criteria based on order of importance.

Stonecoast was my first choice with a score of “5!” and, naturally, they were the last program to respond. I was so ecstatic during my acceptance call that I almost forgot to ask what genre I’d be working in. Fiction, I was told, as though it was the obvious answer. This was the consensus from all the programs I applied to and it genuinely surprised me—frightened me, in fact. I had taken numerous writing courses in college, but my Creative Writing focus was in poetry. I did well in the fiction courses but I mostly experimented with genre fiction, fantasy fiction and magical realism. The excerpt I submitted with my MFA application was the first piece of literary fiction I’d written in nearly twenty years. I was suddenly terrified at the thought of sharing my work with experienced writers, *real* writers.

For all my point values and calculations, I was wholly unprepared for the reality of my first residency. I had completed all the suggested and required readings for every seminar or presentation I was interested in attending, and I’d read each workshop manuscript three times. I marked-up manuscripts and returned them to the authors in a labeled, color-coded folders. I was organized but I wasn’t prepared. There exists no quantitative measure to score the emotional impact of hearing faculty readings that expressed everything I could not, or students openly discussing craft elements and sharing book titles. I can’t account for the fact that I discounted something so obvious, but it didn’t occur to me that I’d be among so many people who shared my love for the written word. People who *wanted* to talk about it. I didn’t anticipate being immediately welcomed into a community of people who shared similar interests and beliefs as me.

I took nearly all of my undergrad writing courses online, so I'd never experienced serious literary discussions in person. Until my first residency at Stonecoast, I'd never attended readings or workshops. I envisioned an intense but sterile ten-day academic setting where I would take pages of notes that I could apply to my writing. I did, of course, take pages of notes but the greatest benefit of this program can't be documented. A sense of belonging can't be taught, only felt. For me, that changed everything. I knew on my first day of residency that I was doing exactly what I was meant to do, that I was in a program that would help me transition from someone who wrote creatively to a confident writer.

When I returned home from my first residency I realized that those ten days were the first of my life that I ever felt I had an identity of my own, one that wasn't relational to the roles or people in my life. I wasn't so-and-so's wife, or so-and-so's mom. I was just Stacie, the student. Stacie, the writer. And it was the first time ever that I felt I wasn't pretending to be something or someone else. Faculty and student readings moved me to tears and nobody told me to suck it up, or to dry my eyes. Nobody reminded me that I had a reputation to uphold or people to impress. In the military, it's a given that the mission comes before spouses and families. My dad was once told that if the Navy wanted him to have a wife and kids they'd have issued them in his sea bag. I had spent the whole of my childhood, and fifteen years of adulthood sacrificing my dreams and aspirations to accommodate the people in my life. Ten days in Maine changed that. I was a writer, and I had a lot to learn.

I learned a lot about technical elements—speech tags, passive voice, scene structure, POV, narrative arc, etc.—during my very first workshops and seminars, but

characterization, plot, language, tension, and pacing took more time. My characters were initially either all good or all bad, and there was little dramatic tension in my work. I was, however, a master of melodrama. There was no subtlety to my characters' intentions, actions, or words. No reason for a reader to care about the story I wanted to tell. I also seemed to have it backwards with regards to important details. I told too much when I needed to allow readers to think for themselves and I was vague to the point of confusion in areas that required clarity. It wasn't difficult for me to grasp and employ small technical changes but creating complex characters took a lot of time and hard work. A lot of failed attempts, and a lot of close reading.

I can't stress enough how helpful the annotations were to me. I'd always been a voracious reader, but I came to realize two things: I wasn't reading books that aligned with the themes I was writing; and I'd always immersed myself in the stories, paid no attention to the craft elements. Feedback from my mentors was of critical importance. Knowing my weaknesses allowed me to study those elements in successful works. I wrote my annotations on craft elements I struggled with rather than those of interest.

Dialogue was the most difficult for me because it is often taught with subtext as the primary emphasis. I read several craft books with very little improvement in practice, but analyzing dialogue in assigned readings made all the difference. Only when I analyzed books critically did I come to see dialogue as connected to everything—inseparable from plot, pacing, characterization, tension, and setting. I'd argue that dialogue is the most fundamental literary device, the most difficult to utilize to its full potential.

I think my biggest breakthrough in writing was in coming to view dialogue as a vehicle for all other devices. I had previously attempted to improve dialogue by employing advanced techniques—sarcasm, miscommunication, unanswered questions, etc.—but I still treated it as disconnected from everything else. I believe my writing took a significant turn after studying dialogue so closely. I dedicated months to examining how it works, when it works, when it doesn't, and why. There is a necessary awareness of all other craft elements when writing dialogue, and understanding the relationship between these devices allowed for growth in other areas of weakness.

In my application essay I wrote that one of my goals was to personalize my voice as a writer. I realize, now, that what I needed was permission to use it. I think I've always known which stories I wanted to tell, but I didn't know *how* to tell them. Perhaps, more importantly, I wasn't confident that I possessed the authority to tell them.

For a long time, I preferred collecting stories to writing them. For as long as I can recall, I've been interested in people's personal histories, their life experiences. One night, for example, when I was eighteen, some friends and I were on our way to a nightclub and stopped for gas along the way. Inside the convenience store, a middle-aged gentleman filled the front pocket of his backpack with miniature cups of coffee creamer. He wasn't very sly about it either. The cashier shook her head and waved her hand as if to say it wasn't a big deal. He left the store without purchasing anything and as the cashier rang me up, I inquired about the man. She informed me that she'd worked there for nearly ten years, that the man had been a regular customer for at least that long, but had recently lost his wife and was "down on his luck." Outside, the man poured the

creamers into a small dish then called around the side of the building for a cat. I was genuinely moved by this and struck up a conversation.

My friends wanted to leave for the club and I stayed at the convenience store with this man, named Russell. They, of course, thought I was crazy but agreed to pick me up on the way back. For about five hours I talked to Russell, listened as he told his story. His wife battled colon cancer for three years. He lost his job during that time because he often missed work to take her to appointments, or to care for her when she was particularly ill. They had tried unsuccessfully to have children but, as Russell stated, “it wasn’t in the cards.” They’d been married almost twenty years, and he was grateful that he managed to hold on to the house until after she passed. He was thankful that she didn’t see him “fall so far.” When I met Russell, he was homeless, yet even while he grieved, he still had hope that he’d find his way back. I later saw the place Russell called home: a shabby tent in the woods.

I visited with him several times a week on my way home from my job as a waitress at Steak-N-Shake. Russell liked Frisco burgers and strawberry shakes, so when my shifts ended on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays I brought him dinner and we talked. I helped Russell get a new license, which was incredibly difficult for those without a permanent address. Over the course of six months I worked with Russell to create a resume, apply for jobs, and eventually secure an apartment. The world, it seemed, had given up on this man when he most needed help and even when my friends thought I would end up hacked to pieces and strewn about the woods, I couldn’t shake his story. I don’t know what became of Russell—we lost contact when I moved out of

state—but he was working two jobs when I left, and I like to think he fully integrated back into society.

People like Russell captivate me. Stories like his move me. It is not unusual for me to engage in lengthy conversation with homeless people, prostitutes, addicts, or convicted criminals. That these people are considered less deserving of kindness is a concept that has always escaped me. Perhaps there's something in my demeanor that betrays this belief because everywhere I go, strangers talk to me.

My classmates at Stonecoast remarked on this during our residency in Ireland—even in Dublin and Dingle, I rarely made it more than fifty yards without stopping to converse with someone. I was eager to experience a different culture, but I didn't want to do it with blinders on.

For all the traveling I've done in the United States, I had never travelled out of the country. My residency in Ireland was the first time I'd taken a passenger train (or any public transportation), the first time I had a French Press coffee; my first taste of lamb, of calamari; my first swim in the North Atlantic Ocean (with seals!)—so many firsts. But I also smelled the flowers there, felt the gravel, visited castles and cliffs, and met the people. I met a former member of the IRA, talked to local fisherman, cab drivers, and pub-goers. In Dublin, I met an elderly couple—the gentleman Irish, the lady English. During our chat, we discovered the woman was from the same town in England where my grandfather was born and raised. She knew my mother's family name, in fact. In the span of a few hours, she told me things about my grandfather's upbringing in that part of England, at that particular time that I'd not have otherwise known. I've kept in contact

with her, and during a recent trip back to England she sent me photos of my grandfather's various childhood homes, the church his parents were married in, the schools he attended.

The novel excerpt in this thesis was borne from my own observations and experiences but it is not my story. The summer after my seventh grade year, I met a young black boy named Preston and developed an instant crush on him. We walked around the neighborhood holding hands one day, and a neighbor immediately called my parents.

It isn't as though I'd never heard racial slurs or was oblivious to my parents' prejudice, but until that day that I never thought to question it. Race had always been positioned in a way that seemed logical to me as a child—there are good and bad people of every color. I considered Preston a good person and didn't give it much thought beyond that. But their reaction was visceral and violent, and one that I neither understood nor expected in its intensity. Their beliefs about him, and black men and most black people came to light in all their ugliness, and just holding hands with this boy elicited a reaction I'd never witnessed before. Disgust. My parents were genuinely and vehemently disgusted by me.

I asked them to explain why I wasn't allowed to like Preston—never mind that I wasn't old enough to date anyone, that played no part in the conversation—but the only reason they provided is that whites shouldn't "mix" with blacks. *But why?* I asked. *You just don't,* they said. It was my first conscious awareness of racial injustice. I was, of course, angry that my parents were exercising control over who I was allowed to like, but it was also the first time I felt genuinely ashamed of myself for obeying. When Preston

asked why I couldn't hang out with him anymore, he already knew the answer. It was evident in his posture, his eyes, his voice—but he asked anyway, and I confirmed what he already knew. He was black. That's all. I had no other explanation. Preston nodded and walked away and never spoke to me again.

This novel isn't my story. The characters are not real, the family is not mine, these particular events did not occur. However, the attitudes and prejudices are pervasive and real. This novel is partly the choice I wish I had made, my protagonist the strong-willed girl I wish I had been, but mostly it's an attempt to convey my conviction that human feelings are stronger and far more important than learned beliefs. This novel is my attempt to understand something I still don't understand, to find reason where there is probably none. The day I sat down to write this book is, in my mind, the day I knew I wanted to write. I can't claim it as a conscious decision—it just felt necessary. In the days after Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, MO, I heard arguments from friends, family, and neighbors that police do not target young black men, but they do. I've seen it happen.

Early versions of this novel included scenes that came directly from my own experience. I have since removed these portions of the book because they don't belong to my characters but rather to me. In one such experience, as a friend and I were waiting in a restaurant parking lot for my brother to get off work, we were attacked by three guys. Two of these guys were white, one was black. I was sprayed in the face with pepper spray, pushed to the ground and physically assaulted. As these guys tore at my clothes, my friend managed to get free and ran into the restaurant for help. I can guess what these

guys planned to do, but they succeeded only in temporarily blinding me, inflicting a few small scratches and shredding a new shirt. When my friend ran for help, they fled.

What is most memorable about that night was what came after the attempted assault. We gave statements to the police and provided physical descriptions of the assailants. The young black man was the easiest to describe—he was unusually short, perhaps only five feet tall, and had just three fingers on his right hand. He was the one who sprayed me and the only one I saw clearly before losing my sight to pepper spray. My friend described the two white guys. After a lengthy process of documenting the events, the police informed us that they had a few suspects outside who matched our descriptions, asked if we would be willing to identify them. For numerous reasons, I can't believe this to be standard police practice but it happened nonetheless.

The “few suspects” they mentioned was actually a single line of approximately twenty guys. Black guys. I don't know that I can effectively put into words the way I felt standing there. Shocked—how and where did the police find this many young black men in so short a time? Ashamed—I felt responsible for this herding of humans like livestock. Conflicted—I wanted the guys to be punished even if it meant only identifying one. Angry—the police made no real attempt to find our attackers, didn't bother to round up any white guys, didn't bother to eliminate any of the black guys by simply counting their fingers or considering their height. Appalled—there was absolutely no reason for the police to do what they did.

My friend and I stood staring. An officer asked if we could identify any of the “suspects,” and neither of us said a word. He came closer, spoke in nearly a whisper and

said, “I know. They all look the same. How about you just pick one out. Don’t matter which one.” I don’t think I’ve ever been so stunned by someone’s words. That officer felt we shared some sort of allegiance, not because he was trying to protect and serve two girls who needed it but because we were all white, and they were all black. I wish I could say I became angry and shouted at the officer that I wasn’t just going to pick one out, but I didn’t. I quietly refused to look at the men individually by staring at my feet instead, and the officer finally turned to the line of guys and said, “Looks like it’s your lucky night. You’re free to go.” I’ll never forget the collective humiliation and anger in their faces. I suspect nobody there felt luck had anything to do with that night.

This particular event was the first scene I wrote for this novel. As I mentioned, the scene has since been deleted but it was a necessary starting point for me. I believe that we, as a society, have a responsibility to penetrate the silence of those who bear witness. These things do happen. This is a reality. Writing them down is, in my opinion, a way to expose these truths from multiple views. Picking up the pen was my decision to step out of the role of observer.

Ginetta Sagan is quoted as saying, “Silence in the face of injustice is complicity with the oppressor.” I sat down to write this novel because I do not want to be complicit. I will not obey a society that casts humans away like trash. It is for that reason, I chose to write this novel from the perspective of a young white girl with complex familial relationships who has just moved to a place of cultural and racial diversity. I want to challenge her beliefs and view of the world. I put her in a specific time and place, under circumstances that force her to look outward, to see that her experience is not the only one, that the world isn’t as she believed it to be.

Class is also a recurring theme in nearly all my writing, and is prevalent in this work as well. My characters work almost exclusively in blue-collar jobs. Those who don't can generally still be classified as low-earners of the working class. (The formal definitions of these two terms are murky at best, but I use working class as a term inclusive of blue-collar jobs, as well as those that do not require advanced education). I realize, looking back at even my earliest stories, that I have always written from a working class perspective. There are few doctors or lawyers or bankers in my stories because I didn't know any. I write waitresses and mechanics and factory workers. I tell stories about service members and farmers and cashiers because these people exist in the world and their occupations have no bearing on their capacity to love or dream. They have stories worth telling, stories worth reading. I treat these characters with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Growing up, nobody told me I was poor. Not explicitly, anyhow. We were merely "robbing Peter to pay Paul," or "making ends meet." I've noticed in literature that working class populations are often depicted as miserable beings who spend every waking moment lamenting their lot in life. Stereotypes of the working class tend to be polarized: hardworking or lazy, pious or sinful, prideful or shameless, simpletons or hell-rasiers, but at the core they always seem to be downtrodden or fundamentally flawed. People to be pitied. This is particularly true in the classic "rags to riches" stories, as though all working class people want to be part of the middle or upper class culture and customs, that happiness is attained only with financial gain. This simply isn't true.

I hope to offer a different perspective in my writing—one that communicates the complexity, the beauty, the joys and sorrows of working class people. I want to create

characters and stories that resonate with the working class world because that's the world I live in, and I've always been aware that my life is rarely depicted in literature. Contrary to popular belief—one that I've heard countless times in literary circles—working class people do read. Perhaps they are more likely to check a book out from the library than purchase one, but that doesn't mean they don't deserve to see their stories, their friends and family and neighborhoods on the page.

When I started at Stonecoast, I knew I wanted to write stories with strong social themes but I was afraid to commit fully to these subjects. I struggled to accept the responsibility and authority required to do so. It took until the end of my second semester—nearly halfway through the program—before I finally stopped dancing around the issues that are so important to me. Race, class, gender, loss, sexuality, and perpetual transition are recurring themes in my work and I'm making every attempt to handle them responsibly and truthfully.

Stonecoast taught me craft elements and literary theory, careful reading and revision. More importantly, Stonecoast taught me to accept myself as a person, a writer, and to accept my characters and stories for all their flaws. Rather than toning it down, I'm turning it up, and I'm eager to see where it goes from here. A big part of me is scared to graduate and leave the Stonecoast community because I know I still have much to learn, but I've been given the tools I need to succeed, I've learned how to use them. Now I just have to do the work.

– **Chapter One** –
June, 1994

By the time I was sixteen, I had lived at thirty-one addresses—most of them in different states—so it came as no great surprise when my parents announced, after just eight months in a barren Kentucky town, that we were moving again. They were well past the point of needing to say it out loud—we’d been burning our trash and sneaking buckets of water from the neighbor’s spigot since the county shut our services down. Of course, cut utilities didn’t always mean it was time to move but when we started back on canned-food roulette, I knew. That’s the game where everyone chose one dented can, stripped of its label, from a cluster in the pantry. And that was supper.

On the day of the announcement, I picked sauerkraut for the third day straight. The stench of stringy, soggy cabbage hit me before I even finished twisting the can-opener, and I considered throwing my supper at the wall, then thought briefly about chucking it at my older brother who laughed at my luck, but I slammed the half-open can

on the counter and yelled, “Shut up, Jacks! You’ve had Spaghetti-O’s or soup every single day, and if I don’t get stuck with this garbage, it’s beans and weenies.”

Jackson laughed louder and I slammed my can harder, then stomped to my room—my left hand splattered and stinking with sauerkraut juice. It was a stupid, stupid thing to do because I had no way to wash it off. I wasn’t cold but my teeth chattered—from anger or hunger, I don’t know. I sat on the edge of the bed I shared with my sister Allie, stared at the glossy Luke Perry poses ticky-tacked to our door, and waited for one of my parents to come in with a lecture about starving kids in Africa who’d murder their own mothers for a fraction of what I wasted.

Allie came in, quietly, with two open cans. She held one out to me.

I sighed. “I’m not gonna eat your supper. I’m not even hungry now.”

“Come on, Sadie—I’m sick of peas. I was gonna ask for a trade anyway.” She held her free hand up. “Bible.”

Allie was a liar—she didn’t like sauerkraut either, but if I refused her food she’d work herself into a frenzy—afraid that I might starve to death—and wouldn’t eat anyway. So, I nodded and let her think I believed her. Our spoons clanked inside the cans. We shoveled and slurped and raked at the bottom for every last bite, then drank what was left. I meant to stop halfway through and say I was full. I meant to leave some peas for my little sister whose thin skin hugged her bones. I didn’t, but I meant to.

After three soft taps, a pause, and two more taps—my dad’s signature knock—the door creaked open. “Family meeting,” was all he said, then closed the door again. I wiped brine from my chin with the back of my smelly wrist, and stood up.

“We’re coming, Daddy!” Allie hollered toward the hallway.

“Daddy?” I shook my head. “You’re fourteen, Allie.” I knelt down and, from beneath the bed, pulled out a stack of flattened boxes and a roll of packing tape.

Allie looked at the boxes, tugged and twisted at a lock of her strawberry blonde hair. “It could be about something else.”

“We should’ve started packing when the landlord showed up. If we weren’t behind on the rent, Mom would’ve answered the door.”

“I wanted to start high school here.” Allie twisted her finger in her hair and pulled again. “Me and Katie picked the same classes.”

The idea of Allie in high school worried me. She still couldn’t sleep without a mountain of stuffed animals crowding her corner of the bed, and she couldn’t tuck her troubles out of view like most people do. I didn’t tell her that kids are assholes no matter where you go, that she wouldn’t have an easy time of it anywhere—Katie or no Katie.

“At least we’re not leaving in the middle of the school year,” I said. “That’s ten times as bad.” I separated Allie’s boxes from mine, made two stacks of three on the mattress.

“You don’t care.” She crossed her arms. “You didn’t make any friends here.”

She wasn't lying about that, and it didn't hurt me to hear her say it—made me proud, to be honest—but Allie is the kind of person who gets mad at herself before you have the idea to get mad at her. She apologized before I could react.

“Allie, stop the yanking. You're gonna give yourself a bald spot.” I took her hand in mine. “Let's find out where this circus train is headed next.”

Our living room was painted dusty gold with just the faintest hint of rose—the fleeting shade of a wheat field at sunset—and apart from one oblong highlight that bent itself backward onto the ceiling, the walls rejected everything the table lamp offered. My mom sat erect in a kitchen chair, her back not touching (but perfectly parallel to) its smooth mahogany spindles—her tired red ringlets uncoiling from scalp to waist, bony hands flat in her lap. She trained her eyes on the wall clock, tapped her toes twice for every second that passed.

My dad was a grown man, and a big one at that, but he hunkered down on the couch with his neck shrunk up, chin to his chest like a dog caught chewing a shoe. Only his eyes dared to acknowledge my mom and, even then, just a flicker. Jackson sprawled sideways across the armchair, a glob of ravioli or spaghetti sauce glued to his shirt like a first-place medal, and he bobbed his head at the ceiling, drummed some imagined tune on his thighs with the flats of his fingers. Allie sat between me and my dad on the frumpy floral couch and tried to blink away the tears welling up in front of her eyes—pale green like sour grapes—her face a canvas of constellations, freckles stretching across the bridge of her nose and cheeks.

My mom nodded her head once, took a deep breath, opened her mouth.

“Where we going this time, and when do we leave?” I said.

“Sadie, can you please let your mother spea—”

“Sean, I’m a big girl—I don’t need you answering for me.” My mom closed her eyes for a moment, sucked in a deep breath. “Jackson, sit up straight before you break my chair worse than it already is, and Allie, stop the waterworks—ain’t nothing happened yet.” My mom aimed her pointer at me. “As for you, young lady, you might think about checking your attitude before you find yourself wandering the hillside of this godforsaken state wishing you had a home to go to.”

Allie’s eyes grew wide, and my dad lost a little more of his neck to his shoulders. Jackson kept drumming the thighs of his stonewashed jeans. I think, in his mind, he kept Kurt Cobain alive by copying his look—that carefully planned, I don’t give a shit look. And the funny part is this: Where we lived in Kentucky, everyone wore long-sleeved flannels, and jeans with blown out knees, so nobody noticed the grunge statement he made. Not that anyone saw him anyway. He dropped out of high school in March (on his eighteenth birthday) just two months before graduation, and he didn’t bother to get a job.

“Jackson Quinn, I said sit up right.” My mom paused, took a breath, and tried again. “Now, I know you kids are growing up and don’t wanna be moving all over God’s green Earth, so we been looking for a place to settle down.”

Nobody said a word and that wasn’t such a bad sign, but there were four sets of raised eyebrows. She still had some selling to do. Wouldn’t hurt her case if my dad at

least pretended that he knew what she was going on about instead of gawking like one of the kids.

“I think our luck’s gonna turn. We got some connections where we’re headed.”

“Where *are* we headed?” Jackson asked, bucking his head to the side so he could see past his thick brown hair—dyed brown hair, his light roots slinking out to betray his dirty blonde secret.

“Ohio?” I said. I looked back and forth between my mom and dad. “Are we finally gonna see where you were raised?”

Dad coughed and coughed and kept on coughing, thumped his chest like he had a cracker or chip stuck sideways in his throat. Hacked until his face turned red and a slight whistle could be heard in his breath, and I began to think he might really be choking, but I didn’t move—nobody moved—to slap his back or grab him a drink or anything at all. We watched. When he finally got himself under control, he put a hand in front of him and said, “Thank you, I’m fine,” as though someone had asked. “Sadie, to those people we’ll always just be river rats.” He cleared his throat. “It would serve you well to remember that.”

“Ain’t a thing worth seeing in Ohio and no one there worth meeting anyhow.” Mom dismissed the idea with a wave. “We’re moving to a nice little town in Florida, right on the coast. Port de Leon. Don’t it just *sound* fancy? There’s beautiful beaches and sea cows and it’s close enough to the space center that you can watch shuttles go up right from the front yard. Can you even imagine?” She looked to each one of us and tapped her toes five times, ten, maybe twenty. “Well?”

Allie kept the tears at bay, but her lips quivered. “I’ll never talk to Katie again.”

“Good Heavens, Allie, they got the internet next door. You can mail her from your new school.”

I put my arm around Allie’s back and pulled her my direction. She rested her head on my shoulder, tugged on one of her curls. I could almost see the scene playing out in Jackson’s head—he appeared to be the only one considering the benefits of this move and I knew exactly what he was thinking—beaches equal bikinis.

“Anyhow, we’re moving to Florida and we only got four days until they cut the lights.” Mom turned her eyes to the clock and watched the second-hand work its way around the circle. Three taps per second. “Better get to packing.”

The following morning at precisely 5:30, Mom flipped my bedroom light on, no warning whatsoever, and told me and Allie to get our butts in gear. She did the same to Jackson. He muttered something about being eighteen and waking up on his own, and she fired something back about eighteen being old enough to wash his own clothes and pay his own bills if he was so inclined, and Jackson shuffled from his bedroom and into the kitchen alongside me and Allie. We took our seats at the table, fully aware that we were set to play another of my parents’ food games. In this one whatever remained in the pantry was arranged in small groups on the countertops, each stash covered with dishtowels. I liked this game better than canned-food roulette because it didn’t rely on luck, but a willingness to work. That gave me an advantage over Jacks.

My dad leaned on the door that led to the back porch. He was dressed in his moving clothes—old shit-kickers, dusty denim jeans, and black t-shirt. Cowboy hat pushed up high off his brow, and holding a carrot like a microphone. “Our contestants have arrived ... tell ‘em what’s on the auction block, Norah!”

“Thank you, Sean!” With exaggerated excitement, my mom—still dressed in her knee-length, shapeless teal nightgown—removed a red and white checked dishtowel from cluster #1. She aimed her whole hand at each item. “Here we got two red potatoes, a can of SPAM, and a packet of hot chocolate.”

“Those potatoes sure look tasty,” he said. “Let the bidding begin.”

I eyed Jacks and Allied, tried to gauge their interest. No doubt the hot chocolate would have to be made with water, but we had a little butter for the potatoes.

“Linen closet,” Allie called out.

Jacks narrowed his eyes at Allie, then sized me up. “I’ll pack the wall pictures.”

I didn’t bite. Jacks always went big right out of the gate thinking someone would top him. I’d hold out for a better lot. “No bid,” I said.

Even though my dad played the part of host, he looked to my mom for a decision. She raised her eyebrows. “The pictures all need to be wiped down before being boxed,” she said, and Jacks agreed but you could see that he was pissed with himself for offering up so much at the start. He crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat.

“Lot number one goes to lucky contestant number one,” Dad said, and my mom unveiled the next cluster at his prompting.

The trick up my parents' sleeves was that nobody could eat a thing until all the lots had been auctioned off, and by the end we were desperate enough for breakfast to bid almost any cleaning or packing job for the promise of a mayonnaise sandwich. I always left with the longest list of obligations and the best stash of food because I didn't mind cleaning, and I thoroughly enjoyed packing—it was like playing Tetris. When my parents left to have their coffee on the back deck, the bartering began.

“I'll give you the SPAM if you dust the lamps and mom's stupid knickknacks,” Jacks told Allie, and she nodded, offered to wrap the cherubs in newspaper when she was finished if he gave her one of his roulette cans. Jacks laughed and told her she was bargaining at her own risk, that she'd probably end up with more sauerkraut, but she took it anyway.

“Two items of your choice to whoever gives me space in their boxes,” I said.

My brother shook his head. “I don't know why you don't leave your stupid books behind, but I'll take the crackers and the rest of the honey for three books.”

I slid the crackers and honey across the table. “Sold.”

Allie offered space for five books if I gave her the last bit of pancake batter and two slices of bread. For breakfast, she ate a short stack of mini pancakes—no syrup—and fried SPAM on buttered toast. Jackson ate peanut butter and honey crackers, and I had enough room for all my books to make the move.

By supper time, the house was packed, beds and tables broken down, all of it moved to the front of the living room to allow for two full days of deep cleaning. We sat

in a circle on the living room floor eating our personal buffets, and Dad flipped the T.V. on to check the forecast for moving day. He found a breaking news report instead: *O.J. Simpson Questioned in Connection with Gruesome Murders*.

“Turn that up,” Mom said.

We watched in silence as the blonde news reporter in a navy-blue pantsuit ran through the story. Nicole Brown Simpson and an unidentified male victim were brutally murdered the night before in front of Nicole’s home. O.J. was cooperating with police. Not named as a suspect. The screen flashed images of the crime scene, then photos of Nicole and O.J. together, talk of a stormy relationship and a previous altercation, charges of wife-beating. They split. Reconciled. Separated, again. The scene was a bloodbath.

Jacks was the first to offer an opinion, and he said O.J. was guilty as sin. My dad nodded and remarked on his history of violence. Allie thought he might be innocent—he said he was in Chicago, after all—and Mom said Nicole should’ve had the sense to leave when he hit her the first time. What did she think was gonna happen?

“They have kids together,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean a damn thing,” Dad said, and he said it loudly.

“Well excuse me for breathing,” I replied. “You guys are the ones always going on about how families stick together through thick and thin, and now you’re blaming a woman for getting herself murdered because she did exactly that.”

“They’re talking about *normal* families, Sadie,” Jacks said.

I knew already what my brother meant but I still asked why, exactly, they didn't qualify as *normal*. He shook his head and called me stupid, and Dad said, "There's nothing normal about a white person mixing with—"

My mom whipped her head around and faced him. "Sean Quinn, don't you even think of finishing that sentence."

Nobody said anything for a full minute, at least, and my dad's heavy breathing finally eased up, his face lost some of the flush, and he hung his head, studied his hands.

"Why don't we have a checkers tournament?" Allie said. "I can get the board."

"Not tonight." Dad didn't lift his head or eyes, even as Mom stood up.

"Time for bed. We got two days of scrubbing ahead. I ain't never left a house dirty and I ain't starting now," she said. "Won't have the neighbors thinking we're trash."

I wanted to believe O.J. was innocent, but it didn't shape up to look that way. The T.V. stayed turned on and tuned in for two days while we wiped down walls, touched up baseboards, spackled nail holes. Every update gave some reason to doubt his innocence. The strangest thing was that the more the news reported damning evidence, the more my mom seemed to believe he was innocent, and that just baffled and infuriated my dad. I had to admit, I agreed when he told her that Stevie Wonder could see O.J. was guilty. She stared him down and told him he didn't know the first goddamned thing about guilt. And the next time I went into the living room I noticed the stack of boxes was two short of its

former count. I didn't need to do any detective work to figure out which ones. I already knew. Alannah's boxes.

The morning of the move, just as the sun came up, my mom taught me to dig up and re-pot plants without damaging the roots. It was a task she was stingy about sharing. She only trusted me to touch the hardier plants while she handled the temperamental ones but it was more than she'd ever allowed before. While I worked the trowel in a wide circle around the last grouping of purple asters, my mom sang the lyrics to her favorite hymn, "On Eagle's Wings." Something about her voice, like raw honey straight from the hive, caused my throat to swell. I turned away, wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt so that if she noticed she'd think I was wiping sweat from my face. I potted the last of the asters, thanked her for letting me help, and crossed the yard. All without facing her again.

My dad actually stood the full six feet and four inches of his height, that day. Even his hair, jet black, had more shine and bounce, his dark eyes a little glint of gold. He felt good about the move, said that losing his job at Marty's Salvage yard might've been a blessing in disguise. "You've got to answer when opportunity knocks," he explained while rearranging our lives in the back of a ten-foot trailer. "We're going to be happy there."

I didn't ask why he was so certain that this move was the game changer—mostly because he always expressed some variation of that sentiment when he packed a trailer, but partly because it was nice to see him stand up under the weight of his guilt. I preferred to see him this way. "What time do you think we'll get on the road?" I asked.

"Won't be long," he said. "If you want to make final rounds, now's the time."

I nodded. “Don’t leave without me.”

“We couldn’t get that lucky.” He winked as he hefted a box off the ground.

I admired the house, a tiny perfect square like a child’s drawing with a steep triangle on top. When I had first seen the place, I couldn’t even will myself to walk inside. And besides, the walkway—a path of worn grass—led to a set of broken steps so I wasn’t even certain that we *could* get in. Mud had baked itself to the first six feet of every surface, every crevice—the result of a flood that left thick, sour evidence behind when the water went down. It took weeks of scrubbing and scraping and drying to see results, but after a month or so I came to like the place. It was now pale yellow, with wooden window shutters and a wraparound porch that my dad added on. My mom had planted ivy and wove it along the lattice and, after just one winter, the fresh paint had dulled to match the same weathered white of the door and window frames. It was cute, cozy. Ready to receive real tenants.

I passed Jackson who napped in the grass with a Walkman on his chest, headphones muffed over his ears, and went inside. My fingertips grazed the walls and drawers and knobs and pulls of the living room, the hallway, two small bedrooms, the bathroom, the larger bedroom, the hallway again, and finally the kitchen. The last walk through an empty house makes me smile. I’ve heard people say how hard it is to leave a home, as though all their memories are trapped inside but I love the echo, the mixed scent of bleach and Windex, sneakers squeaking on bare floors. Our houses stand strong and clean and hollow when we leave. But we never find them that way.

The places we moved to were always in a sad state and we went to work right away fixing them up. My dad ripped out cabinets and countertops and built new ones in their place; he reframed doors and windows, laid new floors, replaced the roof—whatever the homeowners needed done. My mom scrubbed and painted and polished. She planted gardens and sometimes added little koi ponds or fountains depending on the landlord's budget. And the kids were put to work on whatever we couldn't screw up. I never knew the specifics but my parents usually worked out some sort of deal before we arrived. Instead of paying full price for labor, the owners advanced enough money for us to live on and allowed us to stay there deposit-free or rent free or both, for however long it took to cover the cost of the work. After that, we were supposed to make payments but if my parents hadn't found regular jobs by then, we left at the end of the last free month. We'd made it beyond the free period here, but not by much.

I walked out the kitchen door to the back porch. We didn't often live in a house with any sort of view but here our backyard sloped and the lawn thinned until it was nothing but driftwood and loam, a riverbank. The Ohio wasn't pretty. Most of the time the water looked like a giant worming puddle of mud, but I liked how black and glassy the surface seemed—not like water at all—in the hours between day and night when lightning bugs twinkled in the trees. I made my way to the bank, sat on the stump of a long-fallen tree—my place of escape after supper where I watched coal barges sludge by, holding my breath (if I could make it that long) until the captain passed in his tugboat.

From my stump, I could see straight across the river to Ohio where a little town sat up high, protected by a stone wall at least a mile wide. Behind the main road—lined with historic, red-brick buildings—small hills grew bigger and wider. They peaked and

plunged and rolled into the sky and, after dark, glowing haloes from old-fashioned street lamps freckled the night. I liked to imagine that was the town my parents were from, that one day we'd meet their family, *our* family, and browse the street markets or visit the classic car shows on weekends. So much for that. I pulled a flat rock up from the mud, brushed the loose dirt from its surface, and threw it side-armed—no arc—just above the water line. It skipped nine times.

When I was little, I thought moving was an adventure. I saw mountains and rivers, oceans and canyons; snow and sand, prairies and forests. My mom always said we were blessed to see so much of the world, and by world she meant America, but I believed her then. We rarely moved to the same state twice, and never to the same town, but my mom always seemed to know someone who helped us out once we got where we were going.

I used to pretend my parents were part of the Witness Protection Program or the CIA. Sometimes they were fugitives. And when we disappeared again I was amused by the number of kids who might think of the scrawny, plain-faced blonde girl from school and decide that I was telling the truth—we were an important family, dangerous maybe.

When I was thirteen, the adventure ended. We stayed in one place too long. For eleven months and fifteen days we lived in a trailer lot in North Carolina where I met a boy named Cameron. Every Monday we walked our parents' rent money to the double-wide at the back of the park, and on the short stretch of gravel between the last tenant trailer and the landlord's place, we held hands and told real truths about our lives.

Cameron said his mama took off when he was five after the state took his baby brother away. I told him about my sister—my dead sister—the one my parents named me for, and Cameron agreed that it was a rotten thing to do. He showed me cigarette burns on his legs and arms and back—his daddy’s way of discipline if Cameron forgot to let their big dirty dog out, or bag the trash, or turn the outside light off. Anything, really. Everything.

Cameron wasn’t a handsome boy. He had enormous ears and too many teeth, but I didn’t mind. When I decided I didn’t want Alannah—my dead sister’s name—as my middle name anymore, he stretched his loose lips over all those teeth and held his mouth in a straight line. “I think Sadie Alannah Quinn is a right pretty name, and a smart one too. If you want my truth on the subject, I think your sister’s the one who should be called something different. Something ugly too. Like Gertrude.”

It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me. “How about Ethel?”

“Bertha!”

Every Monday when we walked the rent up, I reminded him to rinse the dishes right and keep his shoes in his room so his daddy didn’t get mad, and Cameron would tell me a new name he had cooked up, each one as terrible as the last, and we squeezed our hands together while we laughed.

Then one Monday he wasn’t out front where he usually stood. I waited a while, called his name, and finally went to the door. He didn’t answer when I knocked so I stood up on my toes and looked in through the little diamond window. There was nothing

inside but a dinner plate full of cigarette butts, a few crumpled rags, a broken broom, and a pile of dog doo.

I ran all the way to the double wide, shoved our payment in Mrs. Herpel's hand.
“Where'd Cameron go?”

She was a large blocky woman, both wide and tall, and even her stretched-out shadow swallowed mine. Her face was the shade of a dried tobacco stain, the lines shooting out from her eyes like crooked, dirty rays of sunshine. Mrs. Herpel smoothed out and counted every last crumpled bill before she answered. “Who you looking for?”

“Cameron.”

No response.

“Lot forty-seven.”

“Oh. Forty-seven cleared out. They was only paid through last night. Better not've left no mess neither.”

“Well, where'd they go?”

“Hell, darling, do I look like the police? I don't track 'em once they're gone.”

“He didn't say goodbye.”

“Way of the world, child. Do me a favor and tell your daddy I ain't no pole dancer—I got better things to do with my day than count out all these singles.” Mrs. Herpel waved a crinkled bill in the air, stuffed it in the saggy collar of her shirt and

shoved her hips side to side as she shuffled backward into her trailer. She closed the front door.

I stood on the stoop until she flipped on the porch light, a signal to tenants that it was supertime and not to knock—just leave the rent money in the box. Cameron was the only person I had ever spoken to about Alannah and he was off in the world somewhere with my secret while I was stuck in that collection of tin cans keeping his. When I made it to lot forty-seven, I picked up a handful of gravel and threw it, hard as I could, at the two-toned trailer with no skirting. One of the rocks hit the wide front window, Cameron's bedroom window, and put a chip in the glass. If my parents had to pay for a window, they'd have killed me, or at least put me to work pulling weeds all week. I was up on the rusted trailer hitch trying to get a closer look at the chip when I saw it. Written into the window grime was the name Hilda. It was hardly visible, and the word was backwards, but Cameron's goodbye was right there. And I had no way to say mine.

I slipped a flat, smooth stone in my pocket and walked up the embankment, enjoyed the sting in my calves until the ground leveled out. I looked at our house and yard then turned back to see the bank, the river, and the simple town across the way. I would never again see life from this view—that much I already knew.

Around the side of the house I found a handful of neighbors on their way out. I waited as my mom smiled and waved goodbye, wiped tears from her eyes, promised to call the very minute we settled in. When the women were all at a safe enough distance to eliminate any threat of rushing back to wrap me up in their arms where I'd be forced to

pillow my head on their breasts while they cried, I walked to our new blue pickup. Well, it looked awfully old, to tell the truth—but it was new to us. My dad had traded our big brown Le Baron for the truck and a few hundred bucks—enough to cover gas and food for the move. Half of the passenger’s side was pocked with shotgun holes with rings of rust that spread out from their centers, cutting a sharp contrast into the periwinkle paint. My dad was proud. Said it wouldn’t take much to fix her up right, and he’d always wanted a pickup with a second row of seats. Plus, the shotgun truck had enough oomph to pull the U-Haul through the mountains—that was the important thing.

“Time to go?” I asked.

“Good a time as any,” he replied. “We’re packed so tight that a mouse turd couldn’t slip through the cracks.” His face looked handsome when he laughed, and he always laughed when he said that. “You ready, sweetie?”

I started toward him, then froze when Allie said, “Ready as I’m gonna get.”

I swallowed the thick feeling in the back of my throat and climbed into the tail of our truck where my parents agreed to let me ride alone. I shoved my stuff into the small space that my dad engineered between boxes and settled in. Once we were cruising for an hour or two I dug into my bag. From the bottom of a tampon box—the only place in the world that my mother wouldn’t bother to snoop—I pulled out a pack of Marlboros. Three puffs in, the truck slowed to a stop. We swayed as the cars on the road raced past, which felt like the start of a roller coaster ride, and one of the truck doors opened and closed. I jammed the cigarette into a full can of grape soda and waved my hands like a madman trying to throw the cloud out the window. When it became clear that those three rebel

puffs had no intention of leaving the scene, I shuffled frantically through my things, pumped out so much vanilla bean body spray that I could taste the alcohol.

I crawled on my knees, coughing and knocking boxes out of my way until I reached the tail window. My dad rounded the rear right as I popped the glass open. He took a step back when the scent of smoked vanilla rolled out, stared at me like I was the mastermind of this unplanned pit stop. He knew. He had to.

He crinkled his sniffer and said simply, “It smells like a whore house back here.”

My stomach eased up. He couldn’t know, or I’d already be six feet beneath mile marker 113. I lifted one eyebrow. “Why are we stopped?”

“Your sister had to go.”

“Outside?”

“Said she couldn’t hold it.”

I wiggled the top half of my body out the back and looked down the tree line. There was Allie crouched behind the cover of her open door—her butt hovering just above the brush.

“You need to go?”

“Um ... No.” I peeled my eyes from Allie’s full white moon, and just as I pulled myself back inside, a rig rolled by and hit the air horn.

My heart punched my throat, and my dad hopscotched back. “Sonofabitch!”

Someone screamed. I turned toward my sister, half expecting to see her naked bottom buried in a bush but she was all zipped up. Standing on the side of the highway, completely frozen except for one finger and thumb pulling one of her curls. She stared at the shotgun truck.

Oh God ... Mom! My dad raced toward the truck but she was out the door before he reached her. My mom trembled. Not just her hands—every inch of her body quaked. I looked on, helpless, as she locked her fingers together behind her head and paced alongside the guardrail. Her chest heaved and her cheeks puffed out as she tried to breathe. She alternated between sobbing and dry-vomiting.

Alannah was four when she died. A semi-truck blew through a red light just as my mom crossed the intersection. It hit Alannah's side, killed her on impact. She didn't suffer, my dad always said, at least she didn't suffer. Mom never talked about the accident at all except to say that the whole goddamned town killed her girl, that they were guilty too even if it was her fault. Her punishment. That's all she ever said. Usually she just locked herself up, refused food for days and cried over Alannah's boxes and whatever the hell was in them. And now, after three months of keeping it together, she crumbled.

I motioned for my sister, climbed out of the truck, and screamed, "Mom, find a focal point!"

Jacks got out, too—stood in the spot Allie abandoned, his arms hanging limp like he didn't know what to do with them. He looked back and forth between my parents, stepped toward them, then back. Settled his eyes on the sky, stared.

“Alright, Norah.” Dad stretched his syllables like a sad church song. “Deep breaths.”

Mom stopped gagging but continued to quiver. Her breaths grew deeper until she had enough air to release a wail or a groan—a low-pitched, throaty, “Noooo!”

Allie was clawing her forearm with her fingernails, her back to my mom, eyes focused on some faraway place. I gently pulled her hands down and said, “We talked about this, Allie. No scratching.” I wrapped my arms around my sister, pressed my cheek to the crown of her head, smoothed her tangled hair. “Everything’s going to be fine in a few minutes. You know that, right?”

She nodded and sniffled, and I had to hold my own tears back watching it all. My parents were like two different people entirely. Strangers. These episodes were the only time my mom seemed weak, and they didn’t happen often when she was off the bottle, but the semi-truck... That was enough.

“I didn’t mean it,” Mom said, and clutched my dad’s shirt in both her hands. “Sean. I swear, I didn’t mean it.”

“I know, Norah. I know.” He pulled her to his chest, held her tight with one arm, and stroked her wild red hair. “It’s not your fault. None of it was your fault.”

For a moment—only a moment—I wondered what it might feel like to have my mom crushed against my chest. Was she warm? Would I feel her shake? Was her hair coarse like Allie’s or soft like mine? I always wondered that.

Then she said it. “God punished me by taking my girl,” she cried, and my dad shushed her, said it was a terrible accident, just an accident, and led her back to the truck.

I kissed my sister’s forehead, told her everything was fine now, we were getting back on the road. “No more scratching, Allie. Promise?” Allie promised, and Jackson looked down from the sky, at me, and shook his head.

When I climbed back into the tail of our truck, I slammed the back glass down and locked it from the inside. Gertrude. Bertha. Ethel. Olga. Peggy. Eunice. Fanny. Hilda.

The rest of the drive blurred by like the view from my miniature window. The pine trees and elms turned to palms and oaks, freshwater creeks to marshes, and the soggy scent of riverbank shifted to salt spray and fish guts between sporadic bouts of cow shit. A constant hum came from the tires and the only nap I managed was interrupted by the whine of our engine working overtime to make it through the mountains. The further south we traveled, the warmer my cramped space became. Somewhere in South Carolina, a five-car pileup blocked the southbound lanes and we sat completely still for an hour. The sun blasted in through the back, cooked me like an ant under a magnifying glass. Outside, the weight of June looked almost like fog, but *not*, because the air was hot and didn’t linger at the peak of a mountain, or settle over the sea—it was everywhere at once and didn’t seem to budge even as you tried to move through it. Halfway through Georgia, I realized that I might spend our entire stay in the South sweating like Santa Claus in a sauna. And I hated it before we even made it to our new state.

– Chapter Two –

The town of Port de Leon was divided by a set of railroad tracks that ran down the east coast. It wasn't like other places we'd lived. My parents usually found houses on the outskirts of a run-down town where poor was the natural state, wealth the exception. In the winter, especially, the split was palpable—snow plows wouldn't brave the dips and curves of country roads outside town limits, didn't even bother dropping rock salt or sand to allow a chance of getting out. The two settings rarely met, and they never squared off—not like they did in Port de Leon.

Here, it wasn't as simple as crossing the tracks to find (or escape) a certain side of town. Clean, crisp waterfront condos towered along one side of the road, and half-burned, graffitied buildings slouched on the other. In the historic section, flowering vines spilled down the sides of the courthouse walls and ducked under flourishing beds. The roads were made of cobblestone, and families gathered on outdoor patios (which were all sheltered by colorful striped awnings) eating ice cream or fudge or giant rainbow

lollipops. But heading in or out of that area looked downright dangerous. The public playgrounds were surrounded by ten-foot fences, littered with brown-bag drinking adults—no kids at all—and attached to the basketball hoops were chains instead of nets. Convenience stores had picnic tables or benches outside, and so many ads and flyers and neon signs plastered the windows and doors that you couldn't even see inside.

Miniature cinderblock houses grew without warning to sprawling red-brick homes with unnaturally green grass that never made its way onto, or into the drive. Tall grooved columns announced covered porches. Black shutters flanked yawning white-trimmed windows. Children played volleyball and tennis in their own yards, or else swam in pools shimmering beneath the pale moonlight. No wood or chain link fences either. All the neighbors had agreed, it seemed, on black wrought iron fencing, elaborate gates. Then, just like that, clotheslines, hosed sprinklers, and wood constructed squares with barely pitched rooftops appeared.

What's more is that in *every* neighborhood skin colors ranged from shades of white oak and beech to mahogany and walnut. We'd mostly stayed in places where seeing skin darker than maple meant traveling a ways to Lexington or Kansas City or Fort Wayne, or whatever big city wasn't too far off. That wasn't the case in Port de Leon.

When we finally arrived at our new address, the moon was fat and bright and it cast crooked shadows across the overgrown lawn. Dad backed the trailer into the yard, parked the shotgun truck at the curb. Me and my parents sized up the front of the place while Allie and Jacks slept. Gigantic truck tires, worn to the wire, were scattered across the lawn among items not meant for outdoors—dishes, picture frames, phonebooks, a

waterlogged box of VHS tapes. Fishing line had been tied around a tree at one end, a refrigerator door at the other. Waving in the wind were a supersized pair of women's underwear and a bra big enough to support two overgrown pumpkins. Maybe a really fat, really dead woman was rotting through the floorboards inside. That would account for the smell, at least.

“Ain't as bad as I expected,” Mom said. “Yard'll be fine by morning. Sean?”

“Bricks look solid. Mortar's intact. No big cracks.”

“Let's just hope Big Bertha hasn't swollen and popped and splattered the walls with death juice.” My parents stared at me so I pointed to the makeshift clothesline. “You know, whoever owns the elephant-sized undies.”

They looked at each other, back at me. Dad cracked a smile. Mom did not.

“Never mind.”

My dad went to retrieve Allie and Jacks from the truck and I studied the house. So far as I could tell, the outside only needed cosmetic work—fresh paint, landscaping, that sort of thing. No caved-in roof or broken windows, no flood mud, solid metal door with a brass knocker, front light in working order. The left side of the house was bricked, the right side cinderblocked which meant someone probably renovated. I glanced around at the neighbors' houses, most of which had carports, and decided yes, the house had undergone construction at some point.

After five minutes of trying to wake my brother and sister, Dad threw his hands up and told my mom they were dead to the world. It took her all of thirty seconds to get them out of the shotgun truck and lined up in the driveway. “Ready?”

Me and Dad said yes, Allie and Jacks nodded, and Mom stuffed her arm into the rusted metal mailbox bolted to the house. She ripped her arm out, squealed, “Jesus, Mary, and Saint Joseph!”

The key she was digging for fell with a clink on the concrete as an enormous brown bug with eyes as big as mine flapped its wings and flew off toward a tree. My dad leaned down, laughed while he retrieved the key. “Just a Palmetto bug, Norah.”

“Palmetto, my foot. You can give it a fancy name but that ain’t gonna change what it is—a giant flying cockroach.”

I looked at the bug’s landing zone and cringed. Dad handed the key to Mom. She unlocked the door, swung it open in a grand gesture, and everyone paraded through the entrance as though we’d lived there forever and just returned home from a ballgame or something.

We’d been to Florida once before, but I was younger then and didn’t remember much more than the rats that skittered around our shed. And the circus. Not a real circus, but the one all the kids put on. My dad was the ringleader, Allie the acrobat. Jackson did tricks on his bicycle and I walked on a corroded barrel in a bathing suit. I don’t know the reason for the swimwear, but it didn’t do me any favors when I couldn’t keep up and fell on the

concrete slab that served as our side yard. My neck wouldn't turn for at least a week and I was confined, for most of that time, to the ugly wagon-wheel couch my parents had picked from the neighbor's trash. The couch smelled like a wet dog, but the stink was nothing compared to the Icy-Hot my mom slapped on my neck and back all week—reminding me each time how reckless I'd been. I resolved to hate Florida after that. The only memories I had involved high-diving into concrete, Icy-Hot, and rats. And now, flying roaches. What the hell made them pick this state again?

Our front door opened up to a small terrazzo landing—three foot by three, at best—and a wall. You had to turn left or right. The room on the left had been the carport at one point, now a family room or den, and it cut back to the kitchen. On the right was a bowling alley living room that stretched far enough from right to left that it met up with the kitchen as well. Between these rooms was a long, narrow hallway.

I was staring in disgust at the hideous blue carpet—light and dark swirls, like someone had tie-dyed the floor—when Jackson came alive in the hall. He did a ridiculous dance—arms flapping like a funky-chicken, head plunging forward, his bottom half buckling like an infant learning to walk—an attempt at the running-man, maybe. “I got the biggest bedroom ... Sadie got stuck with Allie.” He laughed his weasel laugh and started again, “I got the biggest bedroom ...”

“Shut up, Jacks. You can't have the biggest bedroom. You don't have to share.”

He kept right on with his dumb song and dance, and I pressed against the hallway wall to avoid being bulldozed over. Allie leaned out from one of the doorways but didn't

chime in. She was having a tough time managing the weight of her head and every time she blinked, her eyeballs rolled around. I stepped past her to inspect the room so I could compare it with the one Jackson had claimed. He was probably full of shit, anyway.

My mom popped in while I walked heel-to-toe, sizing the room with my feet. “What are you doing in here?” She sported a goofy grin and her eyes were unnaturally wide—it was the face she wore when she wanted a reaction. A *big* reaction. “Your room’s in the back.”

“*What?* I thought Jackson’s room was in the back.”

I served my mom’s big moment on a silver platter and she gobbled it right up. “Well, I think there might just be another door back there. Maybe we should check.” She scuttled down the hall to the last door on the right and didn’t even wait for me to catch up before she flung it open and marched in. So much for the two of us discovering the door.

I thought I’d be sick when she clicked the chain. A lonely bulb swung from the center of the room and it splashed the neon pink walls with light. “Oh my God!” was all I could think to say, and I said it several times. If it was surprise my mom was after, she got it, but she seemed too proud of herself to notice my disgust. Or the lime green peace sign painted on the side wall.

She moved to the far left of the room, opened a door to reveal a closet with rods on both sides, then stepped in and turned around with her arms stretched out to demonstrate its size.

I considered the room, the closet. I figured myself lucky if my bedroom even had a closet—and one with a door was reason enough to celebrate—but this one was near big enough to be its own bedroom. I looked over my shoulder, checked to see if my dad was waiting in the wings so he could join this little party and laugh about how easy it is to pull the wool over my eyes, but he wasn't. "This is the master bedroom," I said.

She nodded. "Me and dad are converting the den. It's got a fireplace."

"A fireplace in Florida?"

"I ain't standing in here for my health, Sadie. You gonna check this out, or what?"

I stepped in the closet with my mom, ran my fingertips along the dull silver rods. "This is so rad!" I said. "We could fit everyone's clothes in here."

I don't know what I was thinking—maybe the excitement struck me dumb or something—but I went to hug her. My mom stepped quickly to the side and crouched a little to get under the rods and away from me—back to the open space of the bedroom. I remained in the dark, gripped the closet bar with both hands. Why did I do that? Stupid!

It was one of those rare moments when I found relief in my brother's voice. "Holy hippies!" he said. "The sixties threw up all over your room. All you need is a braided headband and a pound of reefer."

"You stop that, Jackson Quinn. All's it needs is a fresh coat of paint."

"I'm going to get the rest of stuff from the truck," I said.

My mom told me my hair looked like a rat's nest and wanted to know when I had combed it last. I reminded her that she packed the hairbrush three days ago, but that didn't settle it. "Don't you go out there looking like that," she said. "What will the new neighbors think?"

"That we don't wear our Sunday best on Thursdays. Or when we move."

Jackson wanted to know why he didn't get the big bedroom since he was older, and I left her to answer that. From the tailgate of the shotgun truck, I studied the neighborhood. There wasn't much space between one house and the next but the back yards stretched pretty deep. The block homes to the left and right of ours had wooden privacy fences which looked funny because the eaves hung flush with the top of the fence line. Our house was the squat bastard in the middle; it borrowed the neighbor's wood fences along the sides, chain-links closed the gaps in front. It was ugly, but that didn't mean much. We'd definitely seen worse.

I was admiring the big oak tree in our front yard, the way the branches cut in at odd angles, when I heard voices in the distance. Four guys slipped out from the shed a few houses down, made a scene of slowly closing the door before bolting to the road where they, very suddenly, slowed their pace and turned in my direction. As they drew nearer and into the light of a streetlamp, I realized one of the four guys was female—she just had her hair pulled back in a sloppy bun of sorts. I sat still, unsure if I should clear my throat or cough or something so they'd realize someone was ten yards to their front, but I didn't have time to decide before the girl let out a gasp and grabbed hold of the guy

beside her. They stopped, hunched their shoulders forward. I did the same. We stared at each other like a bunch of idiots.

The girl finally spoke. “You scared the crap out of me. Who the heck are you?”

“Sadie,” I said. “I’m new here.”

“The U-haul gave you away.” The guy unlocked his fingers from the girl’s, pointed to the trailer in the yard, then said, “I’m Nate.”

For some reason, I stuck my hand out for a shake, and as soon as I did I realized how absurd the gesture was. My arm hung in the air, my wrist limp, heavy with embarrassment. But Nate stepped closer, reached forward, wrapped his fingers around mine and took a bow. “Sadie m’lady.” He kissed the top of my hand. “Sir Nathan at your beck and call.”

Separately, Nate’s features were nice enough—thick brown eyebrows and cloudy blue eyes. His nose had a tendency toward the left but the hook was slight, only noticeable straight on. He had forgettable lips, not big or small, but his teeth were too little—straight and white but child-sized. His ears were elfish too. The combination was odd, like a collage made from magazine faces pasted between his olive tinted chin and wiry brown waves.

I saw someone pass, then return to the front window of my house—my mother, no doubt—and I pulled my arm back. Nate clutched his hands to his chest, staggered backward like he’d been shot. The girl told him he was a loser, then claimed his hand again.

The guy beside Nate had shaggy black hair that hung in his face, covered a fair amount of acne. “You’ll have to excuse him. He don’t get let out of his cage that much.”

“Where you from?” asked the other one. He was the tallest and, without a doubt, the most handsome of the three. His lips matched his dark brown skin at the edges but graduated to the shade of bubble gum at the center. Hair was cut close on the sides, a little longer on top, and even by moonlight his amber-colored eyes caught mine. His voice was deep—surprisingly so—and the sound of it brought my arm hairs to attention. I couldn’t speak because the only thought that came to me was that I hadn’t brushed my hair in half a week.

“If you don’t wanna say, that’s cool.”

“Oh, it’s not that. I’m not really from anywhere exactly.” He raised his eyebrows. I shook my head, rolled my eyes at my own idiot self. “I mean, I just got here from Kentucky but we move a lot, so—”

“I’m from PA!” the girl said. Two peas from the same heartland pod.

I tilted my head towards her but my eyes traveled away from him at a much slower speed. His lips turned upward before I finally broke my gaze, and I realized he probably thought there was something seriously wrong with me, staring like that. To the girl, I said, “Yeah? I lived near Philly when I was little.”

“I’m from Hershey, PA.”

It annoyed me that she referenced her state by its abbreviation. “Cool.”

“Where they make chocolate...”

“Oh.” The deep-throated call of a bullfrog pulsed, and I was certain I could make out the click of beetle feet on concrete. I trained my eyes on the girl’s t-shirt. Metallica—I hated that band. They did more screaming than singing, and the music sounded like worn brake pads. If *total moron* had a face, I’m sure it was mine. I wanted to look at *him* again, but I didn’t want him to look at me so I just stared at the girl’s shirt. “Do one of you live there?” I finally said, and gestured toward the shed they’d crept out from.

For a moment, I thought I’d spoken a foreign language. Nobody seemed to comprehend the question. Some level of understanding finally dawned on the shaggy-haired kid who said, “Naw. That place has been abandoned near as long as yours. We was just hanging out is all.” Nate and the girl from PA give him simultaneous sideways glances. “Not that we make a habit of it or nothing. I mean, it’s a shed. Who’d want—”

“Heck, Stinky. Would you just be quiet already?” The girl said.

“Stinky?”

The boy hung his head some. “Just a nickname. I don’t really stink.”

“That’s a relief,” I said, and stuck my stupid arm out again.

“Sir Stinky at your service, ma’am.” He smiled a doofy smile and shook my hand, and I thought this had to be the strangest group of people I’d ever met. Close, anyway.

Deep voice. “So, Sadie from nowhere exactly. What grade you in?”

“Going into eleventh,” I said. “You?”

“We’re juniors too. Except Stinky—he’s a sophomore this year.”

“I ain’t stupid. I got held back in third grade cause I caught pneumonia and had to stay in the hospital too long, that’s all.

Nate said, “Nobody called you stupid, man. Chill out.”

“You know what classes you’re taking?” the handsome one asked.

The girl said, “You’re just dying to find someone as nerdy as you.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, big mouth.”

“Good thing. I don’t speak geek.” The girl removed the scrunchie from her hair, flipped her head upside down and redid the sloppy bun. It looked exactly as it did before.

“I don’t know my classes yet. I only found out we were moving three days ago.”

“Three days?” said Stinky. “I knew three weeks ago.”

“I’m sorry, Stink-bug. Did you say *weeks*?”

“Well, I didn’t know it was *you* coming. ‘Cause obviously, I don’t know you. I just met you, and all.” He scratched his scalp at the crown of his head, stared at the ground. “It’s just that I watched some people coming and going out the house lately and I figured someone was fixing to move in.” Stinky shifted his weight back and forth between legs, scratched his head again. “I don’t mean I *watched* them—I ain’t no peeping tom. I live right there.” He pointed at the house directly across from mine. Poor kid couldn’t talk to save his life. I thought I was bad.

“He ain’t no peeping tom,” Nate said, grinned. “So if you see him outside your window with his pimply little dick in his hand—”

“I’ll let him borrow Big Bertha’s panties.” I nodded toward my yard. “When you’re through with them, that is.” It sort of just tumbled out without any real thought and I wanted to take it back as soon as I said it until...

Laughter—soft, wispy like wind. His deep voice trickled in, lapped against the inside of my ribs. “Sadie, I think you’re gonna fit right in here.”

The girl shoved Nate toward Stinky, told them the shed was open if they needed some private time. I don’t know what Stinky did, don’t know what Nate said, don’t know what the girl did next. I was replaying my name over and over in that boy’s voice, noting the tiny scar on his cheek—a speck, really—so small you’d miss it if you weren’t committing every curve, every shade, every highlight of his face to memory. The way he angled his head, narrowed his eyes, took just a nibble of his bottom lip between his teeth.

“You haven’t told me your name yet,” I said.

“You haven’t offered your hand.”

My arm went out by way of its own mind and he didn’t shake my hand, didn’t kiss it, just slid the tiniest sliver of his thumb over my fingernails—only the tips—and he didn’t lean forward, didn’t bow, but kept his head tilted to the side and locked his eyes on mine. He might’ve been holding my hand forever by then, I might’ve hoped he’d never let go, but I didn’t think to wonder if my mother was still watching from the front window.

“I’m Trenton.”

“Sadie.”

Slight smile. Amber eyes, gold flecks. “I know.” He pressed a little harder, but not hard, and I’m sure he could feel my heart pounding, my breath catching, my fingers trembling when he smoothed the thick of his thumb over my nails.

“Ah shit! Trenton is spitting game!” Nate howled, and I didn’t have a chance to reply, didn’t have the idea or inclination to pull my hand away until a steady, high-pitched beep brought me back.

Trenton seemed equally confused by the sound even though he seemed to be the source. He fumbled around the waistline of his jeans, and the pager was on its third round of beeps before he found the button to silence it. He unclipped the small black device, looked at the numbers lit up on the tiny screen, and it was only then that I thought to look at the house. When I turned my head, a figure inched away from the window. I was gonna catch an earful when I got in. I could hear it already: *Sadie Alannah Quinn, I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you but you better stay away from that black boy.* Shit.

“My mom’s home,” Trenton said to the others. Then, “We gotta roll, Sadie.”

I nodded, meant to ask the girl’s name but didn’t. I don’t think I said anything to the others before they walked away. I told Trenton I’d see him around. He said he hoped so, then jogged to catch up to the group. Someone called him a mack daddy or a daddy mack, one, but I didn’t bother to hear anything else. The hum of his voice, his tiny scar, his smile, their laughter rustling the leaves.

I gathered my things, closed up the truck and floated to the front door, through it. My mom wasn’t waiting by the window, didn’t intercept me while I drifted through the living room and down the hallway to my Woodstock corner of the world. I stumbled in

my bedroom, tripped over Allie who'd made a bed on my floor, and dropped my pillow trying to catch myself on the far wall. I didn't bother to stand upright, just turned and slid down the wall until I came to rest with my knees to my chest. I breathed the first breath of my new life, or the last breath of my old, then curled myself around my sister, covered us both, and created new dreams before I ever fell asleep.

– Chapter Three –

I awoke to the sound of the vacuum outside my door. Allie rolled over, shoved her head under a pillow. It wasn't one of those lightweight, upright vacuums that could be slipped into a closet. This thing had its own suitcase, and my mom swore by the fifty-pound hunk of howling metal. She said that it had belonged to her mother—like that fact made it worth keeping, even when it smelled like roasted rubber—but I think she kept it as a torture device.

Without invitation, Mom came into my room. She didn't stomp on the clutch or release the throttle, or whatever it took to shut that beast down. Instead, she yelled over the noise—an impressive feat, really. “It's damn near nine, and you two are still curled up like kittens in here. Up and at 'em.”

“Can't we sleep in today?” I moaned.

“What do you think you been doing? Dad and Jackson done made two trips to the dump.” She stretched her foot back, tapped it on the vacuum. The growl faded out.

“Too bad that thing can’t suck the ugly out of the carpet,” I said.

“I’ll bet it could suck the lips off a mouthy little girl.” My mom tapped the base with her foot again, aimed the hose at my face, moved it around my head like a shuffleboard stick while I swatted it away. Allie groaned, told my mom to get out already but, between the pillow and vacuum, I doubt she heard. My mom laughed herself out the door and down the hallway but called back, “Dad’ll be home before long and he’s got a big surprise for you kids.”

Allie poked her head out from the pillow. “I was in the middle of a good dream, too.” She rubbed her face. “I was flying on an airplane to Kentucky, then it crashed into your room.”

I smiled and nodded in understanding. My mom’s methods for waking us up had a way of slipping in and changing the course of a dream, which sucked because it seemed like someplace she shouldn’t be able to reach.

I said, “You can probably sleep a few more minutes. I’m going to take a shower. She won’t come back here if she thinks we’re up.”

Allie stuffed her head under the pillow again.

The big oak in our yard, with its gnarled and decrepit branches, was perfect for climbing. And spying too, as it turned out. We smuggled out a bag of miniature donuts and sucked

the fine powder from our fingers under the cover of green and brown. The sun came in at a slant, sprinkling highlights and shadows in a shifting pattern throughout the tree and when a slight breeze moved through it looked like little people dancing on the leaves.

“I met some kids from the neighborhood last night,” I said between bites, noticing that the front yard was completely clear of garbage.

“Is that why you used half a can of hairspray on your bangs this morning?”

“The boy across the street is only a year ahead of you.”

“You’re wearing mascara too.” She smirked.

“I’m trying to help you, Allie. If you make friends over the summer, you won’t feel like the new girl when school starts.”

“I’m always the new girl.”

The front door opened and I pressed my index finger to my lips. Allie stuffed the rest of a donut in her mouth, pretended to zip her lips. If my mom caught us up there she’d tell us to get down before we broke our damn necks. *The last thing I need*, she’d say, *is to waste my day in the emergency room.*

Allie and I sat perfectly still, watched my mom cross the yard in her bare feet. She got to the sidewalk and stopped. “Sure is a fine morning, wouldn’t you say?”

A man replied from across the street. “About the same as every other morning.” He had a gravelly voice and I could tell his mouth was packed full of chewing tobacco.

My mom walked into the street and out of view.

“Welcome to our little slice of paradise,” a woman said. “We’re tickled pink to have ya’ll in the neighborhood!”

“I’ll take these palm trees and beaches over a cruddy river any day of the week.”

They spoke softly after that and the wind picked up so I couldn’t catch all the conversation. I took the opportunity to sneak two more donuts, careful not to make any crinkling sounds.

After a few minutes, the man called out, “Maybelle, you still yapping? I’m heading to the bridge and ain’t nobody sitting with the kids.”

“Go ahead, Johnny. I got ‘em.” Then she said, “Don’t you run off, Miss Norah Quinn. I’m just gonna check on the girls and refill my coffee. You want something?”

“I’m doing fine.” My mom stepped back into the yard, shook her head and watched the man walk down the street. To no one, she said “I see Johnny’s just as charming as he ever was.”

Allie shot me a suspicious glance. Through a bald spot in the tree I caught sight of Johnny, a fishing pole tucked under his armpit, and a rolling cooler in tow. He wore no shirt and I could almost hear his ribcage creak. His jeans had been cut off at the knees so that threads of denim hung loose at the fringes. On his feet were sneakers that might have been white at one time, no socks. His dust-colored ponytail was slick with sweat and sunshine. He spat tobacco juice on the pavement with a quick splat, then wiped his chin with the back of his hand as he rounded the corner. Yeah, a real charmer.

Maybelle returned with a plastic coffee mug. Smiled at my mom. “What?”

“You’re all grewed up now, that’s all. Don’t look a day past twenty but you got a pack of kids to say that ain’t true.”

Allie whispered, “Guess we found Mom’s connections.”

Maybelle waved the compliment away. “If I look that young it’s only ‘cause the good Lord got himself mixed up and put me in a body meant for a boy.”

She had a syrupy voice, the opposite of her husband’s. When I’d heard her earlier, I pictured a heavy-set woman with forever red cheeks. But Mabelle was petite, all knees and wrists and elbows, collarbone more pronounced than breasts. Her pockets were longer than her denim shorts, and her hair was nearly white—a peroxide over blonde sort of white. It looked dry and brittle, and when she lit a cigarette I feared the flame might catch in her hair and crackle like autumn leaves in a burn barrel. Beneath the pitted skin on her face she looked like she had been pretty once, or could have been, anyway, if she had only avoided the sun.

Maybelle added, “You always was lucky when it come to looks. Had all the boys back home chasing after you.”

“Gross.” Allie’s face puckered up like she’d smelled something foul.

“Only one’s chasing me now got a stack of bills in their hand.”

Maybelle held her cigarette and coffee mug in one hand, reached forward with the other and squeezed my mom’s shoulder. “Lord, I’ve missed you. You should’ve seen me when your first letter came. I cried like a baby.”

“You’ll get along just fine with my littlest one. She’s a waterworks too.”

Allie muttered something under her breath, shifted her weight some. A twig cracked off and dropped—shaking up leaves and bouncing against branches as it made its way down to the ground. My mom and Maybelle turned toward the trunk. I pressed my finger to my lips again, held my breath, waited. We might have been found out that very moment if Stinky, Nate, and Trenton hadn't come walking up the street, right toward my yard. My eyes grew wider and wider as they approached. I gripped my sister's arm and squeezed.

“Good heavens, Maybelle,” Mom said. “Don't tell me one of these troublemakers belongs to you.” Maybelle told her that they don't make no trouble, and my mom pointed to Trenton. “A blind man could see *that* one ain't yours.” Then to Nate, “And I can't see you raising one to look that damn smug.” She drummed a finger on her cheek, pointed it again. “So I'm guessing that one there's your boy.”

“Yes, ma'am. My name's Nathan but everyone calls me Stinky.”

“Did he say Stinky?” Allie whispered, and I nodded, let go of her arm.

Stinky wiped his palm on the side pocket of his shorts, put his hand out. At least I wasn't the only dork on the block.

“What the hell kinda name is that? I ain't shaking no stinky hand.”

“He don't stink—we just been calling him that since he was little.” Maybelle pointed to Nate. “We got two Nathan's in the neighborhood so everyone took to calling mine by his nickname. Don't mean nothing.” She tipped her coffee mug up, took a drink.

My mom said, “Guess Stinky ain't no worse than Smelly Belly.”

Maybelle spit her drink out she laughed so hard, laughed herself right into a coughing fit. She wiped her eyes, told Stinky, “Your granddaddy used to call her that. She’d get so mad her face would go as red as that hair of hers.” And she laughed some more at that.

“Your daddy was the devil.”

Stinky stuffed his hands in his pockets and kicked the grass with the toe of his sneaker. I realized he probably did know three weeks ago that we were moving. Shit-head lied to me.

“Sadie!” Allie whispered. “That black guy is looking right at us.”

“Shh,” I said, and saw Trenton—arms crossed over his chest, dressed in a loose blue button-up shirt, black ballcap turned backwards, eyes watching mine. With a slight angle of his neck and a drawing-in of eyebrows, he seemed to ask why the hell we were hiding in a tree. I pointed at my mom, then at my ear, created circles with my finger. Crossed my eyes and stuck my tongue out for effect. Trenton smiled, laughed maybe, and covered by clearing his throat, nodded once to me, the smile not quite leaving his lips.

“Crap, Sadie. Do *not* tell me he’s the reason you’re primping. Mom and Dad will freaking kill you.” Allie spoke in a voice above a whisper and I shushed her again, told her if she breathed one word to Mom or Dad, I’d cut her tongue out and feed it to her for lunch. She shook her head.

“You boys mind watching the girls for a few minutes?” Maybelle asked.

“Not at all, Mama.” Stinky turned to my mom. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

Trenton glanced back before he crossed the street. I'd swear he winked and Allie must've seen it too because she called me an idiot, an idiot with a death wish, then she said she shouldn't have said that, she was sorry for saying it. And was I mad? No, I wasn't mad.

"Well, the boy's got his manners," Mom said. "Hell of a name, but he's got manners." She waited until they'd all gone inside, then faced Maybelle directly. "Why the hell you letting him run around with that black boy, Maybelle? You trying to find trouble?"

Maybelle didn't look angry, more disappointed than anything. "Times are changed. It ain't like that here. It ain't even like that back home no more. They got black people living up on the hill now. You believe that? Right up next to that fancy Quinn farm you left us in the valley for. Serves that family right, too."

My mom didn't respond right away, seemed to let it settle. "I'd have to see it to believe it alright, but I don't guess I ever will. I won't step one foot back in that rotten town." She looked out at the street and said nothing for a moment. Then her voice hardened, "Times might change, Maybelle, but people don't. You let that boy around your child if you see fit, but I won't have him rubbing off on mine."

"Trenton's as sweet as they come. He'd give the shirt off his back to a hobbling dog if he saw one. And he ain't had an easy time of life, he's got troubles close to your own. You'd find that out if you got to know him."

"I know all I need to know about *that* boy."

Maybelle shook her head and sighed. “I see the stubbornness ain’t made its way out of you.” She lit another cigarette. “That boy’s got a name, Norah.” Blew her smoke toward the sky. “And it ain’t Detroit Jones.”

To see the look on Mom’s face, you’d have thought Maybelle slugged her. She stumbled back a step, stood like she’d just been hit with a stun gun. After a few slow seconds, my mom turned and walked to the front door. “Sean’s due back any minute. I should get lunch going.”

“One bruised apple don’t ruin the bunch,” Maybelle called out before the door slammed. “One bruised apple...”

We climbed down from the tree when Maybelle went in. Allie asked what the hell that was all about but I didn’t answer because I didn’t know. It was the first time I’d ever heard the name Detroit Jones, and even my wildest guess probably wouldn’t have landed anywhere near the truth of it.

Me and Allie were heading toward the door when my dad pulled up. He cranked the window, said he could use our help carrying some stuff. Jackson spilled out of the front seat looking unusually excited and walked to the back where Dad popped the top glass and dropped the tailgate.

The smell of bleach slapped me back a step. “Oh my God, it smells like you’re cleaning up a murder scene in here. What are all the buckets for?”

“When you’re finished cleaning the pool, I won’t have any use for you,” he said.
“I can dispose of your body in these.”

“Pool?” I said, and Allie said, “What pool?”

“The one in the backyard, bone-heads.” My dad wasn’t one to get theatrical with surprises. “Go check it out if you want but don’t go empty handed.”

Allie carried two small jugs. I walked hunched over with my legs out wide, lugging a big green bucket by its handle, and I had to stop every couple steps to work out the pain in my fingers.

“Come on, Olive Oyl, you can do it,” Jackson said as he and my dad cruised by.

I turned with the plan to drag the bucket backwards and saw the girl from PA staring from the sidewalk. Same girl from the night before but she wore a different Metallica shirt—this one a black tank top—and a very short pair of cutoff shorts, bleach stains intentional, I believe. Her brown hair, the color of a Hershey bar from Hershey, PA, was down today, hanging just above her shoulder blades. She wore eyeliner and her light gray eyes resembled those of a feline. “Need some help?” She asked.

I wiped sweat from my forehead. “What gave it away?”

She joined me, grabbed part of the handle, and we carried the bucket between us around the left side of the house where a rickety, rusted gate had been opened as far as it could go before a lump of mud stopped it in its tracks. The chain-link itself was almost completely detached, looked to be running away from the posts, trying like hell to keel over and die.

When we made it through the gate and into the side yard, my dad jumped out and yelled, “Snake! Jacks, get a shovel.”

My brother still held a bucket in each hand but he turned his head left, right, then back to my dad. “Everything’s packed!”

I froze. Allie sprinted a few feet to safety and my dad stood, not upright but bent awkwardly at the hips and knees, palms facing out as though he were giving himself up to the police. Even while my chest kicked, I wanted to laugh at the sight of my dad in his half-karate, half-surrender stance.

The girl from PA walked cautiously toward my dad, followed his eyes to the grass, craned her neck a bit, then relaxed her shoulders. “It’s just a garter.” She knelt down and picked up the head of a thin wriggling snake. “Heck, it’s not even a big one. They won’t hurt you.” She turned toward my dad, who jumped back again.

“Get that thing out of here!” he yelled.

The girl laughed, but did as she was told. She walked past him to the privacy fence and sent the snake flying over.

“For Christ’s sake, I didn’t say to throw it in the neighbor’s yard.”

“Well, I didn’t see you being picky about it.”

Jackson came closer, said, “Holy snake wrangler! What’s your name?”

She introduced herself as Michele and informed us that she lived one street behind ours, that our backyards touched, in fact. It took everything I had to keep from

chuckling when my dad dipped his head down, tapped his cowboy hat, and said *Howdy*, like he hadn't just been the damsel in distress.

We walked along the side of the house, which went further back than I would've guessed. Looked like whoever closed in the carport added a massive utility room on the other side of the kitchen, then a porch—a Florida room, Michele called it—and after that came a screened room that housed the in-ground pool. From the back, the house looked like a big block-letter U, turned on its side.

“Are you kidding me?” I said when I saw the pool.

Jacks pretended to puke and Allie covered her nose and mouth with one hand. My dad shrugged, “I never said it was ready to swim in. It's going to take some work.”

“Ready to swim in?” I said. “We'll need hazmat suits to go near it.”

The pool was only about a third of the way full but I don't think you could call it water. The contents were thick and green—it was basically the biggest bowl of spinach I'd ever seen. Gnats and dragonflies and things I couldn't identify hovered above the water, and the concrete walls were heavy with slime. On the steps that led to the shallow end, a lizard puffed out its pink neck. The sun rose above the tree line where nothing weakened its intensity and a soft rain fell even while the sun toasted my thighs. Water drops patted the tin framework of the room. If the humidity hadn't amped up the acrid stench of the pool, it might've been relaxing. As quickly as the rain came, it quit.

“You guys want some help unloading?” Michele asked.

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” My dad said.

Michele proved to be quite the helper, which cemented her position in my mom's good graces, and she had no problem hoisting one end of a ladder on her shoulder and walking it to the back with my dad. When the two returned, laughing about how she had chucked a snake like a baseball, I saw that my dad liked her too. We spent the day unloading and sweating—not a good day for primping, I decided, when mascara bled down my face—and carrying odd-shaped items in pairs. Twice, Michele took a shortcut home (through a gap in our back fence) and on her second trip, she returned with a backpack hanging off one shoulder and announced to my family that she could sleep over, as though she'd been invited by everyone. Or anyone, for that matter. We arranged furniture, unpacked boxes, rearranged, hung pictures and mirrors and shelves. We broke down boxes, folded up packing paper, and by evening you'd never have known we'd been in town less than one full day. Michele was amazed. That's the way of it though—when you move like we do, you learn to do it right. You also learn that each place is a do-over, that you can start again and again and again until you figure out how to get *life* right.

My parents left to take the trailer back so they wouldn't be charged for an extra day. Allie and Jacks went along to take a tour of the town since they slept through it the night before. Michele and I sat in the long evening shadow of my tree. Our street didn't look so slummy late in the day. The harsh afternoon light drew attention to the crude patches along cracked cinderblock walls, shined a spotlight on the mildew that speckled aluminum sheds. But the orangey haze that arrived with evening complemented the little homes. The same towering elephant ears and palm fronds and aloe plants that took on a wild, jungle-like appearance earlier in the day now framed the neighborhood with an air of tropical charm. It wasn't paradise—not even a slice. But there was something serene

about the sound of a fat grapefruit falling to the ground like a water balloon breaking in the grass, and the scent of fresh citrus basting the lawn. I could almost imagine our pool with clean, crystalline water shimmering beneath the tangerine sky.

Across the street, Maybelle and Johnny lounged in camping chairs at the front of their carport. Scattered around their feet was a small collection of crunched up beer cans. Johnny stomped another one with the heel of his shoe, kicked it in the general direction of the others, then pulled a fresh beer from a small cooler between their chairs. Their house was the mirror image of ours, without the closed-in den, and it looked like they'd lived there a while. Settled homes are easy to recognize—items like bicycles and buckets become part of the landscape, obstacles that owners grow accustomed to maneuvering around. A twin-sized box spring leaned against the carport's cinderblock supports and the torn sun-bleached fabric flapped in the air, exposing the coils. A faded pink Coke can was wedged between springs, a baby's walker toy parked beside it—one plastic wheel in the wind. Stinky dragged an outdoor trash bin toward his parents, dropped all the compacted cans inside. He waved us over when he finished.

Maybelle greeted Michele with a hug, and Johnny nodded hello. When I introduced myself, Maybelle wrapped her arms around me, aimed to kiss my cheek but only reached my jaw, she was so much smaller than me. "I know precisely who you are, Miss Sadie Quinn. Been waiting a long time to meet you." She held on just a beat too long and I had to tug myself out of her embrace.

The carport smelled like spoiled hamburger or a clumpy litter box, depending on which direction the breeze wanted to blow. Johnny said, "Christ almighty—wheel that bin to the side of the house."

“You’ve known my mom a while?” I asked.

“Your daddy too,” Maybelle said proudly. “Since before you was thought of.”

I expected her to say something more, but she offered no additional details, just left it at that. And Johnny didn’t chime in at all.

When Stinky came back from the side of the house, he said, “I checked the T.V. before I came out. They reckon O.J.’s gonna kill himself. Some lawyer—the guy’s got a skunk stripe in his hair, ain’t that weird?—he’s reading a letter O.J. wrote. Sounds an awful lot like a suicide note to me.”

“This whole thing *stinks* of a conspiracy,” Johnny laughed. “Get it?”

“You’re an idiot, Johnny,” Maybelle said.

He stood up. “You love me.”

“Can’t get rid of you, is all,” she said, and winked. “Grab that cooler, would ya?”

Johnny and Maybelle went in, and the last sliver of sun dipped below the tree line. Streetlights and television screens flickered, created the only sense of motion. Stinky suggested we walk the neighborhood so I could see where everyone lived.

Despite its name, Snowdrop Circle wasn’t actually a circle. It was more of an ellipse—like a NASCAR track—and we lived at the tip of a curved end. Along the straightaway, we passed a number of intersecting streets before hooking a left onto Wisteria Way. I realized, then, that all the roads in the neighborhood had been named for plants—Plumeria Place, Dahlia Drive, Rosemary Road. My house was on Snowdrop Circle, as were Nate’s, Stinky’s and Trenton’s. Michele lived on Aster Alley, which wasn’t an alley at all but a regular road like the rest. The alliteration was corny, but I liked it anyway. A

crumbling brick sign off Main Street named our neighborhood: Whispering Oaks. I liked that too. At the end of Wisteria Way, we arrived at the other straightaway of Snowdrop Circle. We turned left again and headed back toward my end of the ellipse.

All the houses on the outer edge of the track backed up to the woods. Crickets called out and occasional animals scampered across the ground, cracking twigs and rustling the brush as they went. Squirrels or raccoons, probably. The smell was musty in a good way—fresh, like a bed of leaves after a good hard rain. As we approached the final turn toward my house, a small dull red car with a hatchback slowed, idled beside us, then pulled into the next driveway.

“Trenton’s home,” Michele said, and we walked to the foot of his short driveway.

His was the last house on the straightaway—just six houses down from Stinky’s—a hop across the road and six houses down from mine! Trenton got out of the passenger door, a woman exited from the driver’s side. Her hair was a mass of curls, little black spindles that moved out from her scalp to form a near perfect circle—like a stained-glass image of the angel, Gabriel. The woman’s skin was smooth, her eyebrows thick and carefully curved over startling golden brown eyes.

“Sadie, I take it?” She wore a waitress uniform that looked like it came right off the movie set of *Grease*—a fitted, pink button-up dress with white apron pockets and a scalloped collar.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. The bottom of my stomach dropped. She knew my name.

She tapped the letters embroidered on her dress. “Tonya.”

I resisted sticking my hand out for a shake, told her it was very nice to meet her and she replied in kind, then went inside.

There was a slight sheen on Trenton's skin, and it carried with it the scent of a workday—sweet and sweat and citrus. He met my eyes, lifted his chin just slightly. "Looks like you found your way out of the tree."

"Wasn't easy," I said. "Only got lost a couple times."

"Now I know where to look for you," he replied, and I hoped the sun I got during the day disguised the blush I felt in my cheeks. He winked. I was sure of it that time.

"Reel it in, Romeo." Stinky dripped sweat from every pore on his head and his dark brown hair was stuck, in messy chunks, to his face and neck. He raised his Hard Rock Café shirt, wiped his face, and the sweat bubbled back. Reminded me of wiper blades that couldn't keep pace with the rain. Stinky gave up and let the sweat trickle down from his forehead. "Did you hear there's a man-hunt for O.J. Simpson?"

Trenton held my eyes for an instant longer, betrayed the slightest hint of a smile and turned to Stinky. "He didn't turn himself in?"

"You ain't been following the news?"

"I been packing grapefruit into crates since noon."

"You got a car radio, don't you?"

"You wanna play twenty questions, Stinky? Or just tell me what's going on?"

Stinky explained that O.J. disappeared right under his attorney's noses, that a lawyer read a suicide letter live on TV, that O.J. had been declared a fugitive of justice. Michele said he was probably in Mexico laughing his guilty ass off, and Stinky was still on the fence. He didn't think it made sense that O.J. would kill Nicole when they weren't even married anymore.

“Ever heard of alimony or child support?” Michele asked. “Who the heck else would want her dead?”

“Some people are saying Nicole was wild. Heavy into drugs and, uh, women too.” Stinky’s oatmeal cheeks went straight to pink. My borderline sunburn might’ve covered for me, but his skin gave him up right away. “Lots of ‘em from what I heard.”

“What’s that got to do with her murder?” I asked, and Stinky shrugged.

“You need to lay off the porno mags,” Trenton said. “What do you think, Sadie?”

I looked at my unpolished, too long toenails and the skinny rubber strips of my flip-flops—the streetlight shining a spotlight down on both. “The evidence doesn’t look good.” I curled my toes under as best I could and looked at Trenton. “The blood at the scene matches O.J.’s blood type. Plus they found blood on the Bronco, in the Bronco, *and* inside his mansion. The bloody glove isn’t doing him any favors. I’m interested in the sophisticated DNA testing they keep talking about,” I said. “But, he has a history of violence.”

“Listen to that,” Michele said. “Someone else who speaks geek.”

Trenton smoothed the top of his hair, but it was cut so short that the faint pattern of waves stayed in place. “I think I’m with Sadie. Her evidence makes more sense than Stinky’s weird fantasy.”

Trenton’s front door rushed open and his mom hustled into the yard, closed a robe around her pajamas—an afterthought, obviously. “He’s driving on the highway and the helicopters ... the cops are—They interrupted the game!” Tonya stared at us, we stared back, and I’m not sure anyone knew what she meant until she said, “O.J. is live on TV.”

Stinky and Michele went in and I paused in the yard, looked at my house, saw the shotgun truck in the drive, nobody outside. Trenton asked if I was coming and I glanced at my house again to make sure nobody saw, then quickly followed him through the door. Trenton's layout was different than mine and his floors were tiled—twelve-inch textured beige tiles, expensive tiles—in every room I could see. They'd upgraded from the slat-glass jalousie windows to standard lift windows, too. It was nice. Very nice. The small foyer opened to a living room with white wicker furniture and cushions that looked like paintings, beach scenes at dawn.

Stinky and Michele each took a cushion on the couch, and Tonya took the chair. She reached for the remote on the square glass coffee table, gestured to her son but looked at me. "Go on and sit down. There's room on the love seat."

My cheeks and neck and ears went warm at the word *love seat*, but nobody noticed. Their eyes were on the television screen. Tonya aimed the remote, turned the volume up. "They been following him for a little while now, I guess. Look at all them cop cars, and not one of those fools has tried to get in front and block him in."

"They're saying he's got a gun," Michele offered. "Probably don't want him blowing his brains out."

"Maybe," Tonya said. "But I can promise if that was me driving down the freeway with a loaded gun, they'd already be tagging my toe."

Trenton shrugged. "Maybe they're just being cautious so they don't end up shooting the most famous black man in the country on national television."

“He might be famous, but he forgot a long time ago that he was black. He went and—” Tonya cut herself off, looked at Trenton, at me, back to the screen. “Cops are just trailing behind like a group of concert girls hoping to get invited to the after-party.”

Trenton said nothing, the others laughed, and I felt suddenly like my skin grew three shades lighter, Trenton’s three shades darker. Neither of us moved but it felt like a fat glass window grew up between us. What had Tonya started to say? *He went and ...* what?

Broadcasters conducted telephone interviews with anyone they could scrape up, anyone willing to take a stab at O.J.’s state of mind, intentions, or guilt. The footage itself was a bit boring—the Bronco wasn’t even speeding, and they had somehow managed to clear the freeway so it appeared as if he could drive forever into the horizon without any interference.

“He’s gotta run out of gas sometime,” Stinky said after a while.

Michele yawned, “I hope it’s sooner than later. I’m whooped. Sadie’s family don’t mess around when it comes to moving in.”

“We should probably head back to my house anyway,” I said to Michele, relieved to find a reason to go. “My parents don’t know where we are or where to look.”

When we got to my place, I expected an earful from my mom about the time—it was nearly eleven—but she shushed me when I called out that I was home. My sister, brother, and parents sat in the living room watching the O.J. chase, an oily bowl of popcorn kernels on the coffee table. They didn’t even acknowledge us standing there.

Mom was on the edge of the couch, hands steepled together like in bedtime prayer, her bare foot tapping the tie-dyed carpet at a rate of three taps per second, at least. “They’re gonna wind up shooting him. I just know it,” she said. “After everything he’s been through.”

“Yeah. He’s been through the wringer.” My dad shook his head. “Butchering two people is a hard thing to cope with.”

“He’s innocent until proven guilty,” Mom snapped.

“Since when do you have faith in the judicial system?”

“That’s my point, Sean. The police don’t know their asses from a hole in the wall. What makes you think they got this right? You don’t know him.”

“I know all I need to know about that man,” Dad said.

My mom had spoken the very same words that morning about Trenton, *because* he was black. Now she was giving a murderer, of all people, the benefit of doubt? And my dad, who could usually be kept in check with the whip of her head and one cold, hard stare, just opposed her directly. What the hell was going on?

I eyed the glass in front of my mom. “Can I have a sip of your Coke?”

My dad grabbed his glass and held it out to me.

“You don’t really have much left,” I said. “Mom’s is still full.”

“For shit’s sake, Sadie!” Mom said. “I don’t got any liquor in my cup if that’s what you’re fishing for. Now sit down and watch the show or go to your room, one. But figure it out quick—I’m trying to hear.”

Jacks sprawled across the armchair as usual, arms and legs spilling every which way, Allie was curled up on the floor wrapped in a knitted throw, and my parents

occupied the cracks between the three couch cushions so that nobody else could fit beside or between them. I took a seat on the floor—catty-corner from the TV. Michele sat down next to me and whispered that he should've gone to Mexico. My mom leaned so far forward it looked as if she'd fall off the couch at any moment. She pumped her fist when the Bronco neared the exit to O.J.'s neighborhood, and my dad blew out a big breath, crossed his arms and leaned back on the couch.

“Oh my God,” I said. The overpass and streets were full of cheering people, some of them bare-chested and waving their shirts like helicopter blades, screaming as though it were Princess Diana and not a fugitive rolling through town. “They had time to make signs?”

“Disgusting.” Jacks curled his lips, shook his head.

“You know,” Mom said as if confronting all of us, or none of us; the silence, maybe, or the noise in her head. “His daughter drowned right there on that property when she was two.” She paused, swallowed. Her voice went soft. “You have any idea the guilt he must feel? That he couldn't even keep his baby girl safe?”

Of course, I thought. It's about Alannah. Always about Alannah.

My dad pounded his fist against the coffee table and startled me—startled everyone, I think. Ice cubes knocked against the inside of their glasses. “He abandoned his family long before his daughter died. A decent man keeps his family together.” Dad stood up quickly, knocked the table again with his shin, then hobbled to his bedroom. Mom wasn't three steps behind, but she turned and walked out the front door, slammed it.

“Everyone in this family is fucking nuts.” Jacks stood up too, walked down the hall to his room.

Allie asked where I thought Mom was going, and I scooted across the floor on my butt, smelled my mom's glass, took a sip. Coke. Just Coke. "She didn't take the keys. Probably just went to Maybelle's to cool off."

"Sheesh," Michele said. "Your parents are passionate about this whole thing."

"They're weird," I replied. I didn't feel like explaining it to her. And anyway, I probably didn't understand them any better than she did.

Me, Allie and Michele watched it grow dark in L.A., watched until O.J.'s figure crept out of the Bronco at last, and went inside. Afterwards, we made our beds on my bedroom floor—my sister had no apparent plans to sleep in her own room, on an actual mattress, it seemed. I didn't fall asleep immediately. Even if it were possible to drift off between two bears growling through the night, I couldn't get the evening out of my mind. Couldn't get Trenton and Tonya, or my mom and dad out of my thoughts. I knew I wasn't supposed to like Trenton, knew my parents would just as soon bury me in a ditch than see me with a black boy, but there was something about him I couldn't shake. I'd spent my entire life feeling invisible, and the way he tilted his head and narrowed his eyes made me feel like he *saw* me, like he was the only person on Earth who'd ever seen me. And I liked it.

– Chapter Four –

The following weekend, a carnival came to town. My mom had agreed to let me go only after Jackson offered to chaperone. She stared at him with a skeptical face—we both knew he'd drop the leash he was supposed to keep me on the moment he spotted a girl in daisy dukes and oversized sunglasses—but she couldn't say no to anything he asked. In the eight days we'd lived in Florida, Michele went home only twice and that was just to dump her dirties and pack the bag again with clean clothes. Mom told Michele if she was gonna stick like a fly on shit, then the least she could do was treat me and my brother to a corn dog. And if it meant I'd get to spend a day away from the constant news coverage of the O.J. case, I wouldn't argue about Jackson tagging along. My mom had all but attached herself to the couch waiting for updates, wouldn't even run laundry or fix supper if she thought a news story might break. Dad was sick of it too. He'd appointed Allie his new apprentice, even bought her a tool belt, and the two of them kept busy repairing and replacing one thing or another.

The afternoon of the carnival, Michele borrowed her mom's car and topped off the tank at Chief's—a gas station with only one pump and a ten-foot plaster statue of an Indian dressed in a loincloth and headdress, a bow in his right hand, nothing in his left because it had broken off. The inside smelled like body odor and incense, but the cashier looked at Michele's ID, took five dollars of her change, and sold her the two tall beer cans she carried to the counter.

We burned through a quarter tank of gas riding around town with Jackson who sat in the back seat drinking. While she drove, Michele explained that we lived in the blocks, the rich in the bricks, the poor in the woods. Rednecks, or big truck boys as she called them, mostly stayed in the sticks—although that had more to do with location than building material—and the immigrants and welfare recipients lived in row houses, the rows. The trailer parks in Port de Leon were unlike any I had ever seen. They were retirement communities stocked with pink flamingo yard ornaments, bird feeders and golf carts, and every last trailer had vinyl siding in place of aluminum panels. Michele rattled off streets to avoid either because the residents would think us trash and call the cops, or because we might be car-jacked sitting at a stop sign. Often, it was the same road that housed both. She pointed out the fishing pier, the drag-race track, the golf course, the yacht club, the beach.

Our last attraction before heading to the carnival was the nude beach. Jackson perked up at that, pressed his face so close to the window that his breath fogged the glass but you couldn't see a thing over the stick fences and sand dunes. Michele hooked a U-turn in the parking lot. “Not what you think anyway. It's a bunch of rubbery old people. But I can let ya'll out if saggy buns are your thing.”

I pictured a mob of silver-scalped oldies tossing their teeth on a sheet, locking arms and running together into the sea—high knees to clear the froth on little white waves. “No thanks,” I said. “I’d like to have my appetite when we stop to eat.”

The carnival entrance was positioned across the street from a row of restaurants. We decided to eat dinner at Berger’s Bier Haus, a German brewery and eatery that backed up to the railroad tracks. The male employees wore charcoal hats, black slacks, and button-front shirts with red bow-ties. The females wore traditional beer-girl outfits—white blouses with capped sleeves and pale blue corsets designed to shove their breasts to their necks. Little ruffled aprons, too.

We sat at a small table near the entrance of the restaurant, but took a tour of the brewery before ordering. Aside from the employee’s uniforms and the German words on the menu, the small front dining room looked like most of the other restaurants I’d been to—little round tables, rolled silverware, condiment caddies, and paper placemats. But the bier hall was something else entirely. It had five rows of long lacquered oak tables—each one big enough to bench ten people, easy—six tables to each row, and still ample space for busy beer girls to deliver oversized steins without bumping into one another. On one side of the room, stainless steel beer vats stood in line to the left and right of an enormous copper vat shaped like a hot air balloon turned on its head. From all the contraptions, pipes traveled different routes along the ceiling, most of which arrived at the beer taps behind a solid wood bar on the adjacent wall.

While we ate, the manager taped a hand-written sign to the front door. “Jacks,” I said. “Looks like this place needs help if you’re up for wearing a newsboy cap.”

“I’ll wear a chicken suit if I get paid.” Jackson put his sandwich down, looked at the sign, at the manager. “I’ll be right back.”

Michele dug some change from her pocket and paged Nate from the payphone in the lobby. Jacks was still talking to the manager when she returned. My brother nodded several times, then the man put up an index finger and walked away. He returned with two flat items wrapped in clear plastic and a stack of papers clipped together with an ink pen. Jackson walked back to our table, a confused look on his face. “I got the job.”

Michele balled her napkin, dropped it on the plate. “That was a quick interview.”

“The dishwasher walked out last night. Manager said I could start today.”

“What time?” I asked.

“Whatever time it is when I finish my application and change.” Jacks held out the packages—a white dress shirt in one bag, cap and bow-tie in the other.

Michele said, “Guess you’re not going to the carnival?”

Jacks chewed the skin around his thumbnail. “Sadie, fill these papers out. My handwriting sucks.”

“Is good penmanship a job requirement for a dishwasher?”

“Just do it,” he said. “Oh, and I managed a seafood restaurant in Kansas for a year, and a steakhouse in Kentucky.”

“We didn’t even live in Kansas for a year,” I said. “Do these places have names?”

“Make them up—they don’t call.”

“Why are you applying for a dishwasher job if you’ve managed two restaurants?”

“Because I’m willing to prove myself and work my way up. Write that down if there’s a spot for it,” Jacks said, then strutted to the bathroom with his plastic-wrapped work clothes.

I scoffed when the application asked for a list of all addresses in the past five years. They didn’t provide enough paper for that. I wrote in the last two and continued, blew through the *Previous Employment* section, and checked some boxes on the back without reading the agreements. When I looked up again, Nate was coming through the entrance, Trenton a step behind him. The manager held the door, removed his *Help Wanted* sign. I turned to Michele, widened my eyes.

“Did I forget to mention Trenton got the night off?” She winked—dramatically and obviously—and said, “Tell me I’m not the best friend you’ve ever had.”

I might have told her she was a gift sent straight from heaven but I was too busy staring at Trenton. He wore dark blue jeans that fit nicely at the hips, baggier in the legs—long enough that the extra material appeared to cascade in small denim waves over the top of his tan boots, but not so long that they dragged the ground. His red t-shirt—snug enough to have been painted on his body—was tucked only in the front and a black belt was visible just at the buckle. Over the red shirt, a loose black button-up shirt

remained unbuttoned. His ball cap matched his shirt. Trenton lifted his chin, said “What’s up, Sadie?” at the same time Jacks said, “Are you done yet?”

My brother wasn’t wearing the newsboy cap but looked no less ridiculous in his starched bow tie and crispy button up, tucked (all the way around) into a filthy pair of torn up jeans. “Done?” he said again. “I want to clock in.”

“You look ... nice.” I said. Pointed to the page. “You need to sign. Right here.”

“No shit, Sadie. I can read.” He snatched up the pen and scribbled his name.

Trenton stepped forward, said, “How you doing, man?”

My brother looked up at him. Looked at Nate. Shook his head, then grabbed his application, dropped his dirty pre-employment shirt in my lap and told me to do something with it. He walked toward the counter and put his cap on.

Nate said, “What’s his problem?”

“Don’t feel special,” Michele said. “He’s an asshole to everyone.”

The evening was warm and sticky, and my lips tasted like ocean. The musk of sausages and grilled onions and peppers hovered above buttered popcorn and caramel apples, and the carnival floor was a carpet of pine needles and grass and snow cone cups, smashed popcorn and paper plates. Beneath the flashing carnival lights, the litter looked natural—like it belonged there.

Nate and Michele walked a few steps ahead—connected at the hands, the hips almost. Nate had on overalls, only one strap latched, the other swinging casually near his backside, and his long-sleeved shirt looked like two different shirts stitched together in the center. The left side was a silky sapphire blue, the right side a chaotic, colorful geometry lesson: triangles, octagons, circles, and squares all linked together, and the colors mostly reminded me of condiments—ketchup and mustard and barbeque sauce. Purple too, but I couldn't think of a sauce for that. I'd have to ask Jacks now that he was on his way to being a food connoisseur.

Michele's snug sunflower shorts barely covered her butt, just reached her tan thighs, and her yellow and black baby-tee didn't even try to approach her pierced belly button. She and Nate were oddly adorable. We walked past numerous booths, games, and rides before anyone showed interest in the carnival. Michele finally pointed to a tent with wooden milk bottles stacked in pyramids, said she wanted to play.

The woman operating the booth wore a stained yellow t-shirt that said *Carnie* on the back. Beneath that was a smiley face missing most of its teeth. At least she found some humor in her job. Michele pulled a folded stack of cash from her back pocket.

“You know they weight the bottles on the bottom row, right?” I told her after she failed to knock the pyramids over with her first dollar. “You have to aim for the middle bottle on the bottom row, about a third of the way up.” Michele glared at me like she was deciding whether or not to believe me, and I said, “Try it. That's what Jacks does and he wins every time.”

The woman shot me a look of annoyance, then spoke like an auctioneer and urged Michele to keep on—only a dollar for three balls, three dollars for twelve, heck of a deal for a gal with an arm of steel. Michele knocked the stacks down, one after another until the carnie didn't bother with her pitch anymore, just stacked the bottles back again, lined the softballs, and stuffed Michele's money in her apron. Michele played and played, traded each prize up for a bigger one. She pointed to the most ridiculous item hanging from the tent—an enormous stuffed pickle with a face made of felt—told Nate she'd play until she won it.

“She'll spend a week's worth of grocery money,” I said to Trenton.

“She'll be here a week trying to win it too,” he said. “Wanna do something else?”

Michele widened her eyes at me, mouthed the word *go*, and I said, “He can see you, you know. You're not invisible.”

“Do you need me to draw you a map, Sadie?”

I told Trenton if he wanted to do something else I'd come along and watch, and he said he'd be happy just to walk so we walked. After a minute, Trenton said, “Nate mentioned you got registered for school. You know your schedule?”

And this was the moment I dreaded—the moment he'd figure out what a *real* geek looked like. I stared at my feet, relieved that I'd clipped and painted my toenails. “I got AP Calculus first period,” I said. Bumped into him trying to avoid a mother chasing her toddler down. “Second period is Chemistry, then Psychology and English Lit.”

I waited for him to laugh or crack a joke, but he said, “First lunch or second?”

“Second, I’m pretty sure,” I said. A crowd of people coming off a ride poured in front of us, between us, pushing and laughing, and someone called someone else a little bitch, looking like he was ‘bout to cry and shit, and the little bitch—who did appear on the verge of tears—picked up his pace, elbowed me and a few others out of his way and ran to the back of a gyro stand where he puked in the grass.

I bobbed up and down on my toes, weaved left to right trying to find Trenton’s ball cap in the crowd, was about to give up and head back to Michele’s booth when I felt a light tug on the waist of my jeans, a hand on my right hip—not firm in its grip, not a grip at all, really, just barely there, but there—and a warm, quiet *boo* in my left ear. I think I jumped, I might have squealed, but I definitely turned to find Trenton laughing. That damn dimple in his cheek. Intense amber eyes.

“You trying to lose me?” he asked.

“I’m trying to find you,” I said.

He tilted his head, studied me. “I’m right here.”

I’m not sure how much time passed while I replayed those words, struggled to come up with something cute or clever to say, and it was only when the rest of the carnival came slowly back into focus that I realized it had ever disappeared. Trenton nodded his head toward an area just at the edge of the carnival grounds, asked if I wanted to sit. I followed close behind him to a small hill, a green mound is all it really was, and we took a seat, looked out at all the people.

“This place is so strange,” I said. It wasn’t just the mix of races—I’d never seen so many old people either, and certainly not at a carnival. Fashion, too, was all over the map. One group of teenagers had matching pink Mohawks, all of them with chain wallets and wrist spikes. Another group thought makeup only came in blood-red and black, and they liked fishnet and body piercing. A lot. “I can’t believe guys wear makeup,” I said. “My parents would lose their shit if me or my sister did our faces up like that, but if my *brother* tried, they’d shoot him on the spot.”

“You look like you never been past the county line,” Trenton laughed.

“I guess not,” I said. “And I can’t understand what half the people are saying.”

He leaned over some, then bumped his shoulder to mine. “I got the same schedule as you except Spanish instead of Psychology.”

“Really?” My gut did the funny flop it does when a car climbs and crests a hill too quickly—when your body drops a half second faster than your insides. I’d get to spend three quarters of my school day in the same enclosed space with him. And, if I was a geek, so was he. I tried to control the size of my smile, as Trenton’s eyes locked on an older man walking by.

“Lil’ T?” The man wore oversized sweatpants, a Chicago Bulls jersey, and black boots with the laces undone. His hair, peppered with gray around the temples, was twisted into a bunch of short spiky dreads, and his neck and wrists and ears were draped in diamonds, gold chains. Some of his teeth were gold, too. “Damn. You as big as me.”

“What’s popping, Marquis?” They did some complicated fist bump to handshake to one-armed hug to double back pat routine. “How you been?”

“Life’s good.” Marquis pulled out a folded stack of one hundred-dollar bills thick enough to pay our rent for a year. “When you coming to work for me?”

“I’m straight,” Trenton said.

The man looked at me hard, up and down, and I was suddenly thankful I decided to wear pants, that I’d resisted Michele’s attempts to stuff me into a pair of her booty shorts. I pulled my hair forward on both sides so it fell over my shoulders and covered my breasts, then stood up.

“Who’s the honey?” Marquis asked, and Trenton turned abruptly as though he’d forgotten I was there.

“I’m Sadie,” I said, and put my hand out. This amused the man—he drew his head back, stared at me like I was some strange specimen in a Petri dish, then laughed. Loudly. And I told myself, again, to stop doing that—people in this place did not shake hands. But he took my hand, held it up above my head, then in one swift movement pulled me in so that I stumbled into his chest. He grabbed my ass. I don’t mean a quick pat or tap, but a full on ass-grab.

“What the hell?” I said, and pushed away, staggered back.

Trenton said, “Come on, man.”

The old man winked at me, told Trenton, “You ain’t gonna keep a honey that white with an ass that tight, on the pocket change you’re making.”

Trenton stuffed his hands in his pockets, “It ain’t like that.”

“Tell Big T to hit me up when he gets out.”

Trenton stood with his hands by his sides, fingers flexing in and out of fists while he watched Marquis walk away. I sat back down. That man, that *old* man touched me and I didn’t even take a swing. What the hell was wrong with me?

Trenton took a seat, picked a long blade of grass—wound it around his finger, unwound it, tore it into tiny pieces. “Check your pocket,” he finally said.

“What?”

“Your back pocket.” Trenton dropped what was left of his blade. “He wasn’t just feeling you up, Sadie. Check your left pocket.”

I tucked my hand into my pocket and froze when I felt something there.

“Pager number or money?” Trenton looked out at the carnival.

I pulled the paper out, flipped it over. “Both.”

He leaned back, looked at the crisp one-hundred dollar bill. Written in blue ink at the top of the bill was a telephone number, followed by the words, “M to the Z.” I didn’t know what that meant, didn’t really care. I’d never held a hundred dollar bill in my hand. Trenton snatched the bill and crumpled it.

“What are you doing?” I said. “Give that back!”

“You want that number?”

“I hope you’re joking,” I said. “I don’t even have a phone. I want the money.”

“You got no idea what that money means, Sadie.”

I waited for him to explain, and when it became clear he didn’t intend to, I said, “Seems like someone who stuffs a hundred bucks in your pocket expects you to spend it.”

“The money and number, Sadie. Think about it.” But I couldn’t come up with anything, and Trenton finally said, “He’s trying to turn you out.”

Turn me what? Oh. My mouth hung open. “Oh my God,” I said. “I met a pimp? Wait. He wants *you* to be a pimp?” I cried, and broke into laughter. Laughed so long and hard, my stomach cramped. “A pimp tried to recruit me!”

“That funny?” He smiled slightly. “You’re a long way from Kansas, Dorothy.”

“I’d be the worst investment Marquis ever made. He’d fire me on the first day.”

“You thinking ‘bout what it takes to turn tricks?” he asked.

“Turn tricks? I’ve never even kissed anyone,” I said. Then I realized what I’d said. I was such a moron. I really needed to learn how to keep my mouth shut.

He raised his eyebrows. “For real?”

“Why don’t we take that money and go play a game.”

Trenton smoothed out the crumpled bill. “You earned it, Miss Thang. You pick the game.” He put it in my hand, rubbed his thumb across the tips of my nails like he’d done my first night there, then helped me to my feet.

I chose a water gun game. He didn't know I'd spent half my life hunting in the woods with my dad. Trenton turned his red ball cap backwards, combed his teeth over his bottom lip, and closed one eye to look down the site. I was relieved to have a target in front of me—I wasn't stern enough with myself to stop staring at him. I straddled the stool, kept my trigger finger at the ready, exhaled slowly. My target lit up. I didn't track my bubbly blue car as it raced to the top, didn't check on anyone else's, just steadied my stream in the center until the obnoxious buzz and pulsing rainbow bulbs chopped my concentration. I won. Five games straight.

“Check you out, Annie Oakley,” Trenton said after the last game, pointed to my car at the top of the track. His was stalled just past the halfway point.

I leaned his direction, lowered my voice. “Your gun jam?”

He moved close enough that I could smell, I could almost taste the spice of his cinnamon chewing gum. “I was distracted.”

My cheeks warmed and I took his hat, put it on. Trenton straightened it for me but didn't try to take it back. The booth operator leaned down, told me to pick my prize, and I pointed to a yellow elephant because it was the first thing I saw. It didn't matter. I'd give it to Allie anyway.

Michele won the monstrous pickle she was playing for, and she perched it on her hip, walked proudly around the carnival like she had given birth to it. When the crowd thinned, Michele smacked her lips together, said she wanted some lemonade and funnel

cake. We found an empty picnic table, and Michele put her pickle down, dragged Nate away. I sat on the bench beside Trenton.

“So why does your family move so much?” he asked.

“My parents made a job of fixing up houses. They go where they can work.”

“They can’t find houses in the same place?”

I shrugged. “They say they like to travel.”

Trenton sucked his bottom lip in, held it there for a few seconds. “Ain’t it hard to leave friends and ... boyfriends behind?”

“I try not to make friends,” I said. “You guys messed up my plan on day one.”

Trenton angled his body and our knees touched.

“You got a girlfriend?” I asked.

“If I had a girl, I wouldn’t be trying to spend my time with you.”

My heart beat faster. Harder. “Is that a no?”

“That’s a no,” he said, lifted his eyes to mine.

I leaned back, rested my weight on my arms, and a sliver of picnic table caught the pad of my index finger. “Ow!” I said, studied the little speck of wood poking from my skin, squeezed. I couldn’t tell if the splinter budged but Trenton moved closer which blocked my light and erased the line that divided us. My chest seemed too small, maybe

because I was actually breathing his breath, I don't know, but whatever it was I loved and hated it all at once.

“Splinter?” Trenton slowly extended a hand towards mine. “Can I touch you?”

The question vibrated through my entire body until my fingers shook. He asked if he could touch me. He *asked* if he could touch me. And what I said—out loud—was, “Where?”

He tossed his head back and laughed. “Hold your horses, Annie, I was talking about your hand.”

I closed my eyes. “I win the prize for the biggest loser alive. I'm such an idiot.”

“You're something, Sadie, but that ain't it.” Trenton scooted closer. “Wanna come this way so your arm's not in the dark?”

It wasn't any brighter there but I didn't care. I placed my splintered hand in his. His palms were lighter than the dark brown of his arms, but my fingers set against his skin like one puffy cloud in an all-blue sky. His nails were trimmed and clean but his hands were scratchy, not chapped or scarred, but coarse in some places, smooth in most—the beginning of working hands. It tickled my skin.

Trenton looked up, didn't let go. “That better?”

I didn't check for the splinter, just nodded.

“Sadie m'lady and Trenton, my man. Are you two sweethearts holding hands?”

Nate smirked. “See what I did there?”

Damn you, Nate. Damn you, speedy lemonade stand. Damn you, poetry. Damn!
Michele unloaded an armful of lemonade cups and Nate set down two funnel cakes.

Trenton and I sat close enough that our legs touched—my right, his left—our knees and feet, too. He placed his left hand on his knee, pinned down bits of dough and pulled off bite-sized pieces with his right. He talked to Nate about something—the previous night’s shift at work, I believe—but I couldn’t eat, couldn’t think, just wanted to touch his hand again. I took a deep breath, held it. Inched my hand over until it met his leg and he missed only half a beat in his story about Jose packing rotten grapefruit, moved his hand back a smidge, and I moved mine to the top of his thigh, scratched lightly a few times, and his hand came back again. The moisture from his palm pressed down on the back of my hand and he slid his fingers—one at a time—between mine, curled them under. I curled mine.

“We should probably head back to the restaurant for Jacks,” I said when the buzz of machinery began stepping down. Trenton let go of my hand long enough to throw our trash away, then reached for it again when I stood up.

The road between the carnival entrance and Berger’s Bier Haus looked like a parade. Cars lined up in both directions, brake lights glowing, barely moving. In front of us was a pickup truck painted camouflage, a confederate flag pinned to the inside of the cab’s back window. The tires were nearly as tall as I was, and in the bed of the truck four guys stood, hollered at anyone who’d listen.

One of them—a guy with frosted tips and erratic patches of blonde facial hair tilted his head and squinted as though he recognized me. He steepled his fingers, moved them to the crown of his head, hummed the music to *Jaws*.

I looked over my shoulder, back at him. What was that supposed to mean?

The kid pulled his hands down, cupped them around his mouth. “Dirty ass shark.”

“What did he just call me?” I said.

Trenton looked at me, followed my look of confusion to its source. “Ignore him.”

“Stupid bitch,” another guy with brown hair said. “You deserve what you get.”

I checked over my shoulder again. “Are you talking to me?”

Michele jumped in, said, “You got a lot of room to call someone stupid, Ryan. You were still taking freshman math as a senior. They only graduated you because they got sick of seeing your pizza face.”

“Suck my dick,” Ryan said, and Nate started to say something but Michele spoke over him, said she’d need a magnifying glass to find it, and the guy grabbed his crotch. She told him to keep searching, the bubble gum in his pocket didn’t count.

The blond kid kept his attention on me. “That fucking monkey’s gonna cut you up, and when he does, ain’t nobody gonna feel sorry for you.”

The words stunned me. I couldn’t believe he was saying it. Out loud. In public. I looked at Trenton who didn’t appear shocked, didn’t appear angry, just seemed ... tired, almost, and I looked back at the blond kid. “Why don’t you mind your own business?”

Trenton spoke quietly, almost too low to hear. “Don’t waste your breath, Sadie.”

“It is my business when porch monkeys start taking our women,” said Ryan.

I couldn’t even respond. How do you respond to that? The guy didn’t take his gaze off me. My hands trembled, my knees too, and the guy narrowed his eyes and called me a dirty mud shark.

“Would someone please fucking tell me what a mud shark is?” I shouted.

Ryan stuffed his tongue between his top lip and gums and grunted while he scratched at his armpits. Nate started forward but Trenton barred him with his arm.

“Let it go,” Trenton said. “Nate! It ain’t worth it. Let it go.”

Nate didn’t advance but his jaw muscle flexed, his chest ballooned out. Cars honked, Michele put up her middle finger, and Ryan grabbed his crotch again, then the truck drove off. Trenton’s muscles relaxed, collapsed almost, and he let go of my hand. We crossed the street. And nobody said a word about what had just happened.

The restaurant lights were dimmed, doors locked, but employees were still inside sweeping floors and wiping down tables and marrying condiment bottles. Michele and Nate waited in the car, and Trenton asked if I wanted to throw rocks at the train chugging along the tracks behind the Bier Haus. The flickering glow of the street lamps did little to illuminate the gravel lot—the side and back of the restaurant were so near black that it took my sight some time to adjust. Small sparks shot out from the tracks when the train slowed its pace.

I chose my rocks carefully, tested the weight with a quick toss and catch in one hand, then took a place between Trenton and a fenced in dumpster. A small sallow light mounted to the wall cast a faint glow on the delivery ramp and handrail leading to the restaurant's back door.

"I'm sorry," I said, and heaved a rock at the train.

Trenton threw one too. "For what?"

"I don't know," I admitted between clinks of stone on steel. "Those guys—what they said."

"Don't apologize for other people, Sadie." He made a windmill with his arm, threw a stone, hard. Another one, harder. "They ain't the first ones to say that shit. Ain't gonna be the last."

I got rid of a few more rocks, then asked, "What's a mud shark?"

He turned, sighed. "A white girl who sleeps with black guys."

"Oh," I said, and gave my gravel back to the lot. An image of a girl with heavy eyeliner, a super tight pony tail and big hoop earrings came to mind. That wasn't me.

The back door opened and Jacks walked out. Behind him, a stocky guy with short, dirt-colored hair. The yellow lamp created dark shadows on the recesses of his face so it looked as though his eye sockets were hollow, the space beneath his cheekbones carved out. He said, "What do you think you're doing back here?"

I waited until they were in front of us, pointed to Jacks. "Waiting for my brother."

“That’s your sister, dude?” the guy said. “You got the shit end of the stick.”

“Shut up, Fortin,” Jacks replied. His new white shirt looked like it had been on the losing end of a food fight.

I asked how his first day went and he answered by holding up his hands. The pads of his palms were covered in blisters and his fingers looked like they belonged to an old, old lady—wrinkled and bent awkwardly.

“Ouch,” I said. “They didn’t give you gloves?”

Fortin said, “Hell no. New guy initiation.”

“I can’t imagine why the last guy quit,” I said, then told Jacks that Michele was waiting and asked if he was ready to go. He said he was going out for a little while, that Fortin lived in the neighborhood and would give him a lift.

“Your other shirt is in the car,” I said. “If you want to change, I’ll throw your work shirt in the wash when I get home.” Jacks jogged to Michele’s car and I glanced back and forth between Fortin and Trenton. “You guys know each other, then?”

“Yeah,” Trenton said, and that’s all he said.

Fortin turned and walked to a truck in the parking lot.

“Leave the house unlocked,” Jacks called, and climbed a set of silver steps to get inside. Black smoke billowed from two tail pipes as Fortin revved the engine. I could hardly hear over the noise but Jacks leaned out the window, tapped the top of his head, and said, “Lose the hat before you go home.”

I reached up and touched Trenton's ball cap. I'd forgotten I was still wearing it. Fortin threw his truck into gear, spun his tires and kicked gravel back at us.

"That guy's an asshole," Trenton said.

"I guess Jacks found his soul mate."

We walked to the side of the restaurant, leaned against the wall. "You got an eyelash," Trenton said, and before I could process what that was supposed to mean, he put his hand to my face—three fingers on my cheek, index and thumb gently plucking beneath my eye.

"Jesus," I said. Out loud, I think.

Trenton held his finger between his mouth and mine. "Make a wish."

I blew the lash but it didn't budge. "Does that mean I don't get my wish?"

He waved me closer with the same finger my eyelash was stuck to, leaned forward and whispered in my ear. The heat of his voice, his breath in my hair gave me chills, and he said, "Maybe you got to wish harder."

I reached up, held his wrist. And this time I blew the lash from his finger. Trenton raised my chin and I felt his breath on my face, my mouth. He put his thumb on my bottom lip, slid it down slowly, gently. Nibbled his own bottom lip. "Can I be the first?"

I closed my eyes, and Trenton's lips—warm and slightly wet—pressed against mine. He placed his thumb on my cheek, his fingers on the side of my neck, in my hair, and he kissed each corner of my mouth, top lip, center, then took my lower lip between

his, between his teeth, and pulled just the slightest bit, slid his tongue—cooler and softer than I'd imagined—across my lip. He pulled back, kissed the corners of my mouth again, the center—twice—and pulled away.

I opened my eyes to his, told myself to breathe, and Trenton rubbed his fingertips along my jaw from my ear to my chin, and back again. “You make me nervous, Sadie.”

“I make *you* nervous?”

“Yeah.” He tilted his head, drew his eyebrows in. “You ever dated a black guy?”

“I've never dated *any* guy,” I replied. I didn't ask why it mattered. I wanted to pretend it didn't. “Have you ever dated a white girl?”

“Sadie, I think I'm gonna fall for you,” he said, but I hated the way he said it—disappointed, like someone predicting rain on picnic day.

“Would you rather not do ... this?”

“I like this,” he said. “That's what's got me worried.”

“Trenton, maybe I'm just dull, but I'm not following. What are you saying?”

“Those guys tonight ... we'll catch shit like that all the time,” he said. “People don't like seeing whites and blacks together. Especially when the girl is as beautiful as you.”

I didn't have words. I wanted to think about what he said, *everything* he said, but I already knew it was true. Most of it, anyway—nobody had ever told me I was beautiful before. My throat tightened and I thought I might cry so I stood on my toes and kissed

him. When I came back down, he turned his ball cap backwards on my head, pressed his forehead to mine.

“Keep the hat,” he said. “It looks better on you.”

“Trenton, I don’t care what other people like seeing, or how much shit I’ll catch,” I said. “I like you.”

Michele flashed her headlights and Trenton sighed, took my hand. We returned to the car, and I traded places with Nate but I wasn’t thrilled about it. I didn’t want the night to end. Didn’t want Trenton to leave. I knew he’d change his mind by morning—wake up and realize I wasn’t worth the trouble, decide he didn’t want to do this—whatever *this* was—with me.

In the neighboring lot, Trenton turned and walked backwards. “Hey, Annie Oakley.” He holstered an imaginary gun. “You have a good night now, ya hear?”

Nate shot his pretend pistols straight up in the air.

– Chapter Five –

For a week after the carnival I didn't see Trenton at all. I figured that he had a job, and with school starting the following month he was probably organizing folders, labeling notebooks. Or maybe he'd changed his mind. Realized I wasn't worth the time. Maybe he sensed that my own family, my old friends, talked the same way the guys in that truck had. Felt the same way they did. And maybe he could tell that I'd never protested.

Three times in a week I dreamed that the kid making monkey-faces at the carnival was my old friend Cameron grown up some. Cameron's daddy always used to say he hated North Carolina because the blacks took all the goddamn jobs—affirmative action bullshit—while hardworking Americans struggled to put food on the table. I never brought up my belief that if his daddy would just quit the cigarettes, he'd be able to afford some sliced cheese and a loaf of bread, at least. Sometimes, especially when the man was in between paydays or in between jobs, Cameron's belly growled so loud it interrupted our talks, and he'd mutter, "Good for nothing coons," and kick the dirt up.

And I never said a word against him—just nodded and plotted ways to sneak him a handful of macaroni. I'd rehearsed the lines a thousand times when my own parents complained of the same thing but in my speech it was my mom's vodka and peanut butter cups, plus the packaged jerky my dad liked. Still, the thoughts never found their way from my mouth.

Another reason I didn't see Trenton all week was that I didn't spend much time outside—July in Florida was the worst form of torture. The humidity hung in the air so that the whole town was trapped in a steam bath, and our pool was still a slime pit. Even the grass burned the soles of my bare feet, and that said plenty since I'd gone without shoes half my life. In my family, shoes were reserved for school, or church if my mom was on that train.

The air conditioning wasn't much help. We had two ancient window units mounted through square holes in the wall because the house had slat-glass windows, and even if you removed the panes there was nothing to hold the a/c in place. When we first moved in, the units were supported by a few rotting two-by-fours shoved under the butts of each unit outside, the wood sinking and sliding in the sandy grass. My dad shook his head every time he walked by. Called it a hack job and put it on his list.

Our driveway had become an outdoor workshop with bright orange extension cords snaking along the pavement between sawhorses and lumber piles. My dad built support shelves and beams that he bolted to the cinderblock walls. He even cut plywood to frame the face of the a/c, then sealed the edges with caulk so we didn't lose air to gaps. After a full day of cutting and drilling and cussing and sweating, he chugged a mason jar

of sweet tea, wiped his forehead with the back of his arm and reported that the inside temperature had only dropped by two degrees. It was complete misery.

Even if the a/c units had been properly mounted and not two hundred years old, the air would never have made the trek down the narrow hallway to my room. On the (not so) bright side, Allie and I painted my room Crème Brulee—the paint can’s fancy way of saying beige—so my walls no longer appeared to be vomiting cotton candy. There was that, at least. I still didn’t have a bed so I lay flat on the floor, my arms and legs spread out from my body like I had frozen halfway through a snow angel.

Michele sat with her legs tucked under her bottom and picked at the carpet. “You should ask your mom if you can sleep over at my house.”

I flopped my head to the side. “Is your bedroom cold?”

“We wouldn’t actually sleep there.”

I dragged myself up and asked where we would actually sleep, then.

“In the shed!” She covered her mouth, whispered it. “The shed.”

I realized Michele didn’t mean her shed, but *the* shed—the one that belonged to the abandoned house down the street. She talked about it all the time like it was a local bar and not a battered aluminum square sitting crooked on a crumbling foundation.

“In this heat? Are you trying to kill me?”

“Come on. It’s like camping, only better because we can get drunk and play games and stay up all night.” She looked at my bedroom door where someone’s foot had punctured the wood panel. “Plus, we’ll get a break from your stalker mom.”

On that point, I had to concede. My mom liked to slink down the hall and thrust my door open like she was gonna catch us in the commission of a crime. When she’d find us doing nothing, always nothing, she recovered by saying something like, “The lady next door is teaching Allie to crochet,” or, “I’m heading to get Jackson,” or, “They got a new lawyer on O.J.’s defense team.” And all I said every time she backed out of my bedroom was, “Um. Okay.”

I didn’t hate Michele’s plan but I didn’t love it either. I saw all sorts of flaws, a million ways that my mom would bust me and ground me to my bedroom where I would roast until our old crocheting neighbor caught a whiff and discovered my boiling bones. But, when she reminded me that I’d get to spend the entire night hanging out with Trenton, I decided to risk it.

We waited until the sun eased up, when my mom was showered and dressed for bed, and caught her off-guard in the kitchen. That was the best approach—I stood a greater chance of success if she didn’t have time to calculate her response.

“Mom,” I said. “Can I sleep over at Michele’s tonight?”

Mom stopped cutting a cantaloupe, mid-slice, and stared at me. “Sadie, I ain’t never met her parents.” She turned to Michele, said, “Not that I think there’s anything

wrong with them, and I ain't passing judgment on the fact that they let you sleep over with complete strangers, but I don't want people thinking I just send my kids off without knowing who they're going with."

Michele looked at her watch. "I can bring them over. They should be getting home from work any minute."

"Just getting home from work at this hour?"

"My dad owns a body-shop in town," Michele explained. "Can't keep a good mechanic to save his life. He's really short-handed and trying to keep up. Mom goes in to help when she can."

"Hard to find a reliable worker nowadays. I always say people want to get something for nothing." My mom filled a plastic bowl with cantaloupe cubes, put a piece of plastic wrap over top, and shoved it in the fridge. "You know, Sadie's dad has experience as a mechanic."

"Is that right?" Michele said. "Let me run home and get my parents. My mom has been dying to talk to you about the fuzzy orange and red flowers in your garden anyway."

My mom smoothed her hair down with both hands, looked down at her nightgown. "Shoot. Now ain't the best time. Sean ain't even showered yet and I'm about ready for bed. I don't want to be such a mess when I meet your family. First impressions are lasting impressions."

"I understand," Michele said, and started toward my room. "I'm just gonna get my stuff, but I'll be back tomorrow."

“Hell,” Mom said. “Go on, Sadie. Ain’t like I can’t find you if I need you.”

“Really?” I said, “I can go?”

“I didn’t stutter,” she said. “Now get out before Allie comes in and figures out you ditched her. And comb your hair before you go.”

My bag was already packed just in case my mom said yes, so we were out the door in minutes. When we turned on Aster Alley—Michele’s road—I shifted my backpack to the front, pulled Trenton’s ball cap from my bag and put it on.

“You weren’t kidding,” Michele said. “She didn’t question any of it.”

I shrugged. “The three F’s: Finding jobs, first impressions, and flowers.”

“I should tell you,” she said on her carport. “My parents aren’t like yours.”

“You mean they’re normal?”

“I don’t know if that’s the best word. Let’s go with ... *different*.”

Michele’s plump little mother glanced up from the couch when we walked in. The woman introduced herself as Sunshine, and yes, that was her God-given name but her close friends called her Sunny and she invited me to do the same. She looked like someone who might play the organ for a church choir—round and rosy, totally responsible. She wore a black blouse assaulted by wide purple flowers that she tucked tightly into stretchy-waist slacks. Nylons too, so close in color to her feet that I wouldn’t

have noticed except for the sheen. She opened a door on the hexagon end-table and produced an orange Rubbermaid container the color of 1969.

Michele went to the kitchen, pulled the phone from the cradle and dialed Nate. She told him we were sleeping at the shed, said we'd get Trenton but he was in charge of getting Stinky. While she talked, she picked through the fridge and cabinets, stuffed her backpack full. Michele grabbed a bottle of liquor, called out, "I'm taking a bottle, Mom."

Sunshine nodded, said nothing. She was busy plucking seeds and stems from the block of marijuana in the orange Rubbermaid. I couldn't believe my eyes. It's not that I hadn't seen pot before—I had, but only in when Jacks brought home some little stub of a joint or a miniature plastic baggie stuffed with a bud half the size of my thumb and begged me to hide it in my tampon box. I'd never seen a brick of it. And couldn't believe a *mom* was sitting on the couch, picking it apart right in front of me. My parents always said pot was for blacks and white trash, but this woman didn't look like either of those things. I was mesmerized by how quickly she twisted little nuggets up in paper that she licked like an envelope. She lifted her eyes to the TV a few times, where two whirling white circles inched toward Florida's east coast.

When she finished, Sunshine kissed her daughter's forehead and handed her two joints, fat as fingers. "Don't go getting yourselves in trouble. I don't need the police at my door." She narrowed her eyes. "And don't be giving none of that to Nate's daddy neither. We fronted him once this week already."

Outside, I whispered, "Your parents are drug dealers?"

"They sell a little weed," Michele laughed. "They're not the Colombian cartel."

We slipped into the woods and walked along a little stream that didn't twist or turn but trickled politely over smooth stones and dropped just enough every now and again to create miniature waterfalls along the way. It was cooler there than I expected, maybe because the sun didn't breach the canopy of knobby oaks and pines and palms littered with Spanish moss, but it was a nice little walk that smelled of wet leaves. Reminded me of the riverbank in Kentucky. We emerged from a dense bundle of trees and walked a few feet to Trenton's bedroom window.

My pulse picked up as Michele tapped the pane, while we waited for him to adjust the height of his blinds, lift the glass. My insides tensed. He wore baggy gray sweats and a tight white t-shirt that clung to his shoulders and arms.

"We're camping at the shed tonight." Michele leaned forward and down so that her nose pressed against the screen. "You in?"

I held my breath waiting for him to show some excitement, to glance at me, to say something I'd replay over and over until I'd memorized it, something I'd write in my journal the minute I got home. He did none of those things. Didn't even look my way. My heart punched my chest like a hammer, each thump saying *idiot, idiot, idiot*—louder and louder and louder.

Trenton smoothed his hair forward. "They're calling for some nasty storms."

I looked at the posters on his walls: Janet Jackson. Aaliyah. Boyz II Men. Red Lamborghini. Periodic table of elements. Really? I scanned it. Atomic number 53. Capital *I* for Idiot, not iodine. I took the ball cap off my head, twisted it up in my hands.

“Come on.” Michele said. “It’ll be lame if you don’t show.”

Down the road, I watched Nate and Stinky head to the shed. Maybelle ran into the grass, piled another blanket on the heap Stinky was lugging, kissed his cheek before turning back. What was with all the moms around here loving on their kids?

Trenton met my eyes for half a second, lifted his chin in a quick hello—a stranger’s hello. Not the kind reserved for someone you kissed a week ago. “I don’t know. My mom—”

“I’m not standing outside all night,” I said. “I’ll be at the shed.”

“What the heck, Sadie?”

“Oh yeah. You can have this back.” I set Trenton’s ball cap on the window ledge. “You need it more than I do. Your hair looks like shit.”

I didn’t stand around for a reaction, his or Michele’s. I wanted to walk down the center of the street and flip my middle finger up at every window in the neighborhood, his especially, but I tiptoed through the backyards instead so my parents wouldn’t catch me out after dark. *Idiot*, I said—out loud—over and over as I struggled through vines and overgrown bushes, probably full of furry spiders and snakes and cicadas and whatever the hell else crept through the night in this shitty ass state.

In the shed, Nate rigged a flashlight to shine down from the ceiling, and Stinky shook out blankets that fell with a quiet flutter to the rotten floor. I licked my thumb and rubbed the scratches on my arms. “Has anyone here ever heard of pruning shears?”

“Mind taking your shoes off?” Stinky said. “I don’t want dirt getting on the bedclothes.” *Bedclothes?* That was funny. It seemed like such a proper word from the mouth of someone called Stinky.

I kicked my flip-flops at the wall. To hell with Trenton. Outside, the wind growled and the shed door swung open, pinned itself to the aluminum front with one fast crash. The weight and scent of rain filled the air but nothing fell from the gray vapor sprinting across the sky. I stepped out. Looked down the street and saw that Michele was still standing at Trenton’s window. I pulled the door shut with more force than I intended.

Nate grabbed a box from the overhead shelf. “That door do something to you?”

“The wind caught it,” I said, and sat down on Stinky’s quilted floor.

Stinky hooked a bungee cord from the center beam of the ceiling to the door handle, then took a seat at the far end of the shed. The blankets smelled faintly of stale cigarette smoke but they masked the odor of damp floorboards, at least. I craned my neck to see inside the box Nate pulled down. A few ounces of vodka in a bottle matching the one in Michele’s backpack. Aside from that, playing cards, paper cups, a Magic 8-ball, and a wad of plastic grocery bags. Loads of fun.

Nate poured what was left of the bottle into three cups and passed one to me and Stinky. “To swiping Sadie’s v-card.”

“To your first time,” Stinky said, raising his drink. “At the shed.”

I lifted my cup and swallowed the vodka down in one gulp. It wasn’t so bad until I inhaled, then it was like I had a flamethrower stuck down my throat. My eyes watered

and I coughed, and Stinky and Nate laughed their asses off at that. I had stolen sips of vodka mixed with orange juice or Sprite when my mom was on a bender but never tasted it straight. Even she didn't do that, and she was a pro.

Thunder cracked outside and rain snapped against the shed. The roof started to leak—not terribly bad, but enough to let water drip through in a few places and Nate grabbed some cups from the sleeve, positioned them around the shed to catch the rain. A gust of wind pulled the door away from its frame, stretched the bungee enough that I slid to the corner in case the hook came undone, whipped in my direction. It took me a moment to realize it wasn't the wind at all—Trenton and Michele were outside, pounding on the door.

“Password!” Nate said, then whispered for me to wait.

“Purple peter eater,” Trenton called, and banged on the door. “Purple peter eater!”

Michele said, “I'm the one with the liquor, idiots.”

“Unhook it,” Stinky laughed.

I unlatched the bungee and Michele and Trenton rushed in. He took the hook from my hand without a word, secured the latch again. *Purple peter eater?* Trenton stood, dripping water from his face and chest like some sort of sweaty man-model, and all I could imagine was him pounding the door, screaming, “Purple peter eater!”

“That funny?” he asked while he wrung the rain from his clothes. His shirt was soaked and it clung to his chest and stomach. “Nate, you're done picking passwords.”

Michele shook rainwater from her hair, unloaded the contents of her backpack into the box, and told Nate to pour drinks. Trenton combed his fingers forward across his scalp, slung the water from his hand. “They upgraded Domingo to a tropical storm and the eye ain’t too far off. Mom said we can come back to the house if—”

“Hurricane party!” Stinky said.

Trenton looked at the leaky ceiling, then at the cups Nate had staged to catch the rain. Shook his head. “I told her you fools would try and stick it out.”

“Take a seat.” Nate pointed my way. “She don’t bite unless you want her to.”

Trenton positioned a cup to his left to catch another drip and sat down beside me. His knee bumped mine and I caught his eye. Held it for three seconds, maybe four, until he looked away and stretched his legs. “What’s the game?”

Michele opened a can of orange soda, added some to each of the vodka cups and passed them out. “Okay, 8-Ball Blitz or Truth or Dare?” she asked, and called a vote like we were the babysitter’s club. Truth or Dare won the popular vote.

Trenton received a lap dance and, because I was right next to him, I got a front row seat to the show. Nate peeled his clothes off, one piece at a time until he was in nothing but boxers, shook his ass in Trenton’s face. He played the part of a stripper convincingly, enthusiastically, and when the required five minutes ended we had to make him stop.

Nate was the first to call something out for Michele, and within minutes the shed was clanging with laughter that grated my nerves. One by one, Michele sucked every toe

on Stinky's left foot. He breathed like he was in labor and crumpled his sock in his fist every time she got near. Apparently he was ticklish.

"Thadie," Michele said, picking lint off her tongue. "Truth or dare?"

"Truth." I wasn't about to lick anyone's foot fuzz. I chugged the rest of my drink, passed my cup back to Michele who filled me up again, and I guzzled most of that cup too. My head felt floaty, like a helium balloon freed from the grip of sticky little fingers floating up, up, up and away to a sunny blue sky.

"Trenton, you been playing like Mr. Mouse all night," Nate said. "Won't you try asking a question."

"Hmm," Trenton said, then leaned his head against the wall of the shed, looked up at the ceiling. Finally, he turned, looked straight into my eyes. "Tell us something about your family you don't want no one knowing."

"What the hell kind of question is that?" I asked.

Nate shrugged and said it was a trust question and Michele agreed, said that anyone who hangs out at the shed has to answer it.

"I ..." I took a long drink. "I don't know."

"It's called *Truth* or Dare," Trenton said. "You have to tell the truth."

I meant to be mad still but that liquor hit me quick, made me feel other feelings. I thought about asking why he couldn't even look at me, how he could just go on about his

business like he'd never even met me when I couldn't get his voice, his touch out of my head. But I chickened out. Instead, I said, "Did I do something to you?"

"I'm just saying you should answer the question. That's the point of the game."

Stinky said, "Can't we ask her something different since it's her first time here?"

"It's okay, Stinkbug. There's plenty about my family I don't want anyone to know. Let me just pick something." I contemplated some of the whoppers I used to tell kids at school, but decided to pass out our big family tragedy. "I have a dead sister," I said.

The shed went silent. I closed my eyes, listened. Pine needles pelted the roof. A branch broke off and landed nearby. I always thought the sound of rain on aluminum tasted like a penny. It didn't make sense, I knew it, but it didn't seem any crazier than wanting to kill a dead girl. I opened my eyes. "Did I pass your trust test?"

"Shit, Sadie. I'm so sorry." Michele sat up. "What was her name?"

"Eunice," I said.

Michele crinkled her nose, and Stinky said, "Geez. This ain't right."

"How'd she die?" Trenton asked softly, sweetly.

It infuriated me. Now he wanted to talk? Now he was going to show concern? Why, now, would he not let me loose of the light in his amber eyes when all day he refused to even look at me? "I answered your question. If you want to know anything else, save it for another round," I said. "It's your turn."

Trenton chose *Dare* and had to pretend he was a cat for five minutes—crawling and meowing and rubbing his face on everyone’s legs, licking his arms and coughing up fur balls, letting people pet him if they wanted. I didn’t. Stinky also chose *Dare* which, by that point, didn’t surprise me—I was obviously the only one dumb enough to pick *Truth*—so when Michele dared Stinky to kiss me, I clenched my teeth but got up on my knees. Stinky didn’t budge.

“Come on, man,” Nate laughed. “She won’t bite unless you want her to.”

“I ain’t kissing her.” He shook his head in a decided no.

My face burned from the inside. Not like a flame, but a million little prickles that needled deep in my skin. Rejected by Stinky too. *Stinky!* The kid with oily skin and zits that were days past the popping point. This couldn’t even be real. This was not my life.

“This ain’t cool,” Trenton said. “Give him something else.”

Michele said, “You picked dare, Stinky. You have to.”

“I said I ain’t kissing her.” Stinky looked right at me, tried to apologize with his eyes, then said, “I ain’t kissing my own damn cousin.”

“What?” I was still on my knees trying to figure out what was so wrong with me when he said it. Did he say—? I couldn’t move. “What did you just say?”

“Her name was Alannah,” Stinky said.

“Who?” Someone asked.

A wail came from the wind, pulled the base of the shed up so that I could see the rusted bolts beside me negotiating with the foundation for just a little more time. Water trickled in from the ceiling, snuck in from the sides.

“How wasted are you?” Nate said.

Stinky looked directly at me. “I know who you are, Sadie Alannah Quinn. I reckon I know more than you want to, but ... I’ll tell you if you want.”

He knew my middle name. The only person I ever told that to was Cameron. How did Stinky know my whole name? For a split-second I thought that Cameron might be Stinky, or Stinky Cameron, but it didn’t add up. Didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense.

Who are you, is the question I meant to pose. “Who am I?” is what I asked.

Stinky rubbed his fingers across the rough terrain of his forehead.

The rain smacked the aluminum panels so hard it sounded like handfuls of gravel. The wind was a pack of wounded animals crying outside. Thunder rolled, cracked.

“Who am I?” I yelled.

“We gotta get inside,” Nate said. “Let’s go.”

Michele re-stuffed her backpack. “Come on!”

I didn’t move. If that rust-bucket shed was going somewhere, I was going with it. Shit-hole, sonofabitch, asshole, motherfucker. Pick me up and take me to Oz, but tell me who the hell I am. “Stinky!” I shouted.

He gathered blankets and I wasn't sure he heard me over the wind and rain.

“Stinky!”

“Your mama and my mama are sisters,” he said. “Half-sisters anyhow. Let's go!”

I dropped to my ass, watched the door rip from its hinges and cartwheel into the neighbor's lawn. Felt the rain smack my head but I didn't follow them through the door, the void that *was* the door. They all rushed out and I sat there, the wind belting twigs and pine needles and rocks at my face. I was somebody's cousin. Stinky was my cousin. My mom spoke of a sister once, but she'd never said her name and I knew not to ask. Stinky held the answers to all the questions I had always asked myself, but never asked out loud.

Trenton came back, pulled me by the arms. “Sadie, come on.”

“Don't touch me,” I screamed. “Don't you dare fucking touch me!”

A branch broke, landed on the roof of the shed. He flinched. “Sadie, please!”

“Leave me alone, Trenton—that seems easy enough for you.”

“You can hate me all you want but I swear to God if you don't come with me, right now, I'm gonna drag your ass out.”

I stared. Didn't know what to say. Didn't know what the hell to do. So I took his hand, ran down the middle of the street. And for a good while after I stood in his foyer shivering and dripping. Deciding what to ask Stinky. My cousin.

Trenton got towels for everyone and we piled into the living room. Michele and Nate cuddled up on the big couch and fell asleep, Stinky took the armchair, and I sat on the love seat with Trenton. Stinky made me swear not to tell anyone and I swore I wouldn't even when I knew I would. I'd tell Allie, for sure.

"Like I said, your mama and my mama are half-sisters," Stinky said. "They had different daddies but they was raised up living with Grammy." I pulled my eyebrows together, shook my head and Stinky clarified, "Our grandma. I call her Grammy."

"She's alive?" I said, louder than I meant to.

"That woman's tough as nails. I wouldn't be one bit surprised if she saw all the rest of us in the ground before she bothers to kick the bucket."

I could have screamed. One of the *only* things my mom had ever said about her family was that her mother was dead and gone. We even lit a candle for her at mass one time, prayed for her soul. I shook my head to myself. My parents were going to burn in hell for all of eternity. I asked Stinky if he knew my grandfather.

"I'm not sure Grammy even knows. She ain't exactly the wholesome type, and everyone in Litchfield knows it. Knew it back then, too. Norah wasn't raised up quite like your daddy," Stinky said. "Our mamas were from the valley—where the river rats lived." When I asked what that meant, he explained that rats were working people, mostly. Black people, too. "If someone lived up on the hill, you could be sure of two things. Their skin was white, and they wasn't working in the power plants or the mills."

"Guess I ain't ever going to Litchfield," Trenton said. "I'm out on both accounts."

“It ain’t so bad now. I reckon they were just slow to catch up with all the world changes, but it was pretty hard-nosed, then. Hill people and valley people didn’t mix.”

“My dad was from the hills.” I remembered what Maybelle had said to my mom when me and Allie were in the tree. That my dad lived on a fancy farm up on the hill. “Was he a farmer?”

“Don’t know that I’d call him that,” Stinky said. “Your daddy’s family owned half the town at one time. They call their property Quinn Farms, but as far as I know they ain’t never been the ones working the fields. Most of their money comes from breeding horses—some for show, some for racing. There’s a track not far off from Litchfield and the Quinn’s got a reputation for breeding winners. Anyhow, rich in Litchfield probably ain’t the same as rich everywhere else, but your daddy didn’t want for nothing.”

I wanted to know how the hell we ended up playing canned food roulette and sneaking buckets of water to flush the toilet when his family was swimming in money.

“The way Mama tells it, my granddaddy tried to make a family out of the situation, took to your mama like she was his own, but Grammy didn’t want no husband, so he took a job here in Port de Leon. Both our mamas spent summers here until yours got old enough to work.”

“The woolen mill,” I said. Mom had mentioned that much, at least.

“The year Norah graduated, Mama came down here for the season. When she got back to town a few months later your mama was married to your daddy and they had a baby coming. Mama said she wouldn’t have believed it if she hadn’t seen the marriage

license with her own eyes. Someone from the hill marrying someone from the valley was reason enough to fire up the gossip mill, but a Quinn marrying a Devlin was a downright scandal in Litchfield. They didn't bother with a proper wedding, just went down to the courthouse to get hitched. And the whole town knew before they walked back out."

I felt a strange sense of pride knowing my parents broke the rules. It was like *Romeo and Juliet* with a less tragic ending. Only slightly less tragic, but still. They didn't care what anyone thought—they were in love and nobody was going to keep them apart.

"The Quinn's weren't happy that your daddy ran off and married your mama. They kicked him out at first, refused to talk to him at all until they found out Norah was carrying a baby. Your daddy ain't the oldest in his family, and he wasn't the first to get married, but he was the first to have a baby on the way. That changed their minds."

"My mom wasn't good enough but her baby was?"

"They set your mama and daddy up in a house on the hill. Wasn't as fancy as the main house, but ten times as nice as any place in this neighborhood. And they spoiled Alannah rotten. Your mama and daddy too."

I couldn't help feeling jealous that they'd had such a nice life, that they walked away from it all. Me and Allie and Jacks were Quinns too but we didn't get shit. Alannah got it all. "Why'd they leave, then?" I said. "Sounds like a fairy tale."

Stinky sighed, "It came with a catch. Your mama wasn't allowed to go back down to the valley. Your daddy's mama made it real clear that if she even daydreamed about

bringing Alannah around any of her river rat friends or family, they'd take the girl away and make sure Norah never saw her again."

"She must've been miserable," I said.

"I think your mama made the best of the situation, for a while anyway. She couldn't stand Grammy. Mama was about the only person Norah cared to see and she snuck to see her often enough. For the most part, your mama was happy until—"

"Until Alannah died."

He nodded, excused himself to the kitchen to fix himself a glass of water. I leaned back, thought about Alannah, about the life we might've had. Or, more precisely, might *not* have had.

Once, when I was still small enough to fit my footie pajamas, I tiptoed into my mom's bedroom closet while she slept on the couch—black bedsheets tacked over the living room windows, an empty bottle in her arms—and lifted the lid to one of my sister's boxes. I was too afraid to touch anything, certain my mom memorized the exact position of every item in the box, but my eyes went immediately to a brown wooden doll with hair shooting out in little ponytailed sprouts. It was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen and it terrified me, tempted me. The body and face were painted brown and finished with a shiny clear coat. Its eyes were wide and bright red. It looked like a demon, but what frightened me the most wasn't its evil eyes or shiny skin, it was the thought that Alannah played with that thing, that my parents let her. I became obsessed with the doll, figured it

was really Alannah painted and lacquered and preserved, carried from house to house in a cardboard box so my mom could hold and rock and kiss her girl while she whispered lullabies.

A couple weeks later, I wrote a letter to Santa asking very specifically for a doll with the same features—ratty white dress and all. That night, as Allie and I slept, my mom came into our room. She didn't ease through the door, she crashed through it with so much force the knob punctured the drywall—something else my dad had to cover up. The sudden flood of light, the sound of the door, that's what woke me. My heart beat so quickly, so suddenly, that I thought it would explode.

My mom pulled me from my bed before my eyes could focus. "Goddamn you, Sadie!" she shouted. "You got no right."

"Mommy?" I cried. "Mommy stop!"

Maybe she didn't hear me over her own shouts, maybe she did, but she didn't stop. She got two good handfuls of my jammies, right at the chest, and shook me. Hard. My head snapped forward and back and I bit my tongue, tasted copper in my mouth, and still didn't know what I'd done to set her off that time.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" She kept right on shaking, screaming, "That box don't belong to you. You got no right going through her things!"

Allie had woken up, crawled to the corner and curled herself into a ball. She sucked her thumb and whimpered. My sister had every reason to be afraid. Mom's face

was in the dark, her red coils, back-lit by the hallway light, looked like flames, and her voice seemed to rise from the pit of her stomach.

“Mommy, stop it!” I screamed. “You’re scaring Allie.”

She stopped the shaking, shoved me backward on the bed. I was more frightened in that brief moment of quiet and calm than I was before. Mom’s eyes were wide and she stared at her hands, but the look on her face wasn’t one of shock or regret for having hurt me. It was one of disgust for having touched me.

“You ain’t Alannah,” she said, real slow and low. “You won’t *never* be Alannah.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d said that, but it was the first time I cracked and screamed back, “I don’t want to be a stupid dead girl anyway!”

She struck me then, more than once—on my face and arms, the top of my head and back when I rolled away from her. I heard Jackson crying too, pleading with her to stop, but it wasn’t until my dad’s voice entered the room that I knew she was done. When I rolled back, he had his arms wrapped around her, dragged her backward through my doorway.

“I don’t want Alannah’s ugly name either,” I yelled. “You can stick it in the box next to that demon doll!”

Jacks brought me a wet washcloth to clean up the blood on my lips, and he held ice to my face until I couldn’t stand the cold anymore. “Good thing you got such a fat head,” he said. “She couldn’t bust that melon if she tried.” Before he closed my door he

told me and Allie goodnight, told us to dream sweet dreams, promised that one day everything would be alright.

I held Allie in my lap after that, smoothed her hair and rocked her to sleep singing Lonesome Valley. *We got to walk that lonesome valley. We got to walk it by ourselves. Nobody else can walk it for us. We got to walk it by ourselves. Mama had to walk that lonesome valley...*

I was seven, then. Seven, when I realized there was no such thing as Santa Claus. Seven when I understood that dead daughters never really die.

Stinky returned from the kitchen and sat down. I wanted to be mad that my parents had lied to me my entire life but I still didn't understand why they left Litchfield.

My cousin rubbed the back of his neck, said, "Your mama went to see a friend who was leaving for Vietnam." He paused, chewed his bottom lip for a moment. "She was in the valley when she got in the accident."

"And it got Alannah killed," I said. "That's why she blames herself."

"The Quinns was just looking for a reason to hate her—your mama didn't come from good stock to begin with—but after Alannah died, they quit pretending. Told your daddy to put her out or they'd cut him out of the family, for good that time."

"So they left," I said. "And kept on leaving."

“I don’t reckon they expected your daddy to walk away but he loved your mama,” Stinky said. “More than all that money he had.”

We talked until our clothes were dry, and then we slept, scattered around Trenton’s living room. It’s strange to think that I didn’t know my own mother’s name until then. To me, she was Norah Quinn. Half her life she’d been Eleanorah Abigail Devlin, and Maybelle called her Elly. I fell asleep watching the ceiling fan spin, whispering *Elly Devlin* over and over and over again, picturing my mom young and beautiful, graceful in the same way her name danced on my tongue. Elly Devlin. The image didn’t fit with everything Stinky told me, didn’t fit with what I already knew but still, I created the picture of my mother twirling like a jewelry-box ballerina, balanced and controlled, and held it as long as I could, until the image drifted into dream.

– Chapter Six –

I woke up angry. Sleep did nothing more than press pause on my mind, let me escape long enough to dream. In the dream, Alannah was alive—still a small girl in size, but one who gossiped and offered advice with adult words—and she was the caboose in our braid train, Allie the lead. Me in the middle, combing and fixing my little sister’s hair while Alannah braided mine. My mother knocked on my bedroom door which, in the dream, wasn’t splintered or damaged, was just a normal door, and waited for an invitation before twirling in with three identical stuffed puppies that she presented to each of us with a kiss. I shouldn’t say I woke up angry. I woke up with the feeling that someone had shoved a sock down my throat, missing a sister I couldn’t miss, a sister I never knew. That’s what made me mad.

The yellow morning was calm, the neighborhood quiet except for the hum of a saggy power line. Not a single squirrel rattled the trees. Not one bird cawed or chirped or flew to a feeder in someone’s yard, or to anywhere at all. My flip-flops slapped the road

and clapped my feet before hitting pavement again, and the cadence they created was like a beating heart—two, maybe. Michele walked just a half-step behind, her shoe smacks echoing mine. The shed was a pitiful sight from the start but now it seemed defeated, embarrassed almost. I thought about propping the door so the neighbors couldn't see inside but my head thumped and my body ached and I just couldn't care enough.

Michele and I trudged through my front door and found my mom in a fervor of dusting and straightening and rearranging. I shook my head. Antsy already. We couldn't have been evicted yet, we were still renovating. My mom angled the couch and coffee table, switched pictures around, moved this candle here and that candle there, then stood in the middle of the room and chewed her lip while she sized up the walls like they had conspired against her somehow. I watched this familiar routine and wondered when Elly Devlin had completely disappeared.

“How nice of you to grace us with your presence,” Mom said. “I been pacing the floors all night and you just prance in here like you don't have a worry in the world.”

“We don't have a phone,” I said. “Did you want me to run over here in the middle of a hurricane to tell you I was fine?”

“Grab that end of the T.V. stand.”

I lifted my end and followed her across the room. “Why are you rearranging, Mom? We just got here.”

“Is it a crime to want the house to look presentable?”

I wanted to tell her the house was presentable yesterday but I knew her spree nothing to do with that. Changing things up or dusting them off was her way of cleaning out her craziness, or burying it, one. “You need help with anything else?” I asked, but my mom didn’t answer my question, just turned her back and shook out a doily, smoothed it out on the side table again. I motioned for Michele and walked down the hallway.

Allie came to my bedroom a few minutes later wearing flannel pajama pants and a long-sleeved tee that I’d never seen—probably my dad’s, it swallowed her up so much. Gray crescent moons puffed under her eyes. “Mom had a freak-out last night,” she said. “After the power went off.”

“I could’ve guessed.” I let out a breath. “She wasn’t drinking, was she?”

“I couldn’t tell.” Allie tugged on the ends of her hair. “I haven’t seen any bottles, but that don’t mean much.”

“Stop yanking, Al.”

“Dad couldn’t calm her down. She knocked a candle over and melted some of the kitchen floor. I put a rug on it for now but I figured you’d know what to do.” Allie wound a curl around her finger and pulled again. Her shirt cuff slipped from her wrists.

I reached forward and pulled her hand down, pushed up her sleeve. Red scratches ran the length of her forearm. “Damn it, Allie, you promised.”

Michele didn’t ask questions but she sucked in a short breath when she saw Allie’s arm. The fresh ones weren’t very wide, and probably not deep enough to scar, but

a bundle of red wiry lines etched her skin from wrist to elbow. The result of a thumbtack or paper clip, I guessed. I was responsible.

“It’s fine.” Allie jerked her arm back and adjusted her sleeve. “I just ... I’m fine.” She turned abruptly and walked out, slammed my door, then hers.

The first time Allie scratched, she was twelve. It was the day after seeing banana-man. I was fourteen, Allie’s age now. *My* fourteen was Kansas (then the Dakotas, but mostly Kansas) and the man at the produce store where my mom stocked shelves.

The manager—a stumpy man with crumbs in his mustache, pit-stains, and enough hair for one pass of a pocket comb—agreed to add our hours to her paycheck if we gathered carts on weekends. That’s what we were *trying* to do in the dusky lot that night.

Parked beside the cart return was a white Ford LTD, windows down, someone inside. Me and Allie started to pull a line of carts out but motion in the car caught my attention. I turned, noticed the man’s expression first—wide unfocused eyes like he could see nothing and everything all at the same time, tongue slack in his open mouth. We stood near enough to hear him breathing like a dog with no water, close enough to see in the window. The man was naked. No trench coat like the T.V. shows, no towel, no sheet, no anything to cover himself. He pumped his penis like a shotgun and we just watched. I couldn’t move, couldn’t look away from his gummy flesh, pallid and veiny against the dark interior. Everything tinted by a plum sunset. He groaned and I unglued my eyes to find his face twisted up, and smiling. Smiling! It was that freakish face that caused me to

abandon the row of carts, grab Allie by the arm and run into the store screaming, “Pervert! There’s a pervert in the parking lot!”

The guy was gone by the time stubby Mr. Nichols put down his scratch-off and tottered from his plexiglass box to the front of the store where cashiers and customers huddled under a manic fluorescent light and scanned the lot. When the excitement ended, he ushered everyone back indoors. He couldn’t call the cops, he’d said, because we were working off the books and he couldn’t risk his position because some fruitcake wanted to mash his banana in the parking lot.

On the ride home I told my mom I didn’t think we should help at the store anymore and she said we should thank our lucky stars that Mr. Nichols let us work when we wasn’t even old enough yet. And anyway, she’d said, the first time you see one it’s the hardest, then she laughed and slapped my leg, cleared her throat and told me that people do what people do and there ain’t a damn thing can be done about it. Gotta put it out of your mind, is all.

But I couldn’t erase the pictures in my mind, and I sure couldn’t pluck them from my sister’s head. I wasn’t sure how much Allie saw, and she refused talk about it, but I figured she’d seen just as much. I should’ve grabbed her, should’ve run straight away. But I just stood there like an idiot, and Allie saw it all. The next morning when we changed for school, I noticed three scratches on her arm. She said the cat did it but we didn’t own one. The neighbor’s, she’d said. Allie was using her own fingernails then—thumbtacks, paperclips, pencil points and staples came later. I should have protected her

from the banana-man and I decided, now, not tell her about Mom. It might send her searching for something more dangerous than office supplies.

I rubbed my face with both hands, locked my fingers together behind my head, and looked at Michele. "I'm already ready for this day to end."

"Why don't we see if Allie wants to hang out with us today?"

I told her I'd like that and went for the door, but my mom flung it open before I could get my hand to the knob.

"I got an idea." Mom jittered like she'd drunk too much coffee, like two pots too many. "Allie," she yelled. "Allie come here. I got an idea." My mom pushed into my bedroom and stepped, shoes and all, on my pillow and blanket on her way to the windows. Clapped her hands together. "We're gonna throw a party."

Allie leaned in my doorway, pulled on her sleeves. "We're gonna what?"

"Throw a pool party! You can invite all your friends."

Allie turned and walked down the hall. "We need a bigger pool to fit all my friends." She slammed her door. Again.

My mom dismissed my sister with a wave. "She'll be fine once school starts." She looked back and forth between me and Michele. "Well, what do you think?"

“Ten minutes ago you were worried that the house wasn’t presentable. Now you want to throw a party?” I dusted my pillow and smoothed my blankets. “I don’t think we can afford that.”

“Well, hell,” Mom said. “How do you know what we can afford?”

“I know the only one with a job is Jacks, and he’s not coming off his paycheck.”

She gestured to the walls and ceiling. “This is our job.”

“That money is to fix the house, Mom. I don’t think we should waste—”

“Last I checked, the pool was part of the package.” She stood with her hands on her hips, lips locked together, eyes wide like *bam, beat that!*

“I doubt that’s what the landlords had in mind. Parties aren’t part of the budget.”

“Ooh!” Michele said. “We got a bunch of party lights at home—the little paper lanterns. We could string them around the top of the pool screen.”

“Atta girl! I knew I liked you from the get-go. We could make it a pot luck too.”

“My dad makes a mean crock of chili, and my mom can do desserts.”

I could have choked Michele. She didn’t have any damn idea what she was doing, encouraging one of my mom’s harebrained ideas. And she surely didn’t understand that throwing a pool party would almost guarantee we’d run out of money and be on our way in a few months’ time. “Mom, we don’t have pool chairs or regular chairs or half the things we actually *need*.” I pointed to the floor, to my blanket bed.

“Okay, okay. I’ll give you that one.” She twisted her lips, tapped a finger on her chin. “Guess it’s high time we go hunting.”

“Hunting?” Michele asked.

“She means trash picking.”

“I mean treasure hunting. One man’s trash...”

“Is still trash.”

My mom smiled. “We got the pickup schedule for the ritzy neighborhoods.”

Didn’t matter where we lived, my parents always knew when rich people set their trash to the curb. Sometimes we spent the work week hunting and the weekend peddling our treasures at the flea market. I always worried a mob would march in and ransack our booth trying to reclaim their things, but my mom just clucked—*those* people think they’re too fancy for flea markets.

“Come on,” Michele said. “You’re the only one in the neighborhood with a pool.”

“It isn’t a pool. It’s a swamp in disguise.”

“Exactly!” Mom said. “And you girls are in charge of cleaning it.”

We’d spent the better part of a week draining and rinsing and scrubbing the pool. The pump outside the screened walls glugged and gurgled and shot green mucous into the yard, and the air smelled like an alligator pit. Occasionally, the pool pump clogged with

lizards or frogs or snakeskins too big to fit through the open valve and everything had to be shut down so we could pick out reptile parts. We scrubbed and rinsed and scrubbed and rinsed until the water finally shot out clear. It took eleven hours to fill the pool and roughly the same amount of time for it to threaten green again. I walked around the perimeter with my test kit and chemicals wearing my dad's enormous safety goggles while Michele and Allie tanned. Actually, Michele tanned, Allie fried, and I eventually mastered pool science.

The water was perfect now, the sun a fat bronze bulb in the sky, no clouds. Hot, but otherwise perfect. Me and Allie and Michele scrubbed the pool screens, Jackson and his friend Fortin worked in the yard, and my mom watered plants. I'd come around to the party idea when I started to see how nicely everything was coming along, and I told myself my mom probably just wanted a reason to spend time with her sister. I hadn't given that much consideration at first. The bonus, I hoped, would be that my mom warmed up to Trenton if she just talked to him. I was still deciding how to get him there without my parents acting like fools.

I looked across the yard. Miss Ruthie next door turned out to be a sprightly woman who did more for fun than just needlepoint and crochet. Her grandchildren—a boy and a girl on either side of Allie's age—were visiting and the little old lady had spent half the afternoon rigging a zip-line between two trees and testing it herself. She slid from her seat on a high branch, clutched the downturned handlebars of a bicycle, and squealed from one end of her yard to the other, only her silver head visible from our side of the privacy fence where we cleaned the screens.

“Allie,” she called when she was perched in the tree again. “Come join us, dear!”

My sister, on her hands and knees between me and Michele, put her scrub brush in the soap bucket and dropped to her butt. Today, she finally ditched the long-sleeved sheer cover-up Michele had lent her. She’d been wearing it to hide her scratches, but it did a better job protecting her secret than her skin. Allie wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her wrist and watched Miss Ruthie’s grandkids take their turns.

“Go ahead,” I said. “We’re almost done.”

“You sure?”

I nodded but Allie was already on her feet, heading toward the broke out slats in the wooden fence. She turned to the side, squeezed through without trouble and in less than a minute zipped across the line.

My mom watered the hostas outside the screen room and paused to watch Allie tear across the neighbor’s yard. She smiled, tugged on the garden hose and sprayed the next section. She’d been in a good mood all week. I was beginning to believe moving here was good for her. Mom hadn’t smiled this much in a long, long time.

“I need the hose when you finish,” I said. “The soap is starting to dry.”

“Go on and use it now,” she said and walked it over. “I wanna douse every one of them plants so they perk up for the party. We only got a few days to get this place in shape.”

“I think the plants look nice.”

“I do too. A ton better here,” Michele said. “Heck, the neighbors probably won’t even notice you took them from their yards.”

“You little witch! I dug ‘em up from the back fence.” Mom aimed the sprayer at Michele, squeezed the handle and soaked her. “God knows I ain’t perfect but I don’t believe in stealing.”

“Tell that to the people missing their patio set.” I pointed to the Florida room.

She pointed the nozzle at me. “Don’t think I won’t spray that grin right off your face. I told you already it was set to the trash.”

“Do people around here make a habit of leaving trash in the middle of the yard with a fresh pitcher of iced tea on top?” I turned my face but the blast of water went straight into my ear. I pounded my palm against my head.

“That’s what you get. You wasn’t even there.” She smiled and rinsed the screen for me. “Solid set though, ain’t it? A good cleaning and a little paint is all it needs.”

My mom said that about everything but this time she wasn’t exaggerating. It was a long glass table with eight matching chairs. No umbrella, but that didn’t matter. Everything was covered in pollen dust, and the chairs had a few patches of mildew, but it wouldn’t take much more than some Mean Green and elbow grease to clean up. My parents also scavenged two charcoal grills, a push-broom, a wicker foot-stool, and a solid wood dresser with two broken slides that my dad replaced in under an hour and for less than three bucks.

“Speaking of iced tea,” Mom said. “I better set the jug out while the sun’s still strong. Your dad’ll pitch a fit if he goes for a glass and there ain’t none made.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“Ain’t my day to watch him.” She handed me the hose, pointed to the flowerbed. “Soak those.” Before she went in she hollered, “He picked up a couple side jobs in the neighborhood. Roof repairs and what have you.”

The mower and weed-eater cut off almost in unison, and Jacks and Fortin returned them to our shed. Even with the screened walls and ceiling, pollen particles and a fine layer of dirt made it in to pollute my water. Ugh. I’d have to skim it again. They came into the pool room. Fortin was shirtless and Jacks pulled his over his head from the back collar.

“Can you guys rinse off before—” I began, but they cannonballed into the water before I could finish. When they surfaced, I said, “Are you kidding me right now? You already screwed up my chemicals because you didn’t use the bag on the mower. Now you splashed half the water out. It’ll take me three days to get it right again.”

“Gee whiz.” Jacks snorted and pretended to push eyeglasses up on his nose. “On our next jump, we’ll calculate the chlorine to water ratio while accounting for body mass and velocity.”

I flipped him off. “If you could do all that you might’ve graduated high school.”

Michele sprayed herself and pencil-jumped into the pool with barely a ripple.

“See,” I said. “It’s not that hard.”

“Jesus, Sadie. Lighten up.” Jacks stepped out of the shallow end and towed off. He turned to Fortin, who remained in the water. “So what’s happening tonight?”

“Party at the dunes, man. Or there’s a kegger in the woods off Highway 26.” He floated on his back. “Whichever one has more girls wanting to ride the Fortin 500.”

Gross. Jacks laughed, told Fortin he was mental, then went in to get showered and changed, said he’d meet up with his friend after supper.

“I ain’t said nothing to your brother,” Fortin said when my brother was inside. “But half the neighborhood saw you two sneaking out of Trenton’s the other day. You’d be smart to keep your distance.”

Hearing *Trenton* in his voice felt like an invasion of privacy. I didn’t like the way it sounded coming from his mouth. I said, “Tell me again why it’s any of your business who I’m friends with.”

“Friends? Ya’ll got awfully close awfully fast.” He turned to Michele. “There’s two reasons we look the other way for you. Number one, your daddy sells the greenest weed in the county—”

“Keep shooting off at the mouth and I’ll make sure you never see another eighth.”

“Number two, Nate ain’t black. Don’t know *what* he is exactly but he don’t look Mexican, and he sure ain’t black. That’s plain.” Fortin climbed the ladder in the deep end and stood so close that I smelled his sunblock. I stepped back. He leaned forward and dripped water on my shirt. “Trenton is the blackest goddamn black I ever saw. Ain’t nobody gonna turn a cheek to that. You been warned once, both of you.”

“What the heck are you going to do? Run us all over with your loud ass truck?”

Fortin didn't reply to Michele—he just walked out of the screened room, still drenched and collecting sand with his feet. He stopped at a tree in the yard, surveyed a few oranges, pulled one off.

“Why is everyone here so concerned with who I like?” I asked.

“You like crackheads and pimps?” He peeled the orange, dropped the rinds in the grass. “Is that your thing? You looking to get yourself raped and killed?”

“Trenton's not like that,” I said, but my confidence wavered. I thought about the carnival, about Marquis.

“You don't know anything about him.”

“Shut up, Fortin,” Michele said sharply.

It struck me that I didn't know much more than Trenton's school schedule. The realization stunned me. In the last week, I'd been electrocuted countless times by the faulty pump switch I kept flipping with wet hands, and that's how I felt just then. Trenton knew my entire life story, and I didn't even know his middle name.

“His brother's in prison,” Fortin said, and crammed an orange slice in his mouth. “He forget to tell you that?” I didn't say anything, just stared as he chewed. “Did he tell you his daddy is dead ... gunned down in crack-town?”

I looked to Michele, waited for her to contradict him. When she didn't, Fortin raised his eyebrows, turned his back, walked through the yard.

“Just because his family is bad, doesn’t mean he is,” I said, but my voice cracked.

He shook his head, kept walking. “You seem smarter than you’re letting on, girl.”

“Leave it be, Sadie. He’s just mad that you’re not trying to ride the Fortin 500.”

“Shit.” Fortin unlatched the gate and turned. “I wouldn’t let her anywhere near this shifter knowing he’s had a run.” He sucked the juice from his fingers and winked, then latched the open gate and walked home.

Michele went home for a couple nights and Allie spent all her time with Miss Ruthie’s grandkids. Jacks was always at work or hanging out with Fortin, and my dad was off doing side jobs in the neighborhood. Between everything I’d learned about my family, and everything Fortin said about Trenton’s, my mind stayed in overdrive. I had asked Michele for details but she said Trenton’s story wasn’t hers to tell. If I wanted to know, I’d have to ask him. I knew I wouldn’t do that. I couldn’t. I’d spent sixteen years *not* asking questions. I didn’t know how to do it, wasn’t sure I even wanted to. I just wanted to shut my head up for a while.

When my mom wasn’t checking the T.V. for updates on the O.J. case, she’d come sit with me by the pool or challenge me to a game of checkers. I pretended not to notice certain moves—obvious moves—because she’d get up and dance every time she crowned one of her pieces. But something inside me fell away every time her eyes changed, focused on some distant thing, and her toes went to tapping. In those moments, I’d try to make a stupid move on the checkerboard so she’d snap back and triple jump my piece for

a crown, but every time she came back to reality she recalled some important thing she needed to do inside.

The morning before the pool party, I woke up from another dream about Alannah and went looking for my mom. I was going to tell her I knew her secret, that I understood everything she did and didn't do. I wanted to tell her it wasn't her fault that Alannah died. Maybe she'd be relieved, maybe she'd be able to forget that daughter, remember that she had two more. I expected to find her in the kitchen fussing over some dish she had to get ready for the party, but she wasn't there. No sign of her anywhere in the house. Out back, Allie played tag with Miss Ruthie's grandkids. I walked out front, noticed that the shotgun truck was gone. I checked the mailbox for Palmetto bugs, then leaned against the house.

Across the street, Maybelle swept her driveway. Allie looked so much like her that I wasn't sure how I missed it before. They shared the same scrawny, bony frame—knock knees and all. For that, I pitied Allie. The breasts she prayed for might not come. On the plus side, her skin still had a shot at toughening up. Maybelle had a tan so deep her bones were probably brown and my sister's blistered red skin was treated daily with a vinegar spritz, one of my mom's home remedies. I didn't buy into any of her potions but preferred the oatmeal rub for sunburns because it didn't smell like a forgotten Easter egg, at least.

My dad came around the side of the house and startled me. He walked under the shade of my oak tree, his leather tool-belt faded and worn, drooping from his waist. "I was beginning to wonder if I should come check your pulse."

“Where’s Mom?”

“Isn’t my day to watch her,” he said, and removed his hat. Patted his head with a red rag spotted with oil or mud or something gross.

“That’s disgusting,” I said, crinkled my nose. “Do you know where she is or not?”

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

“Yeah,” I said. “The floor side.”

“That’ll do it every time.” My dad laughed. “She went to the dollar store down the street. Something I can help you with?”

I leaned against the tree, looked at all the block houses in the neighborhood, glanced back at ours. Three weeks we’d been in Florida and in that time managed to transform the worst place on the block into something decent. Quaint, even. The house smiled in spite of its frumpy-faced neighbors.

“You want to take a walk?” Dad asked.

“A walk?”

He patted his tummy. “I could stand to lose a few pounds.”

“Your hammer is hanging to your knees.”

He tightened his tool belt—one notch past the usual spot. “What do you say?”

We walked in the road without words. Every time I thought of something to say, I swallowed it down. We passed Trenton's house and turned a corner before I finally spoke. "Dad?"

"That's my name."

"Why can't she let go?"

He sighed. Said nothing. Walked the full length of our block.

"You did," I said. "Why can't she?"

We turned another corner. "It's not the same for your mom and me. Your sister was... You have to understand your mom was still a kid when she had Alannah. Eighteen. That little girl was her whole world."

"We should *all* fit in her world."

"The situation is complicated."

"Chemistry homework is complicated, dad. Telling us we have family across the street is not."

He stopped. Studied my face but didn't speak. His jaw muscle flexed.

"My dead grandmother isn't dead," I said. "Brain cancer? Are you kidding me?"

Dad laughed a little, tapped his temple. "Close enough. That woman's got a few screws loose."

"Must run in the family."

“Watch your tone,” he said sharply and walked again. “Who told you?”

“How long did you expect to keep it secret when I can throw a rock and hit her sister?”

He took a deep breath. “Your mother planned to tell you, all of you, and she will in her own time. We made this move because she wanted to be near her sister again. She wanted you kids to know your cousins. It isn’t easy for her Sadie, but she’s trying. Just give her time.”

“Right. Because twenty something years isn’t enough.”

“If fifty years is what it takes, then that’s how long we wait. That’s what family does.” He walked in silence for a few minutes then stopped a few houses short of ours. “You’re just like she used to be, you know that? Bull-headed and sassy and so damned determined that a freight train couldn’t stop her if she set her mind to something.”

I wanted to say something mean and ugly, something I couldn’t take back, but I couldn’t think of a single thing.

“You look alike too. Different color hair but otherwise you could’ve been twins.”

Nobody had ever told me that. If it were true, why wouldn’t someone have said so before now? Tears blurred my sight, made the whole neighborhood look like wax melting under the sun. “Really?” I asked. “Do you have pictures?”

“A few,” he said. “Your mom loved taking pictures. Wanted to be a photographer, in fact. She rarely put her camera down but I snuck it from her enough times to get a few

good photos. They're buried in a box somewhere, but I'll dig them out some time if you want me to."

I nodded, wiped my cheeks. After a moment, I said, "I heard you were a cowboy."

"More like a stable boy." Dad winked, and I turned toward home. "Sadie?"

"That's my name."

"You didn't inherit your mom's attention to detail." He pointed to the left. "She asked me three days ago why I was spending so much time fixing this shit-hole up instead of tearing it down."

The shed stood straighter than before, the door returned to its proper place. New gray sheet-metal roofed the building. He opened the door, gestured for me look inside. I found a not-rotted plywood floor, extra support beams every couple feet, and two new flashlights with batteries still in the package. The stash box sat on the shelf. Shit. Surely, he'd looked inside. My cheeks warmed. "How... I mean, why ..."

"I was your age too. I'd rather you be in the neighborhood than out driving around like your braindead brother," he said. "This should get you through a few more storms, at least."

My throat tightened. I didn't understand him. Or anyone. Or anything.

"Just a little more time, kid." He wiped my cheek with his thumb and went home.

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