

CHAPTER ONE

Most adults didn't like Jack. She was weird, and mangy, and had a staring problem. Like some feral dog who'd burrowed a hole under your fence and had now found its way into your yard, watching you through the plexiglass door to your living room. *Let me in. I promise I won't bite.*

Except – she would bite. At least, up until the age of eight. Anyone who got too close would receive a snaggletoothed nip to the wrist, or the arm, or anywhere fleshy and exposed. Teachers. Classmates. Waiters. It was a problem she was forced to resolve with a child psychologist, one they'd specially summoned to the school once it became clear her mother couldn't afford their own.

Still, somehow, she had a couple friends in Frisco. Mostly older than her. Mostly weirder than her. Goths, punks, emos galore; prima donnas in studded leather and mohawked middle schoolers that collectively seemed to view Jack as their pet. They were a small cohort, met up after school in the cement tunnel by the creek (which smelled like mildew, but was otherwise an excellent hideout) to chalk graffiti on the walls, and rave about their parents. Jack participated in this latter activity sparingly. She rather liked her mother. Bonnie was much cooler than most parents, with her shorn pink hair and tattooed arms. She told them this – nervously, sort of, worried about being judged like you would be for that kind of thing, but their reception warmed rapidly once she mentioned the criminal record.

Your mom went to jail? an eighth grader with a lip ring asked.

So this was a thing to be proud of, then. Jack was relieved.

None of those kids, whose names she has since forgotten, were ever familiar enough to qualify as her best friend, but that was okay. She already had a best friend. Her pet parakeet, Widget, whom she'd received as a birthday gift six months before she died.

Funnily enough, Widget the parakeet died the same day as Aunt Honey. Jack was eleven at the time, and eleven-year-old Jack felt very grateful indeed that the cancer had decided to stop Aunt Honey's heart the same day that Widget had gone prone in the sink, as it gave her something less embarrassing to cry about. There was only a thirty-minute delay between the two deaths, Widget first, and Jack had spent all of thirty minutes cupping the feathery corpse in her palms, sobbing so hard it hurt her back. It wasn't her fault; she hadn't been a negligent owner or anything. Widget hadn't drowned. Only died of old age during her weekly bath. Pitched sideways mid-ruffle, so suddenly that Jack had initially wondered if she'd slipped, if birds even could slip. No. She was just dead. Stiff and cold as a bar of soap. Her little pink tongue forever wedged between her ochre beak, like a worm had tried crawling its way back up her throat.

Bonnie had knocked on the bathroom door shortly after, sweetie are you in there I have something to tell you, and that news came less like a gunshot and more like a kick. She'd already

dealt with the worst of it, Widget was dead, Aunt Honey might as well die today too. Get it over with already. She'd fought a long, nasty battle with a horseshoe-crab tumor in her brain – the kind that made her spout nonsense and bark like a rabid animal, or otherwise sit like a mashed-in pumpkin. May 14, a gorgeous cloudless day: the day their little family halved from four to two.

Screw it, everyone should just be dead, Jack had thought then. (Turns out, Frank Sinatra died that day too – not that she much cared, but her mother was heartbroken. Maybe Jack should just stop thinking things in general.)

Jack had wanted to bury Widget with Aunt Honey, but her mother insisted that they have separate funerals. She'd framed her answer expertly: *Widget deserves her own coffin, don't you think? It's what she would've wanted.*

So they'd placed her matted corpse in a tissue box and buried her by the tennis court across the street, since they had no garden of their own. This suited Jack just fine. Felt respectable enough, seeing as Widget was a green parakeet and tennis courts are green and that just made sense in her eleven-year-old mind, dammit. Also, it was a beautiful procession. They'd blasted Sinatra from a fruit-punch-pink speaker and held hands, kumbaya, here lies Best Bird Ever, and the ice cream truck had miraculously appeared right after *The Best Is Yet To Come*. Dippin' Dots had never tasted so good.

Aunt Honey's funeral was just okay. It was long, and boring, and the church was so hot that it made Jack hate God, but they served garlic knots and lemonade during the reception. Those were a delicacy where Jack came from; she'd enjoyed that part immensely. She ate six garlic knots and threw up in the bathroom after. Then ate two more.

But then the garlic knots and lemonade turned back into hamburger helper and ice pops. Then they sold Widget's cage. Then it was just Jack and her mother in that big empty Texas house, and Bonnie certainly couldn't afford all the bills that Aunt Honey had always taken the brunt of, with her corporate receptionist job versus Bonnie's position as a freelance maid. The house was a quick sell, lots of high bids, good market, et cetera et cetera. That was one of the worst bits – leaving Texas. Jack had liked that house. She knew Bonnie hated it, but she'd liked it. It had personality: painting-choked walls and antique Persian rugs and a too-big attic, and so much space besides that it felt like a museum. But Bonnie couldn't pay the rent. Even with her sister's life insurance money, she couldn't pay, so they boxed up the essentials in two weeks flat and took off. Simple as that.

Early on, Jack would find herself wondering why they hadn't staged a yard sale for the rest of the clutter. Most of it was old, old enough to be priceless, surely – there were marble statues of naked cherubs, a gold-gilded grandfather clock that sang prettier than a church choir, even a real sword used in *Lord of the Rings*, which Jack's grandfather had purchased from an auction. All mouse bait for pretentious home-curators. Right? Surely. *Surely*.

But Bonnie was crafty. One of her main attributes. She framed their swift departure as a surgical necessity; like cutting off a zombie-bitten limb before the virus spread. Everything in

that house was poisonous. Extra meals bought from anything sold – also poisonous. Leave the gold trinkets on their shelves. The clutter would be a housewarming gift for the young couple moving in, a very overbearing variation of champagne bottles and plastic flutes.

Not too much later, Jack would learn that this was a lie. Perhaps not a full-fledged one – Bonnie really *had* hated that house, with all its pendants and vile history – but she knew from the start that something wasn't adding up. Her mother was resourceful above all things. Anything she could've traded in would've been sold before Aunt Honey's body had even cooled over.

No. As it turned out, Aunt Honey's judgment of her sister's criminal tendencies was entirely hypocritical. Brain tumor or felonious genetics, she'd racked up some ridiculous fines shoplifting from local luxury stores (like, actually ridiculous, seriously), and the government was seizing their house and assets as retribution. Well, that's the government for you. Single mother and her kid out on the streets. Not like Bonnie had a solid case against it. She was no regular God-fearing civilian, criminal record long as a Dollar-Store receipt. It was move or CPS would swoop in. Good thing she had enough cash at the time for a full tank of gas.

They hadn't gotten far on their own. The car – an arthritic Honda Civic named Bumblebee, which Aunt Honey had been too fond of to upgrade – nobly chugged its way across state lines before promptly suffering a stroke in New Mexico. That was a scary night. Really scary. It was storming badly, and there's no worse place to get caught in a storm than in fuck-all New Mexican desert. Four oceans of nothing in every direction: NorthSouthEastWest, all nothing and nobody. While Bonnie had frantically battled cell reception behind the wheel, Jack had peered nervously out the window at the sky. CRACK, lightning, CRACK, lightning, CRACK CRACK CRACK. Sheets of rain so heavy they hit the windshield like bodies, clouds clanking like rusted cogs, thunder so loud it was almost grotesque. So the two of them – three, if you counted Bumblebee – waited through all of it, a wayward sailboat bobbing over titan waves. Played cards. Counted bolts of lightning. Slept.

Morning finally came, as morning tends to do, and the sun threw up all over the wreckage. Jack had slipped outside while Bonnie was still asleep – curled up in the reclined driver's seat like a large house cat – to explore. Fresh air, all that.

The first thing that hit her was the smell. Peaty and sweet. Sort of swampy. The air was so humidity-curdled that breathing felt like eating fingers. *Splish-splash*; Jack looked down; the ground had turned to soup beneath her feet. She kicked, *splish-splash*, and giggled. The monsoon had dredged up all sorts of nonsense, weeds and centipedes and even little lizards, which was fun to wade through for a while and pick apart. It was kind of like playing in a sandbox. Like being back home, when she'd reach out to grab something and it could've been anything, a dog turd or a cigarette or a forgotten Barbie, except this playground was only slightly less civilized, and its treasures slightly more morbid. Her favorite discovery that morning was a ram's skull. Its horns, permed like macaroni, were faded from prolonged exposure to the elements. One of the eyesockets was chipped – like a sinkhole extending veiny cracks over

pavement. Jack held it level to her head and stared. It smelled awful, fucking reeked, but she was strangely fascinated by it. Had never considered herself a painter, but she'd longed for paints then – for a palette of sepia and buttermilk and white, a place to tattoo this object's likeness on something more durable. But then a scorpion had crawled out from the chipped eye, and she'd dropped it so fast that it shattered like a vase. Carried on with her sifting through the post-storm desert paste, her hands stinking so bad she couldn't even lift them near her face.

There was a sort of apocalyptic beauty to the desert, now that it was bright out. The emptiness seemed to animate itself. Like some ancient god, docile in the warm bath of spring, exhausted after its midnight rampage. She sloshed around with uncharacteristic reverence, in particular awe of the serrated mountains on the horizon, for they were mammoth; a stark contrast to the exhaustingly flat landscape back home in Frisco. Like lighthouses on a faraway shore, an ocean of silt and cacti away; the culmination of all that dead earth wanting to be something more.

The thought came to her sporadically: *Widget would have loved it here*. There was so much space to fly.

Glancing over her shoulder: there was Bumblebee, still dead on the side of the road, with her sleeping mother entombed within. Mouth open and probably snoring. When her mother slept, she *slept*, usually for twelve hours at a time. It was a good thing most of her clients were either friends or men who liked her; she received few reprimands for lateness, and so the habit had fully ingrained itself in her. Jack figured it would be a while yet before they carried on. She plopped down on a baked potato rock and started making her sculptures.

This, making sculptures, was a favorite hobby of hers. Her little Frankensteins. They were horrible, and she suspected they scared most adults, but her mother always loved them. *Genius*, she'd say. *Painful renderings of humanity at its most vulnerable*. Jack didn't know about *that*, but they were fun to make. Out there, on the desert's kitchen floor, she substituted candy wrappers for lizard skin; popsicle sticks for cactus prongs; doll heads for cockroaches'. Two sculptures. Five. Twenty. Soon, a whole army of her own morbid creations surrounded her. And she felt strangely at peace.

It didn't last. Bonnie had woken up a little while later, tried to call them a lift service, but her phone was dead. Time to improvise.

I'm about to be a very bad parent, she said. This had a sort of Pavlovian effect on Jack, who instantly got excited, because Bonnie typically only said that – or otherwise heard it from Aunt Honey – when she was about to let Jack eat chocolate for dinner or watch an R-rated movie with naked people in it. But this time was not so very thrilling. Half the day went spoiled with Bonnie standing on the side of the highway with her thumb struck out, spitting and jeering at all the cars that kept driving. Then, Jack: eating peanuts in the car, kicking the dashboard, and wishing she had something to drink besides warm Sprite.

They got a lift eventually, decades later. Some old guy named Thorn who looked creepy but was actually very kind. He even passed Jack his phone, *I have Angry Birds downloaded if you'd like to play*, while they drove on to the nearest service station. He looked like a caterpillar. Smelled like oranges. Played good music. Jack found him oddly comforting.

And so, the perfect prologue for a double homicide petered into a modest Thursday afternoon. Thorn bought the two of them lunch before taking off to Las Vegas, where his son had gotten himself into a heap of financial trouble. Jack had felt a strange sort of adoration for him then: this kind old man on an Odyssey across the desert (he'd driven all the way from Louisiana), all to rescue his son, financially irresponsible Victor Price. He was like a mythic hero or something. In a moment of random introspection, Jack wondered if she liked him so much because she'd never known her own father, whom she had plenty of ideas about but could never verify one way or another, as he was spending life in prison and never replied to any of her many letters.

That was the last interesting thing that happened for a while. Bonnie couldn't spare the cash to buy another car, not unless they were going to live in it, so she just bought a mobile charger and a map from the service station. And then they left. Started walking in the opposite direction from where they'd come. One foot, other foot.

But what about all our stuff? In Bumblebee? Jack had asked. She was mostly just asking it for the sake of asking, as it seemed like a logical enough inquiry. In reality, she couldn't think of one single thing in those boxes she'd care at all to keep. If the car exploded with everything in it right then, she'd be happy enough just to have her favorite running sneakers and *Power Rangers* T-shirt. And she did; she was wearing both of those things already. It wasn't like she didn't have any toys or anything – there was a whole box of them in the trunk – but she'd never felt particularly sentimental about, well. Any of them. Not her Barbies; not her coloring books; not even the gold keychain given to her by Aunt Honey, whom she'd regarded as family but never with more than lukewarm filiality. She wondered if that was strange. It probably was.

Well, is there anything special you wanted to grab? Bonnie had asked her.

Jack paused. Really searched for it in her mind. Nothing? Anything? But the honest answer came to her quickly, *No, nothing*.

Good. Me neither.

Which obviously meant that Bonnie already had her credit card, driver's license, and other critical documentation with her (even both of their birth certificates – she'd had the foresight to shove into her waistband while Thorn inspected Bumblebee). She took Jack's hand then, and with no apparent destination at all, they forged on. Two pirates off to the gallows, nothing but the clothes on their backs and the promise of trouble up ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

Room 211, L'Auberge de la Rose, Pyros, New Mexico. A long address to fit on an envelope. You had to sort of cramp the letters together, and Jack – because she was a leftie – had to exercise extreme caution not to smudge the ink with her hand.

Dear Pa, each would start.

Composing these letters was not dissimilar to the construction of her statues, she found, and perhaps that was why she enjoyed it so much. Like clicking seemingly disjointed limbs into place to create something functional, they were an exercise in experimentation – word alchemy. There were staples present in each, of course:

Salutations.

How is Florida?

I hope prison is treating you well.

Ma is good, and so am I.

I look forward to your return letter.

To prevent monotony from infecting both the practice and the product, however, she would make sure to also toss in new words. Jack's main source was Bonnie's astrology magazine, which resided on a shelf above the toilet. *Astrologer's Weekly, Edition 45*. This was the one and only article of literature in all of Room 211 (besides the Bible in the dresser, but she'd found a dead brown recluse inside it once and couldn't bring herself to touch it again). For a seemingly fantastical subject, it actually contained a great trove of vocabulary. Jack relied on it *expeditiously*. It was *beguiling*, in fact, just the same way Leos are beguiling. She herself – being a highly *pragmatic* person, like Capricorns – was never deluded by its fantastical material, but it still had supplied her with the artillery she felt necessary to impress her father. She wasn't entirely sure if she was using them all correctly, but surely he could forgive her if her handwriting looked pretty enough. It didn't. Fuck, maybe he'd forgive her anyway.

It wasn't like he criticized the content very much. Or at all. But she regarded his silence, not with sulkiness, nor with desperation, but with a knowing resignation. It seemed reasonable to chalk it up to stringent prison policy. Right? As long as he got her letters, she supposed, then it was still worth it.

Dear Pa,

Salutations! How is Florida? I hope prison is treating you well. It is my horoscopic ~~wish~~ prognosis that the August heat has not overcome you.

Ma is still working as a maid, but business is slow so she's also just been taken on as a dental assistant. Last month she was a pet groomer, but she got fired for shaving all the fur off this poodle because her owner said no when Ma asked for his number. Quintessential! I had no idea she had any experience in the dental atmosphere, but she said that with a little ~~resoomay rezoom~~ rezoomay-tinkering, you can be anything. I guess that is true. I think it would be fun to work as a dentist, except for having to deal with

gross food in people's teeth. Or bitey kids. I sometimes still bite people, but have gotten better at that. Other times, when a person is really ugly, I cannot help it.

I am starting school in three weeks, which I find extremely blasphemous. At least it will give me something to do, as I am retired of swimming in the hotel pool and playing cards with our neighbor Matilda. I have been so bored lately! There was a Western festival in town last weekend, where everybody dressed up as a cowboy or a cowgirl, which was fun at first because there was a bouncy house and ascendant burgers, but that was pretty much the only good thing to happen all stinking summer.

Overall, Ma is good, and so am I. Do write back soon please Dad. I look forward to your reply. I ~~love~~ miss you!

Mercurially,
Your favorite daughter (Jack)

Recently, she'd also been signing off by drawing little snakes in the bottom left corner – her father's favorite animal, or (by Bonnie's account) the one he had tattooed on his left arm. It was one of the few details she'd spared Jack, this tattoo, and she'd folded it up like a slice of cake in a napkin to tuck away in her heart. She didn't have his hair color, his voice, or more than a few breadcrumbs about his life, but she had this tattoo. Unfortunately, snakes were her *least* favorite animal. He couldn't have gotten a wolf instead? A shark, maybe? Lots of cooler things with teeth. Didn't have to be a shitty reptile. Whatever, his skin.

Back to her father, his obscurity. She tried to press her mother for more sometimes. But that was like punching a tree to make sap – excruciating, futile.

Bonnie's hatred for Clay Hawkley was unlike her typical rage. When Jack's mother was angry about something – a rude stranger, perhaps, or increased rent, or rejection from a handsome man – that anger would be released in spores of heat. Curses and yells. Sometimes fists. This rage made her bigger and undefined, somehow, the same way that heat makes dough bubble up into an amorphous blob. But any mention of her ex-husband? It sapped the very marrow from her. Shrivelled her into something brittle and icy. It carved her cheeks into hollows, siphoned the light from her eyes. Made her look gaunt. Unfamiliar. Impenetrable. It made her look *heartless*.

This, expectedly, complicated the whole process of letter-sending. Bonnie could never find out about the letters at all, Jack knew, because – on principle – she would see it as a betrayal. A betrayal of *blood*; the very worst kind. A man had scorned her. Had fooled *her*, Jack's mother, who was never fooled, who always did the fooling herself. The story of their prison escape was one Jack had only ever heard once, not that she needed to hear it again, as once was enough to convince Jack that forgiveness would never come. Clay had left her mother to the dogs. He had taken their savings and *ran*. He was a coward, Bonnie said. More than a coward. A real fucking monster.

Thus, every inked word emboldened Jack's status as a traitor. But she couldn't stop herself. These correspondences (albeit onesided) were her only exercise in being a father's

daughter. And, more rudimentary than that, she enjoyed the risk. They were more than letters – they were contraband, which she was forced to smuggle from their room in the pockets of their dirty laundry. Jack liked having a secret.

Dear Pa, her most recent letter began, *Salutations. How is Florida? I hope prison is treating you well. I have something beguiling to tell you, even if I'm not very excited about it. Ma is sending me to summer camp!*

It's called Stollberry's. Have you heard of it? It is right near Albuquerque. It lasts for 2 weeks. I think, to be honest, that I would rather die. Anyways, here's a drawing I drew of a rinosoros.

Like most things that change the course of your life, Stollberry's Summer Camp looked – at first – like Nothing Major.

The whole affair was born from Bonnie's own frenzy. What else? Approximately three months into living at the hotel, she decided that Jack was depressed because of Aunt Honey's passing. Jack *was* depressed, actually, but not because of that. Aunt Honey had ceased to be herself long before her body ever caught up, so Jack had had plenty of time to subconsciously grieve the only other living relative she'd ever known. Distractedly, the way you might expect an eleven-year-old to cope with death. Like watching a character die in a movie you were only half-watching. Cut a quick glance to the TV – *aw, sad, I liked them*. This might have explained why Widget's death was so much more jarring; she hadn't expected that at all. Thought Widget was certain to live forever. (Furthermore, why she'd written so many shitty poems about that sad little parakeet in her notebooks, and on her bedroom wall. *Odes to a Bird. Broken-Heart Bird Haiku. My Best Friend Widget.*) Aunt Honey? The bitch with the sharp nails and expensive shoes? Yeah, okay, sure.

No, Jack was depressed because a storm – much like the one that murdered Bumblebee – had destroyed her fort at Devil's Throat Creek.

She didn't even know what depression was at the time. She only knew that she suddenly had no energy for anything at all, not even showering, not even sleeping. Not even statue-making.

Plied for answers by her mother, she gruffly attributed her behavior to a plethora of things: the scorpion sting that had initially incapacitated her; the inexhaustible August heat; the crappy hotel mattress they shared. Blamed her total lack of appetite on their limited store of food. Easy enough. Pebbly cereal and Spaghetti-O's were familiar cuisine, palatable, but she'd had it so much those first three months that she would've felt cannibalistic eating any more. Like that's all she was made of: pebbly cereal and Spaghetti-O's. Cut her open and there'd be nothing else inside.

But why had she gotten so quiet? Oh, that one she didn't have to lie about. She had no friends. Not that she *wanted* any, not the local cretins.

But Bonnie, who had dealt with depression her entire adult life, saw right through it all. Knew that the symptoms were just that: *symptoms*. She'd thus taken it upon herself to provide a remedy. Non-medicinal, of course, as she rejected the principle of medicine itself. And that remedy was—

Summer camp? Jack had asked, bewildered. Beside her cereal spoon sat a pamphlet with blocky yellow writing and gaudy smiles. It may as well have been a magic relic, how foreign was the content proposed. Summer camp. She'd thought it was made-up, in fact. Like 300-year-old vampires attending high school. Or Disney World.

Bonnie nodded. Tapped her spoon against the rim of her cereal bowl, as if proposing a toast. *It'll be good for you, kid. To be around other kids, doing fun kid stuff. Playing outside, or whatever. You don't do that enough.*

Jack disliked the idea immediately. More than that — she distrusted it, the whole notion of it, with her whole body. Kids her age were mostly awful, she'd found. Loud and preening and awful. Incapable of taking care of themselves. Always pawing at the hem of their mothers' skirts like teething pups, whimpering for attention.

Against her better judgment, however, she felt a mild flicker of excitement as she kept flipping through the pages. Eyes flitting from one oversaturated photo to the next: s'mores over a golden campfire, a glassy lake, a zipline through the trees. Now *this* would be something for her next letter. At the time, her most recent one was actually crushed in the waistband of her shorts, the ink barely settled and tattooing her belly. She'd have to postpone its release.

Will it be like the camp from The Parent Trap? she asked, trying hard to keep the hope from her voice. That was her current favorite movie, and one of three they had on DVD in Room 211. (The others: her mother's favorite, *Silence of the Lambs*, and *A Land Before Time* — the latter of which sat under a stack of Bonnie's various odds-and-ends uniforms, rather emulating its own title.)

Apropos Jack's question, Bonnie only shrugged. *Almost. Those programs are fucking expensive, Jacks. It's not the fucking Ritz-in-the-Woods.*

"Almost" was Jack's tip-off that it would not, in fact, be anything like a real summer camp. She wasn't a particularly introspective child or anything, but she also wasn't stupid. Second-rate, cheap, knockoffs; those were the words she instinctively lifted her head at in clothing stores, had seen them in her mother's search history enough times to now know the general income class they belonged to. (Aunt Honey was a better gift-giver, but that was only when she hadn't gone over-budget on nail appointments or drinks with girlfriends. A rare occurrence, unfortunately.) "Almost" meant toasted tortilla wraps and PB&J instead of real *Uncrustables*. "Almost" meant Spanish *Harry Potter* with subtitles. "Almost" was a Pretender, an offensive copycat to whatever A, B, or C thing Bonnie couldn't afford, and somehow "Almost" an Uncrustable or "Almost" Harry Potter was worse than a flat-out PB&J Tortilla and Spanish *Harry Potter*, because at least those were fucking real.

So. The camp would suck, then.

In revolt, Jack scheduled a tantrum for that evening, at dinner. This would be their second fight that week. This one wasn't out of anger but instead desperation: a last-ditch attempt to change Bonnie's mind. It was very unprofessional of her, really, very six-year-old, but she had already convinced herself that it would be horrible and unnecessary, and she wasn't even depressed, just tired, and why couldn't they just go to the movies instead because that would *certainly* make her less depressed? And not to mention — Ma, MA, are you even listening????

I already sent the money, Bonnie had only shrugged, unfazed by the minefield of noodles and steamed vegetables all over the table. *And we don't waste cash around here. Hey, did you want something else to eat?*

Fists slamming the table — *I'm not HUNGRY, woman.*

To which Bonnie had theatrically, almost triumphantly gestured: *See, depressed.*

I can't win, Jack grumbled, slumping down in her seat.

Looking back, Jack-now might've recognized Jack-then's deteriorating mental state as a product of many factors: a lack of friends, economic instability, genetics. It was a manifestation of her broad dissatisfaction — which she masked, not well — with their new environment, with the town they'd picked as randomly as if from a gas station lottery ticket. Actually, that's not far from what happened. After three whole hours of trodding that barren highway, all those years ago (*hiking*, Bonnie called it; *insulting*), they'd stumbled across a town so sparse that it had been a relief to see people in it at all. Regular people, even! Imagine that. All milling about with their baby strollers and their construction vests and their lives. Desert spiders all living in the same web.

Jack keenly studied the face of each passerby. Looked for clues in those maps of wrinkles and sunburn. She wondered, with a kind of contempt that belonged outside her tax bracket, what kind of great sacrifices they'd suffered to wash up here, this flotsam-jetsam brood. But they looked normal. Some of them even looked happy.

What was there to be happy about, she pondered? This town — Pyros, a jilted sign read — it was a zit. The people who lived here were zits on that zit.

It wasn't an ugly place. Not exactly. Still, not-ugly was a far cry from livable. A half-blind man wouldn't need glasses to see the desolation, banded like a gift-ribbon around a coffin, stringing together gray-slab offices and 80s-vomited diners. Arcades like catacombs. Gift shops that couldn't have seen a customer in years. The pueblo houses were sun-whacked and parched, like pottery left on the front porch. Jack stared blankly at them as they walked, at the gravel lawns and flaccid wind-chimes. Mused at the toys scattered over walkways. At chalk drawings on the sidewalk. Signs of youth — how out of place. Kids *her* age lived here? Sure. Why the hell not. At least it was always warm. Plus, she now knew from experience how lovely desert sunrises were.

Shit, Jack said, kind of in general but more specifically now toward a smelly mound of roadkill they were passing. Bonnie never minded when she cursed; she did it so avidly herself.

Well, I think it's sorta charming, Bonnie had shrugged, looking distracted. *Hey, stop a sec. I saw a cute guy two blocks back, three maybe. Mind if I go grab his number? Wait here?*

Why didn't you do it when we passed him?

Wasn't sure. Now I'm regretting it.

Jack groaned. *M'hungry.*

Bonnie ruffled her hair, and she growled. *Easy, little mutt. Fine. We'll eat first. Keep those teeth retracted.*

Per Jack's request (and Bonnie's wallet), the two of them tried for a McDonalds. There was only a Burger King. Over soggy fries and blistered nuggets, Bonnie had popped the question.

Do you like it?

Jack thought she meant the food. Because, really, what *else* could her mother have meant? And she was hungry enough then that her stomach would've welcomed wet cardboard. *Yeah, s'fine.*

Which was how, three months later, Jack had been forced to accept that Room 211 of L'Auberge de la Rose was their home. That they'd hunkered down. That they weren't leaving. Not anytime soon, at least.

The realization had snuck up on her slowly, like a lion stalking its prey through tall reeds. Once or twice, Jack had even heard the snap of bramble – sensed its impending pounce – but deliberately chosen to keep her back turned. Seeing the truth would be too much. Too frightening. Too outlandish, above all. It was easier to feign ignorance, to chase the truth out of sight with a mental broom.

Because, really – why *would* they stay?

Cacti and sand and empty roads – this was no place to build a life. It simply wasn't adhesive enough. Like trying to build a sandcastle with dry sand.

Jack could accept without qualm that she was an abnormal kid; further, that her mother was different from other mothers. They were an unconventional little pair, and she didn't mind that. But that didn't mean she wanted them to abandon normalcy entirely, of course. She still wanted to be around – civilization! Shopping malls! Baseball pitches! Overrun parking lots!

But Bonnie did as Bonnie always did. That is, whatever she wanted. She was like a compass-blind captain: She might depart the shore seeking one destination, but a wayward wind was all it took to reorient her ship entirely. That made Jack a rather peripheral first mate, she supposed, desperately but fruitlessly grappling for some purchase of the helm. Or maybe she was even a sentient block of cargo, how ineffectual were her persuasions.

California had been their initial destination. Some coastal city called Laguna Beach.

Jack knew, from one of the few times her mother *had* ever opened up about Clay, that this was where he and her mother had met. Azul Beach. Cue the movie: in an empty lighthouse they'd both thought to get high in, aww, how romantic. Bonnie had always dreamed of someday returning, she said, to this sacred place. To cleanse it. Claim it as her own. While Clay withered and died in prison, she'd be living on the ocean, free as a bird.

Jack had been thrilled by the idea. California! She could hardly believe it herself. The whole thing was already planned out, too. They were to find a little cottage right on the beach, one with blue shutters and white-sand walkways. Jack would look out her window and see palm trees. Lick salinity off the breeze. She would learn how to surf, and that's what she'd do after school while Bonnie worked. What would Bonnie do for work? Well, she'd be a waitress at first, or still clean houses, but that area was rich with all sorts of movie producers and celebrities. It wouldn't have been long before someone ordering fries and a shake would look up and realize, *wow, miss, you have a striking look, would you be available for an audition this afternoon?*

Jack had been surprised by this prediction. Her mother? An actress?

I've been acting half my life anyway, her mother had dismissed, combing through thick puffs of cigarette smoke with waggling fingers. This was when they were packing up their few belongings in the Texas house. *Haven't you seen any James Bond movies? I've got the perfect look. Or maybe I could be a singer. You've heard my voice. You know how well I sing. Don't I got a great voice?*

Well, sure, Jack liked her mother's voice, even if it was a bit scratchy sometimes. She liked her mother's everything. The things she disliked, she was wrong about. *Sure, Ma, I like your voice.*

Privately, she had questioned whether Hollywood big-shots would hire an ex-convict. She didn't speak her concerns aloud, of course, but those seedling doubts clustered in her mind like sticky nettle. Still, she would trust her mother. Of course she would. She always did. Somehow, everything had worked out for the two of them just fine so far. Laguna Beach would simply be another adventure – full of speedbumps and obstacles all the same, but an adventure – one she'd embrace it with open arms. *Cali girl*, she liked the sound of that.

But then – a breeze. A gust. A gale. A stray wind. One stray wind, that was all it took to reroute their little sailboat, to topple an empire of dreams. Years later, Jack would find herself seething with rage at the mere sight of bumblebees – dandelion-yellow, plump and innocent as cherubs – for the reminder they served of Aunt Honey's car. Stupid fucking Bumblebee the Honda, who just *had* to go and choke in New Mexico. Not even a two days' drive away from their preordained destination. When she cared to dawdle in the blame-lounge, Jack would walk herself through the mindblowing realization that everything in her life – everything *wrong* with her life – was an indirect product of Bumblebee the Honda. Some days she couldn't even stand the sight of yellow.

Bonnie saw things differently. Fate. A sign from the universe. They weren't *meant* to go to Laguna Beach. Why, of course they weren't, of COURSE, because they were meant to end up here instead! Pyros! New Mexico! Oh Joy, hark the heavens!

That night. The first one. The first of many. They'd finished their unassuming meal at Burger King and set off looking for a place to stay. Another luck of the draw, another arbitrary punch into the calculator to forever factor into the outcome of their lives: the only place open at that hour was L'Auberge de la Rose, a salmon-colored motel with green shutters and a broken-shell walkway.

On the way in (a hurried entry; it had begun to rain), Bonnie accidentally let the door swing shut on Jack's face. That was the first time she broke her nose. It was the first of three times, actually, but that was the one that permanently crooked it. Bent it, like the handle of a clay mug grabbed before drying.

Jack's initial enchantment with the wild-wild west puttered out quickly, even before she got depressed. This had something to do with the fact that they'd arrived in July – the hottest on record, in fact – so you couldn't so much as walk out the door without jackknifing in pain. The filthy heat had fucked everyone into a state of total lethargy, had fucked the earth itself into something wrinkled and hairless. Into something dead.

Dead. Death. Everywhere, death. It lived in the wilted C-slump of flower stems too tired, too weak, to maintain their posture; in the dry, arid soil that reeked of sweetness and rot. Withered clumps of grass. Tanking fruitflies. Flayed shoulders, mosquito-fleeced calves. The playgrounds were a billion degrees. The hotel's public pool had reached a boiling point. Those brave enough to venture outside – few and far between – carried water bottles like pistols, and wore sunscreen like a second skin.

In the early weeks, there were three places Jack had learned to seek reprieve.

The first – Room 211 itself, which was mostly empty, as Bonnie was out most days cleaning. Mornings were easy to flush away. Bonnie usually left her cigarettes and wine bottles lying around. Afternoons were more difficult to contend with. Jack was able to entertain herself better than most kids, but she was still a restless creature. She couldn't very well spend *all* day alone, pacing the same walls, dialing through radio channels.

The second place was the downtown movie theater. Sneaking in without a ticket was disappointingly easy, as the desk was only ever manned by a flippant girl named Mannon who spent all shift doing sudoku, or otherwise texting her boyfriend. He came in sometimes, this boyfriend of hers, and was by far the hottest boy Jack had ever seen up to that point. Stacked silver rings. Warrior-cut hair, the *Fight Club* special. By the last week of July, Jack had seen a total of eighteen movies (her favorite was *A Cinderella Story*, but she'd tell anyone it was the newest *Bourne* addition). She only stopped coming once Mannon started actively waiting for her

at the door, probably pissed that this ratty kid was making eyes at her boyfriend from the popcorn stand.

So, improvise. Jack's third and final spot in Pyros: *Devil's Throat*.

Devil's Throat was a well-kept secret, considering how valuable it really was. She'd found it one day meandering around the outskirts of town, chasing that endless tarmac highway in search of supplies for her statues. She'd gone farther than she'd meant to. So far, in fact, that when she turned around, Pyros was no more than a mottled blister bubbling up from the earth. Just teething skyscrapers and glinting metal. She stared and stared at it for a good long while. Wondered how the heck they'd even found it in the first place, how much more of her life would she'd spend there. How many more quarters you could put in a gumball machine before the thing ran out.

In a twist of cinematic timing, the sky had spoiled rotten not ten seconds later, and Jack had no choice but to duck into the nearest shelter. She was lucky to have found one at all – that lonely white chapel, whose sign was rusted beyond comprehension, and which was so dust-heavy that she must've sneezed four times before the door hit her rear. It was there that she spent the next two hours. Huddled, like a wet dog, in the pews while the thunder roared, and the walls shook. In the mouth of the storm, the chapel was a genuine kind of spooky. All yawning window eyes and broken-jaw furniture. Shadows bunched in the corners, so depthless they might've hidden cobwebs, might've hidden people.

The place seemed to have been left in a hurry, she noticed, and not touched in the decades since. The tarnished candelabras were overturned. The crucifix behind the altar was crooked. The marble statues – eyeless, punched-in, the cracks along pale lips and slender fingers looking something like varicose veins. Her only company (that she saw) were the giant moths that beat ragged wings to stay afloat. The singular bat that whorled around with every crack of thunder, only to nestle back into the same spot it had just left.

Nothing to be afraid of, she told herself. She was rather staunch about irrational fears, and – as far as she could tell – her only concerns now were staying dry and splinter-free. Only babies cried over the dark.

As she continued to survey her hideout, she realized it was something of a wonder that the building itself was still standing. The chapel was a house made of matches: fully wooden, perfect kindling for New Mexico's pyromaniac sun. Not that she need worry now, when it was raining enough to summon Noah's Ark.

The pews weren't very comfortable, but – somehow – Jack woke up an indeterminable amount of time later, feeling as though she'd slept for years. Sunlight was pouring in through the stained glass windows, so there was no way of knowing if it was still afternoon or the next day entirely. Oh boy. Hopefully not the latter, Bonnie'd freak.

She sat up slowly. Her neck and back hurt. There were splinters in her elbows.

Stepping outside, she was slapped in the face by *deja vu*. The same smells, the same soupy ground, the same Dawn-of-Earth sensation. Like the world born anew. She cracked her neck. Breathed in. From where in the sky the sun was sitting, she knew that it was still, in fact, the same day – so fickle was desert weather. Good. She had time.

What to do? Go back?

Not yet, she thought. Bonnie would still be out, for one. It was a Friday; she'd likely not be home until late, very late, well after the bar had wrung her thin and her mood had soured. Bonnie never returned from the bar in a good mood. Sometimes, she didn't return at all – not until the next morning, or afternoon, or evening. *211* would be just as lonely, just as isolating, as it had been this morning. The mere thought of it made Jack cramp with panic. Stiff pink drapes; dripping faucet; stripped mattress; her. Always her, just her. Her and her letters.

A little longer, then. Jack marched over marshy gypsum, past squishy shrubs and wriggling beetles. Not really headed anywhere in particular. Just – *headed*. She was enjoying not being in a rush. There was no need, especially now that the heat had receded some, especially knowing that nobody was expecting her to be anywhere anytime soon. Nobody was expecting her at all.

It was luck, and luck alone, that led her to the creek. She hadn't heard it. Hadn't seen it. Only ambled into it – really, *into* it – by accident, guided by the hand of fate over that tiny cliff's edge and into the warm spring below.

Devil's Throat, the tire read.

A misguiding name, she thought, ringing her slimy hair out over the grass. Very misguiding. For that name inspired thoughts of all things unpleasant: hot water, and waterbugs, and piss-shit-stinking mud. All those things were there, yes, but this place was also the closest thing she'd found to an oasis in all of Pyros.

Devil's Throat was the miraculous watering hole in a scooped-out African savannah. It was a creek, though vastly dissimilar to the one she and her friends had once haunted back in Texas. A lifetime ago now, it seemed. Nestled in an alcove of threadbare cottonwoods and soaptree yuccas, the water ran over a lip of sandstone, then cut a zigzag path through the soft silt below. Over stones that burbled it went, and, finally, into a murky green basin just a hundred meters away, where it reflected the tall grass and bushes that grew from its muddy bankside. An algae-reamed tire swing hung above its surface, the tire's rubber effaced with red-paint lettering.

This was a cretaceous place. Something thawed from amber. Husky with history, somewhere even dinosaurs and cavemen would look at home.

Close enough were the locals: colossal dragonflies, long-tailed salamanders, cauldron-bubbled toads and tar-black birds. The spring was rather teeming with life, actually. Everyone, together, languishing in the dappled shade. Jack included.

If she were to guess, she would also wager that there was a rattlesnake or two somewhere close by. She didn't mind spiders, could handle mosquitoes, had no qualms about birds or frogs or ants, but snakes were something to stay away from. A most rational thing to fear. She eyed the tall reeds warily. They were still; the breeze had long died. Still, she scooted back over her butt, drawing her knees closer to her chest.

She fucking hated snakes, actually.

Of course, even a bed of rattlesnakes wouldn't keep her away. This was the first exciting discovery she'd made in all of two months out west. Tuck tail *now*? Obviously not.

What was more – as far as she could tell, it was *hers*. Nobody else's. Nobody's. She, with few things to her name and fewer things to enjoy in life, had no intention of relinquishing it anytime soon. The glorious creek would stay a secret. Her oasis. It would be easier to find next time – she wouldn't fall in. All she had to do was find the white chapel, walk until she heard the thrum of life.

Jack would spend hours at the creek. Days. Enough time to tan and weather her skin into something hard and reptilian. She had turned the place into something of a fortress. Each trek began with a pitstop at the chapel, where she would collect scraps of wood and moth-eaten Bibles, and it was with this growing supply that she began to craft a home on stilts. This – a much larger-scale project, it felt like the perfect use of her sculpturing skills. More practical, too. She couldn't build freaks forever. If she were to spend hours here, hours under the sun, she'd need a roof. A home.

Okay, less of a home, more of a pavilion. Each fortress leg was exactly five Bibles high, each wall a hodgepodge of splintered wood and tree branches. She'd once brought a spare towel from the hotel, poached from an abandoned cart in the hallway, and it was with this that she fashioned the roof. There, now she could sit without burning. It was tiny, barely large enough to squat in, but it brought her immeasurable pride to look at. Not comfortable enough to sit in for long, but she eventually began to use it as an overgrown treasure chest. A place to hide things. Anything, things of minor value or no value at all. Turtle shells. Cactus needles. Jimson weed and marigolds. Things from the hotel, too: a pack of cigarettes, a couch-crack whiskey shooter. Puzzle boxes. Crayons. Spare clothes to change into after swinging into the pool. This-es and thats.

Devil's Throat became her second home. She dreaded the very moment the afternoon would curdle into early evening; that slight drop in temperature, the gray-purple hue that slowly spread out from the horizon like a bruise. The walk was far enough that she had to leave then, not a moment later, for being out so late on the road was treacherous. Mountain lions, coyotes, snakes. Your typical predators.

But others, too. Cars that would slow down if they noticed you. Strange men behind the wheel, eyes kindled with want, who would roll down windows. Make obscene gestures with

their hands. Honk. Yell. The one time Jack had pushed it *just* too late – just ten minutes over, really – a blue van had actually stopped in the middle of the highway and *reversed*. Thinking fast, she'd started throwing rocks and screaming, and the van had reluctantly moved along. Thank God for Bonnie, who had ingrained in her daughter's mind a sycophantic vigilance.

Speaking of her mother. She began to notice her daughter's absences, and soon. These were measured by sunburns and bleached coils of hair – Jack's head was now a shock of copper, several shades lighter than her usual reddish-brown – and, despite her best efforts to dispel suspicion, Bonnie's concern would not abate.

It culminated one soggy afternoon when Jack returned home with a scorpion sting to the ankle. (Her fault, really. She'd gotten too comfortable climbing the rocks. Spooked the poor creature.)

I looked it up on the computer, Jack had snapped, annoyed by Bonnie's shrieks. She was in a fair amount of pain, actually, but it wasn't like her mother was a doctor or anything. *Non-lethal species! It's fine–*

Are you trying to get yourself killed, you fucking moron, Bonnie had yelled.

Convinced her daughter was suicidal, Bonnie had forced Jack to stay home the next week while the wound healed. Over this time, Bonnie's concern had coagulated into something resembling guilt (am i a bad mom? you can be honest), which she tried to compensate for by spoiling Jack with lots of ice cream and pizza. Jack did her best to seem pleased by this. She probably didn't do a very good job. She hated every second of sitting around Room 211, shoveling more junk into her mouth, looking out the window with the kind of longing typically reserved for period-piece lovers. She'd strain her neck trying to spot the chapel in the distance, but they had a piss-poor view: only the overripe golf course and parking lot were visible.

It doesn't even hurt that bad, she'd grumble, five or six times a day. (It did. A lot.)

Liar, Bonnie would reply, smartly.

She hadn't taken Jack to the doctor, but she *had* caved and bought some OTC ointment from the local pharmacy. She'd been unconventionally fretful, Jack's mother. Fluffing and re-fluffing the couch support pillow throughout the day, replacing the icepack used for swelling every thirty minutes or so. She'd even taken the whole week off work. Any other time, Jack might've been touched by this. Instead, she was annoyed. She so often felt imprisoned by city limits; now, she was to be a prisoner in her own home?

Unfortunately, it was over this week-long suspension that a *third* storm hit. This was the Biggest and Baddest of them all, anxiously anticipated by news anchors and locals alike, but Jack most of all. It was the kind of storm that had shops shutting early – windows sealed with garage-like metal sheets, which echoed with a guillotine *clang* – and left the roads derelict. From her place by the window, Jack half-expected to see tumbleweeds gusting along, or vultures settling in on the trembling power lines.

Big one, eh? Bonnie asked, pouring dishwater wine into a mug.

Jack grunted. She was trying and failing to jam a toothbrush into a broken video game console for one of her Frankensteins. This one wasn't turning out so well. But then, they never did, not when she was worried about something. She could scarcely pry her eyes away from the window, which offered a grisly view of the molding sky and ribbons of dust that went spiraling through the air every few seconds. When the glass panes started rattling in place, she finally strode over and snapped the curtains shut. All she could do at this point was hope. Hope, and wait.

Her fortress would be fine, she assured herself. It wasn't some flimsy cardboard box. If that damned church was still standing, so could this.

Over at the coffee table, Bonnie also appeared distracted. She was leaning over her phone and tapping her foot on the floor. She'd been seeing a man named Beau lately – was probably awaiting his replying text. From the one time Jack had seen him leaving their room, he was young – fresh out of college, young – and had softer skin than a newborn baby. A rather fitting characterization for the first half of Bonnie's type. Young men, barely more than boys, with skinny frames and dopey eyes. When she'd run out of fresh meat, however, Bonnie's interests swung wildly to the other side of the pendulum: starchy old men (usually laborers – plumbers, construction workers, the like) with gray-to-white hair and calloused hands. Why she was completely disinterested in men her own age, Jack had no clue. She simply knew better than to ask questions. Strangely enough, her mother's tastes seemed rather consistent with who she was as a person. In a similar way, for instance, she never ate fruit that was perfectly ripe (too juicy, she claimed): instead, she preferred pieces that were either too young and firm, or otherwise slightly spoiled. Tangy and pliant to bite into.

Apparently, Beau wasn't texting back fast enough. Bonnie huffed, tossed her phone across the table, and brought her wine over to the bed, where Jack was curled up in the sheets.

Move your ass, she said.

Jack stuck out her tongue but did as asked. Her mother plopped down next to her, the mattress creaking below, and combed Jack's leg with cold feet. Jack squirmed away, cursing. A splotch of red wine splashed over the mug and onto the sheets. Jack scowled further; she'd just brought up the laundry that morning.

Oops, Bonnie said.

Jack turned her head. She was now even more annoyed with her mother. Her *captor*, it seemed. The scorpion sting hadn't taken more than two days to heal, but she'd still been detained the whole week. She'd taken a small victory in the number of letters she'd been able to send her father (three), but her restlessness had made them short and – bad, honestly. Not interesting at all to read. She wasn't a good writer when she was angry. Broke lots of pencils.

Stop being like that, Bonnie said, snapping her fingers in Jack's face.

Jack waved her away. Yanked the sheets close and brought them to her chin. *I don't want to talk to you.*

Her mother snorted. *I gathered that, you petty little shit. Have you finally gotten your period? Is that what's happening?*

No, Jack seethed. She resented that insult. *I haven't. I just don't feel like talking.*

Okay, fine. Well, share some of the blanket, it's freezing in here.

Jack held the sheets fast, refusing to relinquish even an inch of fabric. *Maybe because the heating is broken, it's freezing. Because this hotel room is shit.*

A beat passed. Room 211 would have been totally silent, were it not for the *tk-tk-tk* of an apple-sized moth in the kitchen, ramming its stupid skull into a light with martyrous fervor. Then, a stroke of thunder. Boom.

...Christ, okay, lots of big feelings, Bonnie said slowly, raising her eyebrows. In the dim lighting, her bubblegum hair looked nearly bioluminescent. She reached over and flicked the lamp on. *Is there something you'd like to say to me, little mutt?*

And you know what? Yes, Jack found, there was. She rolled over out of bed and held herself against the wall, rigid with ire. *I hate this place, you know. It's a shithole and I hate it. Ma, look.*

She held open her arms, gesturing to everything all at once.

The wallpaper, peeling in threads like a hangnail.

The dented TV antenna.

The limp-dick lightbulbs that hung from the ceiling, drawing all the moths and gnats out from their hiding places. The smelly rug; the drippy sink faucet; the closet door that just wouldn't shut, no matter how hard you slammed it.

Finally, she turned back to her mother, who was staring smack-jawed from the wine-stained bed, the one they had to share. *Happy, woman?*

Bonnie set her mug down on the radio table. The muscles in her face twitched and rippled, like she couldn't quite decide which expression to take. Finally, her jaw squared – a telltale sign of one thing: exasperation. *Yeah, fine. It's no fucking Ritz in here. But this is what I – me! the one making the money! – can afford. Maybe if you weren't so fuckin' determined to hate it, you wouldn't always look so constipated. It's not half as bad as you're making it out to be, kid! There's – there's a pool–*

Jack's neck prickled. *There was a dead bunny in there this morning!*

–and quiet neighbors–

Because they're all old, nobody here is my age and I have no friends–

–AND, most importantly, a roof over your ungrateful head. Food on the table. Running water. You ever think that the real problem is you, maybe? Just for a sec?

Jack felt like a cornered rat. She held herself against the wall, trying to control the tremors running up and down her legs. She drew breath like an arrow.

The real problem, she said, once the bow was taut enough, *is that you're never here. You're never, ever here. And neither is Dad. And neither is anybody.*

Bonnie looked like she'd been suckerpunched. Her mouth opened and closed, opened and closed. Silence. Behind the curtains, the window rattled again, quaking in its frame like a chilly skeleton.

...Bringing up Clay was a low blow. She shouldn't have done that. Hadn't planned it, at least. Trying to whisk the words away, she tried for a different approach, *I just – miss Texas*.

Bonnie wavered. Just slightly. She bit the inside of her cheek, looked up at the cowboy acrylic above their bed. ...*Yeah, Jackie. I know you do. But you're – you're like me, you know? An adapter. You'll get used to it out here. And I'm working on something right now, something big, to get us a place of our own. This – it's only an interim. You'll have your own bedroom soon enough.*

Jack could only sigh. She was sick of arguing. She hated arguing with her mother. It made her feel slimy, like crawling out of the creek.

C'mere, Bonnie said, opening her arms. And Jack went.

This spat had indeed dislodged a small thorn of the resentment Jack was feeling toward Bonnie. She was less upset with her mother – more embarrassed than anything, how childish her tantrum was, how outrageous – but the removal of this thorn proved to her the presence of many: she was so *angry*, angry at everything, angry all the time. And what they don't tell you about rage is that it is *heavy*. An anvil you lug around at all times. *Let it go*, you say. But letting it go would make all the work you'd done in lugging it around in the first place feel pointless. For those particularly prideful beings – like Jack, like her mother – letting it go would mean defeat.

So she stored it in her body, like a second skeleton. She was still angry when she woke up the next morning, carefully bundled up in her mother's tattooed arms like a baby. She was still angry when her mother – finally satisfied with the state of Jack's ankle – left for work, whatever job she had that day.

She was especially angry when she returned to Devil's Throat after lunch, only to see what she had known was inevitable: Her fortress had fully flushed away with the storm, no sign of it at all minus the slop of Bible psalms and crayons scattered across the muddy bankside. Hoping otherwise was foolish. She'd heard the thunder last night – like a drumset kicked down a flight of stairs. Heard the rain. Knew. *Knew*.

Still, the sight of it – or, perhaps, the lack thereof – was like a pure dagger to the heart. Jack collapsed against a splintered tree (its branches had blown clean off) and stared, haunted, at the one thing she truly cherished. Gone.

You can always rebuild, came a meek voice in her head.

Yes I know, she shot back. And she would. Obviously. She was just sad – saddened by the knowledge that she would have to, saddened further by the thought that she would likely have to redo it infinite more times – with every storm, probably. How pointless each attempt would now feel. Would she always have to keep rebuilding the same thing, over and over and over again, only into weaker and weaker iterations of itself?

Sadness, anger. Feeling both at once was exhausting.

That was about when the depression hit. When she stopped getting out of bed, stopped trekking out to the chapel. Stopped eating. When her mother got Well and Truly concerned, and committed her to Stollbery Summer Camp.

Her next letter to her father was another brief one. She hadn't had the heart to go on any longer, knowing that this would be just another unopened, unanswered envelope. Just more words to shout at the void. More paper wasted.

Dear Pa,

Salutations. How is Florida? I hope prison is treating you well.

I have something beguiling to tell you, even if I'm not very excited about it. Ma is sending me to summer camp! It's called Stollberry's. Have you heard of it? It is right near Albuquerque. It lasts for 2 weeks. I think, to be honest, that I would rather die.

Anyways, here's a drawing I drawed of a rinosoros.

Please write back soon.

Episcopally,
Your daughter Jack

CHAPTER THREE

Being nervous about camp was irrational. She decided to try for excitement instead. Key word was try. There wasn't much of that in her system, excitement, or at least she was missing the correct ingredients.

By the time fix-it camp rolled around, she had *almost* tricked herself into it. Were she better at pretending, maybe she would've even imagined it as a sort of vacation – the kind only rich kids ever took, kids so buttressed with luggage that they moved like lumbering flightless beetles. *Mother, did you pack my second hairbrush? Did you remember my teacups?*

It was hard to maintain the illusion, however, as that yellow school bus rumbled up the dust-spackled road of Mount Excellence. Mount Excellence was neither a mountain nor excellent; if anything, it was a perversely named hill — another “Like,” which Jack had anticipated but which still made her seethe. Mud-greased and ugly.

There were lots of trees, though. She could grant it that. There weren't many of those back home (did home mean Pyros now? did it have to?), so it was with a sense of sedated intrigue that Jack begrudgingly set aside her most recent bad sculpture and looked out the window. Occupying the seat next to her, a dried mud-ball with Q-tip legs and dimes for eyes wobbled over worn leather, imprisoned by the butt-shaped divot in which it sat. Unable to roll away for good.

The bus ground to a stop. Jack knew she was supposed to get up now, but she only sank down behind the seat in front of her, hoping – foolishly – that maybe the driver would forget his sole passenger and go back.

No, obviously.

Okay, the bus driver said. Her queue.

She didn't want to make him mad. Picked up her backpack – left the mud spider for him as a parting gift – and plunked down the stippled metal steps, *clang clang clang*, then crunch: gravel. She turned around desperately, but the driver (whose name was Hamish, she read) only winked at her. She had no idea what kind of secret message he was trying to convey with this wink. Maybe he was trying to cheer her up? No, she thought, if he was trying to do *that*, he would've taken her Back From Whence. But here she was, drinking in exhaust as the fat yellow thing waddled away, so this wink did not feel cheering, nor conspiratorial, only condescending. Something like, *See ya never kid, hope it doesn't suck too bad*. At least he'd given her a stick of gum for the ride.

At first glance, the camp was misleadingly mundane. Dark-slatted cabins wedged between tall firs; rickety lunch tables surrounding a snuffed firepit; green in abundance, green to the point of congestion. Shy ferns and puffing leaves and prickled bushes, sage and moss and seaweed and basil, like someone had parsed through every Crayola box, extracted every green crayon, and scratched them all to nubs. It all smelled very earthly and moist. Like the creek. Oh, the creek.

Hi. She turned; a squirrely girl with red-framed glasses and no shoes had snuck up behind her.

...Hi, she replied, cautiously. She didn't trust people with glasses. Or feet that tiny.

What's your name?

Jack. You?

Sherbert, Sherbert said. Her gaze caught on Jack's hair, and she cocked her head. Your hair is funny. It's shorter than most boys I know!

Jack reached up self-consciously. I'm not a boy. It's called a pixie-cut.

Hm. It's not very feminine, is it?

I don't give a shit if it's feminine or not.

Behind her lenses, Sherbert's eyes bulged. You'll get in trouble for using words like that around here. You're lucky I'm not a tattle-tail! Hey, you really are funny, aren't you? You look like a boy in your face, too, it's not just your hair. Like, your nose and everything.

Jack's nose was only a month healed from having a door smashed in on it. Forgive her if it looked wrong. She scratched at it, uncomfortable with all the attention she was suddenly receiving. I'm a goddamn girl. I don't know what to tell you.

Sherbert, now goaded into reproofing confidence, shook her head. Clucked like a disapproving chicken. Well, you should really try wearing some make up or something. I brought my older sister's mascara and blush if you'd like to try sometime.

What, Jack said, stupidly.

Sherbert snorted. Come on then. You're gonna make us miss dessert, and they're serving sundaes tonight!

To Jack's reluctant delight, she initially found camp to be not-so-terrible. For one, it really *was* nice to get away from the hotel. From her mother, whom she truly was no longer angry with, but who exhausted her all the same. Secondly – they were outside often, hiking through the sparse forest and looking for newts by the creek, or otherwise dancing to upbeat music, or coloring, and even the food wasn't bad. At least, it was better than what she got at home. The grilled cheeses were particularly good, and they always got dessert before bed. She especially liked the brownies. She'd never had real brownies before, not homemade ones anyway, which were flaky and pillowy and reminded her of sunsets. The ones Bonnie sometimes made by mixing box-mix and water were all unbreakable and evil, like Aunt Honey's brain tumor.

The Stollberry kids were a strange, assorted bunch. Most of them hailed from the nearest town – St. Bart's, which you could see from high-up tree branches, and which looked like Pyros' grubbier twin. Like her, many were impoverished. Quiet, too. She could always recognize her kin: they had a shell-shocked look to them, like everything they saw was frightening and alien. The clothes they wore were too-big, too-small, too old. They had scraped-up knees. Wore shoes with paper-thin soles. Always grabbed second helpings during meals, and ate them without utensils.

Jack hated them. She hated being near them. She hated that she could smell them. Most of all, she hated that she *was* one of them.

That was most of the brood, anyway. A slightly smaller portion were the medium-income kids, who mostly only ever hung around each other, and who you could always tell were well-fed and came from loving families. They were nice, mostly. Textbook normal.

Rarest of all – how had they ended up *there*, of all places, was still a mystery to Jack – were the truly wealthy children. This was a population of four, of which Jack only knew one's name: Peony Dovetail, a stereotypical pageant girl with flouncy curls and diamond earrings that Jack coveted like a greedy dragon. (She would still deny her own materialism – she just liked how sparkly they were.) As for the others, who cared? They were rich. They had each other. They were here, at Stollberry's, for who-the-fuck-knows-why, and they absolutely weren't Jack's problem. They kept to themselves, like the middle-class kids did, but with an even higher degree of reservation, as if afraid that mere eye contact with Jack's clan – *stray dogs*, she'd heard Peony call them – would make them ill. Quiet. Stingy. Pretty.

Those were the kids. The camp counsellors, by contrast, were a trifecta of zealousness. Solace, whom Jack liked; Sun, whom Jack hated; Blythe, whom Jack felt mostly indifferent to. They bobbed from camper to camper like bees in the garden, poking their heads in to see if anyone needed cheering up or a shoulder to cry on, sprinkling their magic words of comfort over everyone like drifting bits of pollen. Half of the kids avoided them like the plague. The other half flocked to them like sheep. Jack developed a different approach. She began spying on them from behind trees and bushes, was *fascinated* by them, because there was obvious drama there: Solace and Blythe were an item, and Sun was viciously jealous. They were like her makeshift soap opera. One night when she was spying, she even saw Solace and Sun kiss after smoking weed in the woods, and Blythe still didn't know about that, and Solace was a pompous little shit for kissing them both, but Jack thought he was cute so she couldn't even blame either of them, really, because his hair was blonde and shaggy like a surfer's, and he had great shoulders. He was a good kisser, she could tell. Used a lot of tongue. Only confident kissers – *experienced* kissers – use that much tongue.

Jack had never given much thought to kissing before camp. She knew her mother liked doing it. Bonnie was *always* kissing people. She knew, logically, that it was popular for a reason. Still, she couldn't imagine what was so fun about smearing your wet mouth against someone else's wet mouth, gnashing tongues and teeth like a couple of feeding birds. Your mouth: where you chewed food and expelled vomit. What was so fun about trading those tastes?

But watching Solace and Blythe, or Solace and Sun, Jack gradually began to understand the appeal. She knew, objectively, that she was being a freak – spying from the wombs of prickly bushes, holding her breath as the hours ticked by – but she couldn't bring herself to stop. She was obsessed with them. Addicted to them. All three. Their twisted drama. Their good looks (all of them were, in her opinion, uncommonly attractive). Their passion and hatred and

jealousy, all tangled up like yarn. They were gods to her; untouchable, golden; trading kisses like currency upon a clouded dais. Once, really late at night – some soft-shelled hour when the entire forest felt ripe and raw – she even heard the strangest words: *I Love You*.

Just a low, kiss-smudged whisper. She didn't know who said them. Didn't even know if there was a reply. But they pierced some part of her, some part she thought was unbreakable. Like a virgin drug user jumping straight to heroin. *I Love You*, say it again, *I Love You*, please say it again, *I Love You I Love You I Love You*. But they never did.

Years later, on the really bad nights, she'd try to pull that memory to the forefront of her mind. Would close her eyes, waiting for whatever bad thing was happening to pass, and pretend they were meant for her. *I love you, Jack*.

On the fourth night of summer camp, a muggy Thursday pockmarked with fireflies and campfire smoke, Jack got lost walking back from Hookup Tree.

This was not her fault. She usually followed them – Solace and whichever girl he was in the mood for that night – from a predatory distance, ambling after peals of laughter and sneaky jokes with an injured-animal lope. But the lovers (Sun, tonight) had taken an unexpected detour, perhaps even to avoid Blythe, and Jack was left tracing circles around the same rocks and trees for two hours straight. By the fifth time she stumbled upon the same horseshoe log, she had started to panic. Would anyone even think to look for her? Or would she just become one of those kids who went missing in the woods, only for the police to find a bear-claw-shredded T-shirt scrap two weeks later? Forget bears. How many snakes were out here?

Jack seldom cried – hadn't, even, when she had pierced her own eyebrow with a sewing needle a few years later – but she suddenly found herself bawling. This made it even harder to see where she was going, to distinguish trees or rocks or bushes from the clotted darkness before her, and it resulted in her tripping over a mangled root and landing on her stomach. Which only made her cry *harder*. Then harder still. Until her wails thinned into breathy whines, and the dry dirt below her had turned into mud. This forest wasn't dense enough to smother her sounds, and she was mildly horrified by the way they expanded and warped, cradled outward by empty space. They sounded like keening wolf cries. And there was she, the wolf – lying on a slab of moonlight, hunched and shaking. Jaws clacking like she was working through a leftover taft of meat.

Ten minutes, thirty, an hour. Nobody was coming. Nobody even knew she was out of bed. Finally, Jack found herself overwhelmed for a different reason – disgust. At her own childish incompetence. In her opinion, incompetency was the worst vice. So she corked her fizzing panic, trapped it back in that constipated vessel of her heart. Rose to her feet. Onwards, upwards, whatever.

Her eyes had somewhat dialed into the dark by that point. She could just make out the borders of trees and bushes, ferns and rocks – enough that they no longer looked like beckoning

monsters, at least. Just what they were. Trees and bushes, ferns and rocks. Nothing too terrifying about those?

Well, she thought, bracing herself. *I'm bound to run out of woods to walk in at some point.*

She picked a direction and set off. At first, her heart kept on with its erratic pace, *thumpbumpthump*, the frightful child inside of her still prattling on about snakes and werewolves and bears.

Her mother was going to feel very sorry for ever sending her here, she thought. Somewhat triumphantly. But then less so, because she had very little room to think or feel anything at all – all her focus went to her senses. Had to go there.

For one, it was dark. So dark. A forceful kind of dark – more than the mere absence of light, but its own separate entity. Something aggressive that ate up space.

So she clung to the light instead – or what remained of it, anyway. What was allowed to enter. The moonlight skewering the tree canopy came down in spears, and those pieces of it that found the forest floor were laid in hieroglyphic arrays. She played hopscotch in those puddles of white, enjoying the crisp *snaps* that sounded whenever she landed on dry leaves or twigs. Gradually, that sharp crescendo of fear dulled into a quiet thrum of anxiety. Only as distracting, as aggravating, as a pesky child crying in the supermarket.

In tune with nature or whatever the hell, her other senses found themselves pleased and busy. The sweet smell of jasmine. The buzz of cicadas, chattering as if over a coffee table. The occasional blip of a firefly. The dizzying blue-black sky — deeper than open ocean, or at least she presumed so — and its strange symmetry with the shadowed realm below. Everything was so *still*. It was a refreshing interim, honestly, from the hustle-bustle of camp activities, from the loud cabins and campfire songs. She didn't have to think about anything except where she was going. She didn't have to talk to anyone. Just walk. It was the same sort of single-mindedness she found at Devil's Throat, curled up in her fortress with the water burbling below.

Calm. You are calm, we are calm. The forest, too, calm.

Well. That is, until it was interrupted by a swinging fist.