

e. lockhart

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



we
felt
apart

A we were liars NOVEL

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RETURN TO THE WORLD OF THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
SENSATIONS *WE WERE LIARS* AND *FAMILY OF LIARS*.

same summer. new liars.

The invitation arrives out of the blue.

In it, Matilda discovers a father she's never met. Kingsley Cello is a visionary, a reclusive artist. And when he asks her to spend the summer at his seaside home, Hidden Beach, Matilda expects to find a part of herself she's never fully understood.

Instead, she finds Meer, her long-lost, open-hearted brother; Brock, a former child star battling demons; and brooding, wild Tatum, who just wants her to leave their crumbling sanctuary.

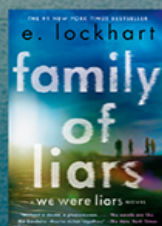
With Kingsley nowhere to be seen, Matilda must delve into the twisted heart of Hidden Beach to uncover the answers she's desperately craving. But secrets run thicker than blood, and blood runs like seawater.

And everyone here is lying.



"Compulsively readable to the very last page."

—Jennifer Lynn Barnes, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Inheritance Games*

DON'T
MISS:







e. lockhart is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *We Were Liars* and *Family of Liars*. *We Were Liars* is also an original series on Prime Video. Her other books include *Again Again*, *Genuine Fraud*, and *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks*. She has been a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the National Book Award and an honoree for the Printz Award. She has a PhD in English literature from Columbia University.

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The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks

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Dear Reader,

We Fell Apart is a stand-alone story. It can be read and completely understood on its own.

It is, however, set in the same world as my novels *We Were Liars* and *Family of Liars*. There are some spoilers for those books in here.

I wrote this book with love, gasoline, and peppermint—for you. I owe you so much.

E. Lockhart

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Part One

Matilda

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1

It was a bad place to fall in love.

On the property called Hidden Beach, a wooden castle stood on a monstrous cliff. It was a place of

barbecues, sunblock, acoustic guitars, and midnight swims.

Oil paint, intrusive briars. Hungry dogs.

Drawings on skin, terrible lies, and

long afternoons at the edge of the sea.

The three boys who lived in the castle followed strange rules, fended for themselves, and became the whole world to each other, keeping their secrets locked in a tower. They were prisoners in an endless idyll.

There was something rotten there, like a bowl of beautiful berries gone putrid in the heat.

I was eighteen, a cold cup of tea, unwanted.

I had an arsenal of weapons.

I was the bringer of madness.

When he first began building the castle on the cliff, my father's friends traveled to see him. People slept in half-constructed towers and outbuildings. They even slept in tents on the lawn. They cooked clams in bonfires on the beach and threw themselves into the ocean waves on hungover mornings. The idea was that they'd live apart from the rest of the world, free of obligations and conventional beliefs.

Some of those friends didn't leave for years. They took up lives in the towers and the pool house. They played guitar, wrote poetry, took photographs, and wove tapestries. They took drugs and raised children.

And they modeled for my father. He spent his days with paintbrush in hand, capturing the faces and bodies of his friends, the frenzy of the sea at his feet.

That's all over now.

2

My name is Matilda Avalon Klein. I am the only child of Isadora Hirschel Klein.

My mother escaped her parents pretty young. They told her she was worthless and she disagreed. She spoke to them as little as possible when they were alive. It was better to keep away, and now they're gone.

She and I have always been a family of two.

If I asked about a dad, Isadora told me we were better off without him and left it at that. The details never seemed important.

Then, midway through the summer after I graduated high school, my father introduces himself by email:

Matilda,

This is Kingsley Cello. I am an artist. I am your father.

I know I have never been in your life, but I'd like to change that.

There is a painting I want to give you. Please come see me at Hidden Beach for a visit.

I never even knew my father's name until today. And maybe I should hate this guy Kingsley for never being around, for whatever he did to Isadora. But instead, his stilted note makes the world begin to hum.

Think of it like: You unlock a secret level you never even imagined was in a game. It's an invitation to go in an unexpected direction. Today, I am invited to a hidden beach. Waiting there for me is the father I never thought I'd meet.

When I search for him online, I realize the level I've unlocked is massive. Kingsley Cello is just about as famous as a living painter gets. There are hundreds of hits: articles in fancy-sounding art magazines and reviews of solo exhibits at major museums.

Here are questions the search engine pops up when I look for his name:

What is Kingsley Cello best known for? Controversial neoclassical paintings. (I have no clue what that even means.)

What is important about Kingsley Cello? The artist's dark vision and fairy tale interpretations have influenced many other artists.

What was the scandal about Kingsley Cello? In his 2012 Whitney Museum show, Cello's extremely violent painting, *Prince of Denmark*, enraged critics.

Where does Kingsley Cello live? The reclusive artist does not disclose his place of residence.

I search *dollar value of Kingsley Cello paintings*.

They average two million dollars.

3

I text my mother: I got this email from Kingsley Cello.

She texts back right away: Hm.

I wait, but she doesn't write more. Hm what? I ask, after a few minutes.

Not a great guy.

What kind of not great? I press.

Just not. Why is he reaching out?

What's he like?

Strange, she writes. Obsessive. Wounded.

He's my father, I write back.

No answer from Isadora.

Is he my father? I write. He says he's my father.

No answer.

HELLO IS HE MY FATHER BECAUSE HE SAYS HE IS.

Hold on, she texts. I'm at a fruit stand.

YOUR FRUIT IS NOT IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW JUST TYPE YES OR NO.

Yes. Then she adds another text: I didn't think he knew where I was. And another. Did he ask about me?

I ignore her and read some more about Kingsley online. The art magazine articles are filled with phrases like *grandly sordid imagination* and *the enfant terrible of twenty-first-century neoclassicism*. The story from Wikipedia is that Cello burst onto the art scene in what was probably his late twenties. (He gives different birth dates to nearly every interviewer.) He never admits to attending art school and first attracted attention with a New York pop-up exhibition in a warehouse space rented for him by an anonymous patron.

His early paintings were considered audacious. They show women (and occasionally men) laughing. Some are in baths or showers. Some are watching television or cooking dinner or doing some other mundane activity. None of them wear clothes.

The articles chronicle his rise to fame as a critical darling, but later he became a controversial figure. He started making work with classical literature and fairy tale references. Some people say Kingsley "eroticizes suffering" and others think his work is "juvenile and needlessly violent."

He never brings journalists to his studio and seems to do all his interviews sitting on park benches in different cities, mostly managing not to reveal much about himself at all. He says he's American but was raised in Italy by a strict and horrific grandmother. He also says that he grew up in a hardscrabble town in the Midwest.

And that he spent his youth in a Swedish tuberculosis sanatorium.

And that he was raised by queer fishermen in Alaska.

I flip through some of his most famous paintings online. Turbulent seas, burned forests, monsters, nudes, people in contemporary clothing confronting fairy tale creatures, castles crumbling, animals transforming into people. They're beautiful and disturbing at the same time.

Then I'm looking at a painting of my mother.

Persephone Escapes the Underworld shows

a castle built of stone.

It is burning.

Doesn't matter that stone doesn't burn. It burns anyway.

From the windows at the top, black smoke pours.

The drawbridge is in flames, as well.

Kingsley has painted Isadora Hirschel Klein
as Persephone, wife of Hades.

In Greek mythology, Hades was lord of the underworld. But Persephone never wanted to live down there with him. She wanted to breathe a different air.

My mother wears a white slip of
see-through fabric.

We look at her through a
haze of smoke that billows into the foreground.

She doubles over with fatigue, but her face is alight with laughter, as if she's marveling at her own
escape.

The phone rings in my hand and I startle.

My mom very rarely calls me. She lives in Mexico City. "Why are you the mostly naked runaway queen of the underworld?" I bark, without saying hello.

"What did Kingsley want?" she shoots back.

"He invited me to visit. He's giving me a painting."

"Giving you a painting? God, they're worth a ton."

"I won't sell it, so it doesn't matter."

"Why not? You should definitely sell it."

"Because it would be the only thing I have in the world from my father. Did you give him my email?"

"I haven't heard from Kingsley since before you were born."

“Hm.”

“Really.”

“So how is that painting of you—*Persephone*—how is that even a thing that exists?” I ask.

“I modeled for him,” she says. “I was in college.”

“It’s a famous piece of art, though. Right? The internet thinks it’s famous.”

“Um-hm.”

“So you just never told me? Or mentioned it in front of me?”

“I didn’t even want you to know he was your father. I don’t like to talk about Kingsley Cello. You know our family is just the two of us.”

I can hardly believe she’s saying “just the two of us” when she lives in Mexico City and I live in LA, but I don’t want to fight with her. She’s already made her choice. “It’s in the Saint Louis Museum of Art,” I say.

“I know. Listen, I don’t think you should visit him. He’s a difficult person. Is he sending you a plane ticket?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t think so.”

“How did he find you?”

“I asked *you* that. But it’s MatildaAvalonKlein at gmail. He probably just guessed.”

She clucks her tongue. “You’re not some plaything he can just pick up when he decides he’s bored.”

“Please. Will you just tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“What happened with you and Kingsley.”

5

Isadora was nineteen when she met my father. And he was forty-three. Or maybe he was even older. She isn’t certain.

She was a student at Fordham University in New York. She made money posing for classes at the Cooper Union art school, downtown. Kingsley was a friend of the painting teacher. One evening, he dropped in at the end of class. The students clustered around the famous man, asking questions, eager to bask in his light.

Kingsley didn't see my mother nude, but he did see fifteen paintings of her around the room in various stages of completion. As she was putting on her coat, he told her he could make a "real painting" of her, if she was willing.

She was. She tells me it was because she was broke. But I think she liked the idea of being immortalized, liked being worth this great man's attention. Her beauty interested a man who famously specialized in beauty.

She went to his studio, which was in a warehouse neighborhood in Brooklyn. Upstairs was a loft apartment where Kingsley lived in haphazard splendor. Isadora had imagined he'd pay her for posing, but money was never discussed. Instead, she moved in with him for three months and shared his bed. She found herself pregnant several days after he told her to pack her things.

Insert angry phone calls, hateful arguments, and the revelation that Kingsley was seeing another woman. He refused to help with the pregnancy or the baby, and before I was even born, Kingsley had disappeared from that Williamsburg loft.

He was impossible to find. Isadora never heard from him again. She sent a birth announcement to his old address.

She moved back home with her parents temporarily, but the Kleins told her she was a stupid, lazy dropout and unfit to be a mother, so Isadora moved out to live with another single mom and share childcare. Soon after that, she met a different artist—a sculptor this time. We moved to Santa Fe to live with him.

Later my mother learned that Kingsley's painting of her, *Persephone Escapes the Underworld*, sold for upwards of four million dollars to a private collector who eventually donated it to that museum in St. Louis. It's now used to advertise their twenty-first-century art collection.

She never made a penny from it.

6

I haven't explained why I don't live with my mother anymore. It's because she's a muse. Or you could say, a groupie. That's her calling.

Yes, she baked cookies and taught me to swim and took me for doctors' checkups.

She tucked me into bed and drove me to school.

But she doesn't really like being a mother.

Even at thirty-eight, Isadora looks like a tree nymph—earthy and feral and somewhat magical. She's petite, with strong features and wild black curls. We look alike, if you describe us only as five foot two with lots of dark hair and big eyes.

But Isadora looks romantic. Creative men who like to feel strong and vital adore her. And she adores them.

She has a remarkable ability to charm people who are more sophisticated or better educated than she is. She never acts meek, never apologizes, and always follows her impulses. To Isadora, all her whims are valid. She puts herself first because no one else ever put her first, when she was young.

I admire her for all that, but my skin crawls at the way she glows in the light of a new man's validation.

As I grew up, she was a muse (or lover, or companion) to a long series of male artists, of which my father appears to have been the first. He's the only one I didn't meet. Until I was three, we lived in a Santa Fe art studio with that sculptor. I slept on a mattress on the floor, surrounded by aloe vera plants.

Then Isadora left the sculptor for a video artist who was documenting people who decorate their cars. We lived with him until she found someone else. And then someone else.

When I was six, Isadora packed two small suitcases and took us to Rome. There, she was the lover of a famous installation artist. We lived with him in a rented villa. I ate spaghetti every night and slept under a canopy.

A few months later, just as I began to understand Italian, the artist abandoned us. Isadora and I woke up one morning to find ourselves alone. Her boyfriend and his entourage had left in the night. No message.

My mother had zero cash, no work permit, and a maxed-out credit card. We lived off what was left in the fridge while the villa's owner tried to force us to leave. We were there for several weeks. We got down to eating pickles and stale crackers.

We were eventually rescued because Isadora put on her prettiest dress and went to a gallery opening, where she met an aging ceramicist whose work was displayed in New York's Museum of Modern Art. He was English, and he grandly whisked us off to a thatched-roof cottage he owned in his home country. We lived with him until Isadora attached herself to a singer-songwriter who was big on the folk music circuit.

A year after that, we were living with his rival.

We lived with (let me count them) seven other men, and I had seven other schools or remote-school situations. At some point, Isadora got me a handheld gaming console. And later, an iPhone. Even though I was limited to small screens, games became everything to me—probably the same way books become everything for readers. The games were friends I could rely on. There was escapism in the story worlds, but more important was the feeling of being in a flow—surfing subway cars or running through a temple. The jolt of solving a puzzle. The release of vanquishing enemies. The buzz of being good at something.

Saar Adler was my mother's second-to-most-recent boyfriend. When we met him, Isadora was thirty-five and I was fifteen. Saar had won an Oscar at age twenty-seven in a supporting part, playing a squirmy, anxiety-ridden gangster in a movie full of dark cinematography and brutal violence. But he hadn't become a star after that. He isn't a typically handsome actor. He's short and kinda hairy, a white guy with five-o'clock shadow and a hangdog look. He ended up playing small roles: criminals and sidekicks, mostly. He got married and later divorced. No kids.

Three years before we met him, Saar got hired last minute on a TV show, substituting for a lead actor who got injured on the second day of filming. When *Highly Classified* became a hit, Saar found himself at thirty-eight with a regular gig. He plays a scrappy criminal turned elite CIA operative, and the job has enabled him to buy a nice car and a two-bedroom bungalow in Venice Beach, California. The bungalow is small, but it's newly renovated and has a plunge pool.

Saar was an artist of a whole different kind, said my mom. He'd been to Juilliard. He'd won that Oscar. She felt his TV show was beneath him and that he was on the verge of becoming a film star of major proportions. But Saar was happy in his two-bedroom bungalow. After having so little acting work for so many years, he felt seriously lucky to have this regular show. He wasn't aggressive or driven, like his character. He had anxiety, which he treated with medication and a weekly therapy appointment. In the mornings, he worked out for ninety minutes. In the evenings, he memorized lines. On weekends, he slept late, made vegetable omelets, played video games, and went to dinner with friends.

That was it. Saar wasn't much caught up in the passion of creation. He was no mysterious visionary, no international sensation or enfant terrible of twentieth-century neoclassicism. He was a television actor who was happy to be settled down in sunny California with his girl and her kid.

One night, Saar left a dinner party early. He often had to wake up at five a.m. for all that exercise before work. My mother stayed.

At the party was an American sculptor who lived in Mexico City. Isadora slept over with the sculptor in his hotel that night, and a week later she was invited to follow him to Mexico and live with him there.

Same old story. The only difference was that this time, I had just turned eighteen. I was a senior in high school and a legal adult.

I refused to go with her. I had a boyfriend, Luca, and with Luca came a group of friends I really liked—bright, talkative people who had parties and played in bands. Luca dreamed of making explosive, edgy movies, like Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino. His low chuckle when he thought something was funny made my stomach flip, it was so sweet. When he first asked if he could kiss me, he bit his lip and looked at the floor like he thought I'd say no. But of course I just kissed him.

After that, Luca and Matilda were in the sunny haze of
making each other laugh,
riding down the freeway in his car, and
losing track of whatever the teachers were saying in assemblies,
so intent we were on the feel
of one another's skin,

palm against palm.

I felt like I might be in love with him. And he might be in love with me. I didn't know for sure, but I wanted to find out.

It felt important to see what might happen between the two of us.

Also, I was applying to colleges that offered video game design programs, and I wanted to visit some of them. Going to Mexico City with Isadora would make that impossible.

Saar told me I was welcome to finish out my senior year living with him. He liked having a kid around, since he didn't have any himself. And I liked living at Saar's. He was kind. He had the plunge pool, a fridge full of food, and that huge game console.

So my mother left.

7

That happened in November. Once Isadora was gone, I felt a rush of anger at her. At the way we'd always lived. I buzzed with axe-throwing rage at my itinerant childhood,

at not mattering enough for Isadora to want to stay,

at patterns that kept repeating like there was no way to ever stop them.

I wasn't surprised she wanted to move on with a different guy. When had she ever done anything else? But I was mad that she actually went, when she'd watched me begin to care about our life in California, begin to care about Saar and Venice Beach. She'd seen me fall for Luca and make all those friends. My heart had opened right in front of her. And she still forced me to choose between her and everything else that mattered to me.

Saar was a hot tangle of misery. He'd been devoted to Isadora and imagined he was a safe harbor for this untamed, magical woman. He thought the two of them would get married. When he left that dinner party, Saar had kissed Isadora good night, happy and trusting, with no inkling that she'd stop loving him by morning.

Now he brought home tall chocolate cakes and ate a large piece every day after dinner, even though he normally watched his diet very carefully.

He'd sit on the couch, playing video games, unshaven and wearing a pair of very old, very unattractive Juilliard sweatpants.

Still, he didn't drink too much. Or do any drugs. He never missed his ninety minutes of exercise. Every weekday, he went to work. He memorized his lines and asked me what groceries I'd like to have in the house.

Saar was a very responsible person.

Isadora never asked about him, though she texted me pretty often. She told me she was probably always meant to live in Mexico City. *I feel truly alive for the first time!* she wrote. She called me sometimes, too—but not on a regular schedule. Usually, she rang while I was in school and couldn't pick up.

Each week she was gone, I felt I knew my mother less. She was on a boat speeding out into the ocean. Smaller and smaller, she was disappearing.

Soon I'd stop being able to see her at all.

During the winter holidays, I celebrated Hanukkah with Saar's family in a small Oregon town. He bought my plane tickets. By the end of January, I had written all my college essays and turned my applications in.

In the evenings Saar and I ate dinner in front of his big screen. The meal was usually lean protein and salad, and the games were usually first-person and violent (though not always): *Grand Theft Auto*, *Luigi's Haunted Mansion*, *Arkham City*, *Red Dead Redemption*. Around when we finished *Luigi's Mansion*, he started dating again. First there was Nicki, a makeup artist. After her, Serena, who is a creative writing professor at UCLA.

In April, I get into UC Irvine. It has affordable in-state tuition and a program in game design. Saar buys me a sweatshirt with the college logo and helps me apply for student housing. I fill out financial aid forms explaining that I don't live with a parent anymore and get a job behind the counter at a coffee shop. I plan to work there full-time until school starts.

I am coping.

I am fine.

I'm raging and bereft—but I'm a responsible person, too.

I do my homework and unload the dishwasher and try to be an adult, even though I feel like a lost little girl.

Then Luca breaks up with me.

8

We are in his car on the way to a party. Luca is driving and I am talking about this game I've started playing called *Killer Odyssey*—what I think of it, and how I would have made it different if I'd built it. I like the sound design. I'm trying to figure out what makes an effective soundscape for a game, because it's not just the music that's important. It's the bounce noises, the bangs, the swish of a weapon through the air.

I dig my sketchbook out of my backpack. It's a graph-paper notebook where I write down ideas and make sketches for levels. I talk as I draw, with my feet on Luca's dashboard. "Instead of Odysseus killing the Cyclops monster by stabbing it through its single eye, which is how you beat the level," I say, "it would be cool if you could actually pop the Cyclops eyeball *out* of the monster's head and then use it as a tool. The eyeball could let you see around corners, maybe. Or you could throw it in the air to get a bird's-eye view of the game map that you couldn't get any other way, like to see shortcuts. Or maybe it could be an exploding eyeball, or a poison-gas eyeball. How would you want to use an eyeball weapon? Like, imagine it's a very ginormous eyeball."

I'm drawing eyeball weapons in my notebook as I talk, and Luca is grunting back at me in what I think is an appreciative way, when I realize he has parked the car.

I turn to look at him. "Are we there?"

"You should hear yourself, Matilda."

"Huh?" Honestly, I think he's going to tell me I'm smart.

"You're just—you're a lot."

"Yeah. But that's what you like about me." I say it confidently, but now I'm sinking inside.

Luca sighs. He taps his strong, beautiful hands on the wheel. "We should break up."

"What?"

“You’re kind of obsessive,” he says. His profile is silhouetted by the streetlight. It seems very possible he’s going to stop talking any second and reach for my neck, pressing his pillowy lips against mine. “Like with the gaming. And being angry at your mom. And you talk a lot. It’s hard to take.”

Suddenly, I can see all the signs I’ve missed.

He doesn’t look at me unless he wants to hook up.

He runs late.

He doesn’t ask me questions.

He’s slow to text back.

Luca is tired of me, the way my mom got tired of Saar. The way my mom gets tired of everyone.

He goes on explaining while I try not to cry. I concentrate on twisting the ends of my hair in my fingers.

I’m too needy, too driven, he says. My face is always in my sketchbook; it’s weird. He doesn’t see why I always have to have an opinion on every little thing. My feelings are on the surface all the time. I’m saying more than anyone wants to hear.

“Okay,” I interrupt. “I get that you don’t like me anymore. I have really, completely understood that point.”

Then Luca says we’re late to this party, so we should probably go inside. Our friends are waiting for us. “Okay?”

No, it’s not okay. I am no way in the universe going to a party right now. He has to take me home.

Luca says no, because people are expecting him, inside.

That’s when I snap. I tell him he’s a bad listener. He isn’t smart enough for me. And I have been letting him win at video games because he sulks like a baby when I beat him.

He’s a weird kisser sometimes. In a bad way. He never tries hard at anything because he thinks it’s uncool to try too hard, to want something, to put effort in—but he’s wrong. Being scared of trying just makes him weak. I am a strategist and a contender and a big thinker and he is a self-sabotaging slacker boy who peaked in high school.

Those things are true. But the truth is, I adore Luca anyway. None of it mattered till he broke up with me. I'm just defending myself.

Luca bangs out of the car and leaves me there. I call for him to come back, but he heads into the party without even turning around.

I sit in his car. Crying.

With the key fob.

I can't think of a single friend at this party who would take me home if I asked, and I can't spare the money for a car service when the travel time will be nearly an hour. So I slide over to the other seat.

I drive Luca's car home.

I leave it parked near Saar's bungalow, key inside.

When I wake the next morning, Luca has picked it up. There is a string of furious texts on my phone.

I don't answer them.

After that, our friends cut their ties to me. They've known Luca longer. They like him better. Plus, he convinces them I'm creepy, I'm nerdy, I'm *off*, somehow. I stole his car.

From then on, I eat lunch on my own and don't hang out with anyone after school. I stop being invited to parties.

I am completely unmoored. No friends, no boyfriend, no family, no mother.

No reason to be anywhere, at all.

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Part Two

Martha's Vineyard

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Matilda,

Hidden Beach is on South Road outside West Tisbury on Martha's Vineyard. After the fourth mailbox past the strawberry, walk to the driveway with my name.

Don't be afraid of glum. See you soon!

There are four strange things about Kingsley's second email, which arrives the day after I answer his first.

One: No normal street address.

Two: What strawberry?

Three: What glum?

Four: He's letting me buy my own plane ticket, even though I'm his child and he's a famous painter.

"The first three strange things are cool," says Saar. "But the fourth one is terrible. Maybe your mom is right about this guy."

"I don't even *know* Kingsley," I say. We're in the kitchen. Saar is trying to figure out the instructions for an espresso machine he just bought. "It's weird to expect someone you've never met to pay for things," I add.

Saar hits *grind* on the machine and it makes a loud buzzing noise. When it stops, he takes a minute to look at the owner's manual. "I know people who are loaded who never pick up the check for things," he says, flipping a page. "And those people *always* turn out to be weasels, somewhere along the line." He tamps down the ground coffee and sets the machine up to brew. "Let me pay for your flight."

"I have money saved," I tell him. "You don't have to."

"I know I don't. But I can afford it, you pipsqueak," he says. "You should save your cash. Don't make it weird." He hands me a cup of espresso. "Taste this. Any good?"

I swallow down the awkwardness of it all, tell Saar the espresso is delicious, and let him buy the ticket.

I have been traveling for almost twenty-four hours. I've had a mocha, a Starbucks pumpkin loaf, four Diet Cokes, and three mini bags of Doritos—but nothing else to eat. My phone is almost without charge, and my portable charger likewise. I've been on a flight, then another flight, and finally a plane that seats only eight. It's so small that my knees touch the back of the pilot's seat.

Below us stretches the island of Martha's Vineyard, mostly green. It's edged in sandy beaches and rocky shores, dotted with lakes and curlicue inlets.

Kingsley Cello is on this island.

Why is he willing, after so many years of absence, to fill the blank space I have labeled *Father*? Will he look at me with a light in his eyes, like a father looks at his kid?

Maybe we'll drink mugs of tea late in the evening or walk by the ocean, talking about video games and art. He'll show me his painting studio and ask to see my game sketchbook. Even if it takes a long time to get to know each other, even if it's awkward at first, Kingsley could be the person I am missing. The person I thought Luca might be. The person my mother never has been, who wants to understand the inside of my mind. Maybe in knowing him, not just a father but a great artist, I will somehow step into myself. Into my powers. I'll no longer be lost.

I am sweating in my squashed plane seat. The pilot wears thick headphones, but for the passengers, the noise is constant and loud. We arc over the lush green of the island and my stomach lurches.

By the time the tiny plane lands, I'm bloated and hot. No, I'm cold. I make it to the airport bathroom and kneel on the grungy tile, heaving horrible Dorito-pumpkin vomit.

The floor is grungy white tile. There's a lost receipt down by my knee.

I'm shaking and I throw up for what seems like forever, not just from travel and bad food but from the churning questions inside me, and the chaos and anger of the whole last year:

the jagged separation from Isadora,
the unhealed wound of Luca's rejection,
the loss of the friends I thought I had,

the isolation,

the jolt of learning about Kingsley.

When the vomiting is finally over, I force myself to breathe slowly.

My face feels coated with oil and sweat. I hold on to the side of the toilet to stop myself from slumping to the floor.

"There's someone kneeling in there," comes a voice from outside the stall.

"So, leave them alone to kneel," says another.

"Are you okay?" comes the first voice, friendly.

"Holland!" The second voice is high and nasal. "People kneeling are people puking. And people puking want to be left the eff alone."

"Says you, Winnie."

"Says everyone."

"Not true. I'd want someone to check on me if I was puking."

"I'll remember that the next time you puke."

"Please do. I want company."

"All right, but also, ick."

"I'm okay," I call out. "I think."

"Do you want us to get somebody?" asks Holland's voice. "Like a medic or whatever? Do you need a bottle of water?"

"There's not an airport medic," says Winnie. "Not here."

"It's a very small airport," calls Holland through the door. "And I don't actually know if airport medic is even a real thing. I shouldn't have offered that."

I grab the paper dispenser and pull myself up to standing, then open the stall. In front of me are two people my own age. They are prep school and tennis courts, macarons and golf clubs. Shiny with health and money.

"Oh my god," says Holland, looking at me. She has triple-pierced ears, short blond hair, pinkish white skin, and a wide mouth full of what seems like more teeth than regular people have. She wears basketball shorts, a cashmere sweater, and Birkenstocks.

"She just threw up," says Winnie. "Don't say 'Oh my god.'"

“I was just telling you,” says Holland. “Remember? That thing I showed you on my phone.”

“Don’t touch your backpack,” says Winnie to me. “Till you’ve washed your hands.” She’s petite and Black, with long braids and electric-blue eye makeup. She’s wearing a white cotton sundress and bright yellow sandals. “Just, you know. Ick.”

“I’m Holland,” says Holland. “What’s your name?”

“Have some game,” Winnie tells her.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Holland says to her.

“I’m Winnie,” says Winnie, smiling big at me. “Short for Guinevere.”

“Matilda,” I tell them. I bend over the sink and wash my hands.

“I have gum,” says Winnie. “Do you want?”

“Thanks.” I take it from her and unwrap it. It’s wintergreen.

“Sorry to be weird,” says Holland. “But you look like someone. Do you live here? On the Vineyard?”

“No.” I bend over the sink again and drink some water straight from the tap. In the mirror, my eyes are red and my hair is absolutely chaotic with humidity. My skin looks gray. The two of them are hovering over me like they have nowhere better to be. “It was a small plane,” I add, standing up. “And some bad lunch. I’m all right.”

“Do you want to change your shirt?” asks Winnie.

I look down. There is vomit and Dorito dust on my hoodie. “Yeah.”

I have a henley on underneath, so I pull the hoodie off and try to shove it in my backpack, but it doesn’t fit, so I give up and wad it into a ball.

They’re still hovering.

“Really, I’m okay,” I say. “You don’t have to be so nice.”

“Listen,” says Holland. “We’re not in any rush. We’re waiting for my mom, and her plane is delayed. Do you have a ride? Do you know your way around? I know this place pretty well. I have family here.”

“I’m going to get— Are there taxis here? Or should I get a rideshare?”

“There are taxis if you go out the side entrance,” says Holland. “Are you going up-island?”

“I don’t even know what that means,” I confess.

“Up-island is away from the big towns. It’s the countryside.”

“I’m going to—well, it’s outside West Tisbury.”

“That’s up-island. And us, too. We have a rental house there, no parents. A whole crew of girls. Except me, because I don’t believe in the gender binary. So when you’re not puking, and you’ve got settled, you should come hang out. Right? We’re here for the rest of the summer. Post-graduation par-tay.”

In LA, rich girls look glossy and aspirational. Holland and Winnie don’t seem to be trying at all. Winnie’s wearing makeup, but her dress is loose and her nails are short and her backpack is beat-up. Holland is rummaging in her Celine raffia bag. I know those cost thousands of dollars, but hers is well-worn, like she doesn’t even realize it’s designer. From it she pulls a circus of random items, including squashed juice boxes and a glucose monitor, while looking for her phone to give me her details.

I can’t think why these two would invite some random vomiter from the airport toilets to hang out with them, but maybe life on Martha’s Vineyard is even quieter than I imagined. When Holland finds her phone, she gives me her info, takes mine. Then they hand me an extra stick of wintergreen gum—“In case you barf in the taxi!”—and run off to meet the incoming plane.

10

The Vineyard taxi is actually a van. It’s dented and covered with bumper stickers. The only way I can tell it’s a taxi is a sign in the window.

The driver is a boy maybe a little older than me, leaning against his vehicle with his arms crossed. His lower lip is pushed out in a pout. He’s sunburned across his nose and his white skin is heavily freckled, like summer has been trying to mark him as her favorite. Wavy dark hair in need of a cut. His broad swimmer’s shoulders are hunched up to his ears, like he can hardly bear to be standing in this airport parking area.

He squints at me from under his baseball cap as I plop my backpack and duffel in front of him.

“Do you go up-island?” I ask. I try to sound like I know what I’m talking about.

“Mm-hm. Ten dollars.”

I recite the directions from Kingsley’s email: “I have to go to South Road, outside West Tisbury, and get dropped off at the strawberry. Can you do that?”

He folds his arms. “South Road, yeah. But strawberry what?”

“I don’t know.”

He shakes his head, thinking. “Maybe it’s a farm stand.”

“Can you take me there?”

He shrugs. An older man in a sports jacket walks up with a roller suitcase, and the boy turns to him. His tone becomes bright and friendly. “Hey there, Mr. Hancock, heading home?” He loads the man’s case into the back of the van and opens the side door. He has a fluid way of moving, like everything’s easy for him.

He turns back to me and his tone reverts to sullen. “Do you know if it’s on the beach side?”

“Of what?”

“South Road.”

“I guess.”

He shakes his head at me. “I can’t take you.”

“What? Why not?”

“People call my boss and complain if I don’t drop them at the right place. I had it happen twice last week. I don’t want to get fired.”

“Why did you drop them at the wrong place?”

He shrugs again, and helps another passenger by taking her bags to the back of the van.

“I won’t call your boss,” I say, following him as he works. “I won’t even blame you if it turns out wrong.”

“I don’t wanna risk it. And I don’t want anything that’s going to take extra time, ’cause I have a pickup at noon and I can’t be late. Use an app.”

“An app can’t take me to a strawberry.”

“Not my problem, Miss.” He adds the *Miss* like it means “Leave me alone.”

“Can I pay you extra?” I look in my wallet. I have thirty dollars in cash. “I could pay an extra ten.”

He takes off his hat and runs his hand through his hair. His eyes are deep brown with black, black lashes. “Fifteen.” He holds out his hand. “Up front.”

He’s a weasel, but whatever. I don’t really have a choice.

11

The van is full, so I have to sit next to the driver even though obviously we hate each other. He keeps his big brown eyes on the road and I try to distract myself from his hostility by opening *Something Rotten* on my phone, but I’m still too nauseated to play a game in a moving car. I give up and stare out the window.

We wind under a canopy of green trees, along roads lined with ancient stone walls. The sunlight is bright but pale, not the hot, oozy sun of California but rays that feel like lemonade in an icy glass.

In the back of the van, Vineyard residents returning from summer excursions all seem to know each other. They’re a mix of country-living types and professors on summer breaks—all gossiping about a fire that happened five days ago. It was on an island called Beechwood, just a short boat ride away. From what I gather, it’s owned privately by a man named Harris Sinclair. He and his family spend every summer there and are often seen in Edgartown, though none of the people in the van run in such wealthy circles.

When the blaze began, the residents say, the Vineyard fire department went over to Beechwood by boat, but they were too late. One of the island’s houses had nearly burned to the ground. Three people died, all of them teenagers.

The residents talk over each other, interrupting and disagreeing:

“I heard it was electrical. The wiring in those houses hadn’t been redone since nobody knows when.”

“I heard the fireplace. Embers sparking. They didn’t have the fire grate on.”

“I heard it was a jug of motorboat fuel that overturned.”

“What did the paper say?”

“Unknown cause. But also: Gerry did the reporting, and everyone knows he’s as dumb as a truck.”

“Maybe the kids were playing with fire. They get an idea to make a bonfire close to the house, or they’re smoking where they shouldn’t be, something like that.”

“Did the police take a witness statement? From the girl who survived?”

“That’s Cadence. I heard she was down at one of the smaller houses all evening. Doesn’t know what happened at the big house.”

The story chills me—those kids dying so young. “Did you know about this fire?” I ask the driver.

“Everybody does,” he says. “Here on the island.”

“Did you know the family?”

He shakes his head.

“Strawberry!” barks the driver, pulling to the shoulder of the road.

We’ve stopped before a metal mailbox. It is painted with a strawberry.

I climb out as the driver gets my bags from the back. He holds out his hand for the fare.

I hand it over. He looks at me for a beat.

“I’m not tipping you,” I say. “I paid you an extra fifteen up front.”

“Fine,” he says. “Have a good day, *Miss*.”

He slams his door as he gets back in the driver’s seat, then revs the engine and is gone.

I stand in brilliant sunshine. The road is lined with emerald bushes and stone walls. There’s a field on one side where a pair of glossy chestnut oxen stand, morose.

South Road runs parallel to the sea. My father’s email says to take the driveway that bears his name, after the fourth mailbox past the strawberry.

Lugging my duffel and backpack, I walk the shoulder of the road. Dirt driveways stretch off here and there, winding south, toward the ocean, or north, into the center of the island. Some are labeled with discreet wooden signs: *Davenport, Rothstein, Taylor, Robertson*. Some have street names: *Clamshell Drive, Evergreen Lane*.

I pass three mailboxes. Then a fourth.

My back aches. I have hardly slept. But I keep on, up a hill. A single car speeds past me.

My nearly dead phone pings with a text from Holland Terhune: I have family junk to deal with in Edgartown next couple days, but when I get back YOU ARE COMING OVER. Winnie thinks you're hot. Even though you had just puked! Do you like girls?

I type back: Just as friends, yes to coming over. But I can't think about Holland and Winnie and their house party. I'm about to meet my father, if I can ever find his place.

When I reach the peak of the hill, I can see the ocean. I can smell it, too, a scent of salt and mystery in the wind. At maybe a quarter mile from the fourth mailbox, there is an unmarked stone driveway that stretches beneath ancient trees toward the sea. Between the stones grow sprigs of grass, but I can tell the stones have been laid carefully. Dark against light form an initial as they go along the curving drive: *K*.

Then *I. N. G.*

Kingsley. He has memorialized himself in everlasting stone.

I turn into the driveway, lugging my duffel and still shaky from being sick. The path curves and doubles back on itself, easing down the hill toward the ocean. Then the view becomes obscured by trees that arc over the drive, many of them reaching their arms down close enough for me to touch. Overgrown.

I've left South Road far behind when an enormous dog, lean and shaggy, appears in the driveway. She is the same deep gray as the stones beneath her feet.

She stands before me, her head higher than my waist, her legs strangely long. A wolfhound, maybe? She wears no collar.

She growls, then lets out a low bark.

I stop.

The dog barks again. Louder, and this time continuously. Like she doesn't want me to go any farther.

I hold still. I love dogs. But this one is really, really big. And she's making a lot of noise.

She takes a step toward me, showing her teeth. Making noise.

I take a step back.

I'm not going to run away, but I don't want to make her angrier than she already is.

I remember that line from my father's second email: *Don't be afraid of glum.*

"Could you be Glum?" I ask the dog, speaking sweetly.

Her ears perk. The barking stops.

"Glum. Hello, baby. I'm Matilda."

She steps tentatively toward me.

"You're very pretty, Glum. So special and huge."

A wag.

Oh, I love her. "It's you. Glum, baby. You're a good protector of your home, aren't you? So brave and true."

I set my duffel down so I can kneel and extend my hand. Glum comes forward and sniffs. We are friends now. She lets me pet her ears and the bony ridge of her skull.

When I start walking again, Glum trots ahead of me, looking back now and again to assure herself that I'm still there.

After a turn, the road opens into a clearing, made for parking cars. Beyond the clearing is an archway of graying wood, a garage. In it stands a butter-colored Mercedes convertible, some kind of collector's item with curving fenders and camel-colored seats. But it's dotted with dust and pollen, and it's missing a headlight.

Through the arch of the garage and out the other side is a *castle*—but not a castle like I've seen in Kingsley's paintings. This one is made of wood, like a beach house, covered with weathered shingles. Many of the ground-floor walls are glass. Four huge, cylindrical towers rise from the ground,

broadly windowed. The door is a curved arch that echoes the arch of the garage.

Around the castle, the property extends in unmowed lawns. In the distance to the right is another building, with another deck. A ways away on the left is a chaotic-looking vegetable garden inside a fence of wood and chicken wire.

Beyond all that, the Atlantic Ocean reveals itself, sparkling and menacing.

I have arrived at Hidden Beach.

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Part Three

Hidden Beach

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12

“Matilda?” A boy rounds the side of the castle, pushing a lawn mower that looks rusted out. He’s maybe eighteen. Asian heritage, with a round face, sunburned on the nose and cheekbones. His black hair, long and wavy, is tied in a knot on top of his head. He wears no shoes. His T-shirt reads *Shirley’s Hardware*.

“Yes, I’m Matilda.”

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he says. “June is deep in the indigo pot.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have been here all day,” the boy says as he abandons his lawn mower to come toward me. “In case you arrived. And now you’re here. So stoked.”

“I told Kingsley my plane time,” I say.

“Kingsley’s off-island.”

“Really?” Disappointment washes over me.

“He’ll be back tomorrow,” says the boy. “He had to do a thing.”

“He didn’t tell you my details?”

“I might have missed the message. We’re mostly unplugged here—off the grid.” The boy scratches Glum’s ears. “Are you the best dog? You walked Matilda here, didn’t you?” He turns to me, smiling brightly. “Her name is Puddleglum. It’s a *Chronicles of Narnia* thing. But we just call her Glum. I’m Vermeer Sugawara. Named after the painter, Vermeer. You heard of him?”

“I think so.”

“He was a Dutch guy in like, the sixteen hundreds. Lots of blue and yellow. People standing near windows in milky sunlight. Whatever. Everyone calls me Meer, ’cause I called myself Meer when I was a baby.” He takes my duffel bag off my shoulder and heads toward the castle but stops before he opens the door. “You know what? Let’s not go in. With the indigo and all that. Let’s go to the beach instead. You tired?”

“Not at all,” I lie.

“Good.”

Who is Meer? And who is this June he's talking about? Do they live here, or work here, or what?

I look at my phone quickly. Nothing from Kingsley. He hasn't bothered to tell me he was called away from home.

This whole trip suddenly seems like a terrible idea.

We pile the bags by the front door and I follow as Meer leads me around the side of the castle, rattling on. "Tatum could be down there in the water. But he also might have been sucked into the indigo. Or he could be at work, I have no idea. Brock's gone off, I don't know, to the market, maybe?"

"Who's Brock?"

"He lives here. He came on like, a pilgrimage to Kingsley. Like you did."

"I came to see my *father*."

"Brock's father is a very different type of guy. Like, a swindler. He took all Brock's money and spent it on pills." The path takes us past what I now see is a separate pool house and an enormous, circular swimming pool. It's filled with water, but it's filthy—sludgy with rotting leaves. "We don't use the pool much," quips Meer. "The beach is down this way."

We walk through a copse of trees to a wooden staircase. It's built into a monstrously high cliff in a tortured marriage of angry wood to submissive clay. The stairs go down, then left, then down, then right, twisting their way to the sand.

At the top of the steps is a large plastic jug with a pump top. A label of blue masking tape reads *Horrible liquid. Do not drink*. Meer pumps what looks like oil into his hand, then rubs it on his cheeks and arms, making his skin shine.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Horrible liquid."

"Really."

"Don't drink it," he says, grinning.

"It's sunblock," I say. "Oh, duh."

"June makes it," he says. "The stuff from the drugstore is evil or toxic or too expensive or something. But I wrote the label."

I pump some into my hand. It smells of tangerines. I rub my hands together and slick it on my face and arms. "Who's June? Because Kingsley

didn't say much when he invited me. Nothing about her, or Tatum, or Brock. Or anyone else who lives here."

Meer shrugs. "Kingsley never tells anyone anything. It's not your fault."

"Okay. I don't know who *you* are, actually," I confess.

"Kingsley's my father," says Meer. "Just like he's yours."

13

The sound of the ocean rings in my ears as I follow Meer down the staircase. I run to catch up with him on the sand. He stands with his feet in the sea.

"You're my half brother," I say, stupidly.

He nods. "I was stoked to meet you."

"Why didn't Kingsley tell me?"

"I don't know. It's just his way."

"Did you always know? About me?"

"Mm-hm."

"I didn't. I didn't know about Kingsley, even."

"That's okay. Now you do."

I stare at Meer. The late-July sun makes his hair shine. The bottom of his shorts is wet from the waves that crash around his ankles.

He and I, we never squabbled. We haven't bothered each other on long car rides or licked each other's ice creams. We never padded downstairs together on weekend mornings to play video games and eat fistfuls of cereal straight from the box, and we didn't sit through each other's dentist appointments and chorus recitals.

I didn't eat the asparagus off his plate to rescue him because he doesn't like it. We never shared a tent. He didn't break the blender and blame it on me. There are no stories to tell about us, no funny family anecdotes. We didn't compete for our father's love and attention because Meer had it all.

He is the child Kingsley decided to raise.

His mother is the woman Kingsley loved instead of Isadora. My father has a son, but he never wanted me, his daughter.

I can't resent Meer for any of that. He wants a sister. I can see it in his wide-open face, the puppy smile he's giving me. And though we have no history, we have blood. Kingsley's runs in both our veins. I can see Meer's pulse in the side of his neck, and the blue just visible in his wrists. It calls out to me. A brother who has been here, all along, when I thought I was an only child.

"What did Kingsley tell you about me?" I ask.

"He was just like, you have a sister, she's out there in the world. Her name is Matilda Klein. And he told me that your mother is in the Persephone painting. That's all."

"I don't think he could have known very much else. He hasn't spoken to my mother since before I was born."

"He thought it would be good for my imagination, to know you were out there."

We stare at the ocean for a minute. "And was it?" I ask eventually. "Good for your imagination?"

"I drew pictures of you when I was little. I don't mean to sound creepy. It wasn't an obsession or anything. It was more the way a kid might draw a grandparent he doesn't see that often, or an imaginary friend or whatever. I have this sketchbook, where I put ideas and stuff—I've always had one. And I'd draw a sister, standing next to me in front of the castle. Or on the beach. Especially before Tatum came to live with us, because once he did I wasn't such a loner. Sorry, that sounds creepy, too."

"No, it's fine," I say. And then: "I have a sketchbook."

"Really?"

"For like, imaginary maps and game ideas and stuff I want to make. Some people think it's weird."

"Mine is mostly tattoo ideas. And doodles. I'm not an artist like Kingsley," says Meer. "I started a sketchbook because he always has one. Most places he goes, or whenever he's sitting around, he likes to keep his hands moving. It helps him understand the world. I wanted to be like my dad when I was little, but also—I always *was* like him anyway. I like to keep my hands moving and kind of process things by drawing stuff."

“Me too.”

“I’m talking a lot right now. I think I’m nervous, probably? We don’t have a lot of visitors.”

“Me too, again,” I tell him. “I don’t meet new family members every day.”

Meer grins at me, sunny. I scan his face for similarities to my own—traits we both get from Kingsley. The mouth, and the shape of the chin, I think. But the way we look isn’t the important thing. Meer and I are connected. We have always been connected. Our whole lives, we’ve been knit together by our biology, and by Meer’s fantasies of me being part of his family, without my knowing it.

And now I know.

“When is our father due back?” I ask. The words *our father* feel unfamiliar in my mouth.

Meer doesn’t answer. He steps deeper into the water. The waves are pretty big here, and they splash against his knees.

“I came a long way,” I add, talking to his back. “From California. Specifically to meet him.”

“He’s giving you this,” says Meer, pointing at the ocean. “Inviting you here. He wants you to see it, I think. And be here, now that your mom is away. He wants you to stay in our house. To get to know us.”

“How does he know my mom left?”

Meer shrugs. “Instagram, maybe.”

“He told you that?”

“Maybe he talks to your mother. I don’t know.”

“He doesn’t.” I look out at the infinite stretch of the sea. “What time is his flight?”

“I dunno. He went to see a client about a painting. These collectors, they like to meet the artist, but Kingsley doesn’t like studio visits. He shows them photographs of the art and lets them buy him expensive meals while they decide what they want. I think he’s in Boston? Or maybe New York.”

“But he said tomorrow?” I persist.

“He doesn’t like schedules and commitments and timetables. He’s very unconstrained.”

I understand now. “You don’t know when he’s coming back,” I say.

“He did say tomorrow. But it might not be.”

“He invited me here, and promised me a painting, and then he just went on a trip?”

“It’s not like that.”

“What’s it like, then?”

“Kingsley isn’t a regular person. He’s an artist.”

“So?”

“He makes his own schedule. And that’s essential to him being what he is, for the genius to be channeled through him.” Meer begins walking along the beach, still in the water.

I stop and roll my jeans to my knees, then catch up. “You think he’s a genius?”

“Sure. He keeps separate from the world. We keep separate from the world, too, mostly, here at Hidden Beach. The idea is that if you eat when you feel hungry and sleep when you’re tired, and you listen to what’s inside you, then you’re giving the muse a chance to show up. Kingsley lives like that. He leaves himself open for the muse.”

I could answer Meer by saying that Kingsley is the kind of man who abandons a woman he got pregnant.

I could say: “He sold *Persephone* for millions and never paid my mother.”

I could say: “In his forties he slept with a nineteen-year-old.”

I have thought these things about Kingsley Cello, when I read all those articles and while my mother was telling me what happened, but the truth is that for all his faults and even crimes, I want my father to see me.

To redeem me.

To help me find my place in the world, when I have always been on the move.

To help me understand my own mind,

how I go so deep into games that the rest of the world falls away,

how I am so full of rage and want

and righteousness and loss,

standing on the brink of my own future.

I want him to give me

the weapons I need

to conquer the levels ahead.

I want him to have

the answer to Matilda Avalon Klein.

But I say nothing to Meer except “I’d like to meet him.”

“You will, of course!” he says brightly. “And then you’ll understand.”

We walk in silence for a moment. Meer bends down to pick up an unusual purple rock. “I have a collection of these.”

“You grew up here, right? So you must have a lot by now.”

He puts it in his pocket. “I’m homeschooled, in case you couldn’t tell. Well, mostly. I tried going to the island schools, but June had so much to teach me. And so did the ocean. And Kingsley. Plus I naturally sleep late. I’m a night person.”

“Homeschooled is cool,” I offer. “I’ve done that a bit.”

“Some people find me . . . socially weird or whatever. Kids from the high school.”

“Losers.”

Meer cracks a smile. “Institutions don’t suit me.”

“How old are you?” I ask him.

“Eighteen.”

“Me too.”

“Born in September.”

“October.”

We stand there silently for a minute.

Kingsley left my mother for Meer’s. Probably, he was sleeping with them both at the same time. We both know it, but maybe Meer has always known.

“I’m older!” says Meer. His face lights up. “I’m glad you’re here, Matilda.”

“Should we rinse our feet?” I ask. I am carrying my sneakers and we are heading in the castle’s back door. Outside it are multiple boogie boards, a number of sandy shoes, a couple buckets. Around one side I can see an outdoor shower.

“Don’t bother,” says Meer.

I gesture to a sign. In curling italics it says *Wash Your Feet*.

“That’s from ages ago,” he says, leading me into an enormous screened porch that functions as a mudroom. It’s lined waist-high with shelving. Row and rows of hooks hold summer things—towels and swimsuits, rash guards, a gardening apron. Rubber boots, a collection of flashlights, flip-flops, sneakers, citronella candles. Against the walls are beach and sports equipment.

Everywhere, labels. *Towels. Flashlights. Boots.* They’re worn and weathered, stained in some places. “June wrote those,” Meer explains. “Like, maybe when I was around ten? Tatum was here then, but with his parents, not with us. They all lived in the pool house. Anyway, he and I made the goofy ones.” Some of the labels are in childish print, and Meer flips the printed *Unicorn Food* sign up to reveal a calligraphy label that says *Winter Hats*. Other signs read *Magical Devices. Toxic Waste. Lizard Teeth. Spoils of War.*

Meer puts on a pair of flip-flops he’s pulled off the shelf that clearly have the name *Tatum Cooper-Lee* written across the heel. “We were so many people back then. And now there’s just us four, and Kingsley. And now you? Maybe? For a while, at least. We’re fewer people, but it’s more chaos.”

In the kitchen, a woman stands on a footstool, shoving a piece of cloth into a large vat of blue dye. She’s maybe forty, with Asian heritage—third-generation Japanese American, I later learn. Like Meer, a slim build. Even in a high ponytail, her black hair nearly reaches her waist. She’s pretty, with feathery eyebrows and color in her cheeks, an elegant neck. She wears work boots and a sleeveless blue dress underneath an enormous blue apron.

The kitchen floor is covered with canvas tarps. The large table is pushed against the wall. The wooden counters are worn, as if they see a lot of use.

A number of clotheslines have been strung up through the room. Blue-dyed pants, T-shirts, sweaters, and curtains hang, dripping. Buckets and bowls underneath are meant to catch the drips.

“Matilda is here,” says Meer to the woman. “Matilda, this is June. My mother.”

“Thank you so much for having me,” I say.

June keeps looking into the vat, wrangling her fabric. Her hands are stained with blue dye. She has calluses on her fingers and her nails are clipped short. “Meer,” she says. “What did we decide about having people over this summer?”

Heat rises to my face. June didn’t know I was coming.

And they’ve clearly made some kind of family rule not to have visitors.

“Kingsley invited her,” Meer explains.

June stops with the fabric and looks up. “He did? Like a while ago? Or do you mean he invited her just now?”

“A couple days ago,” I clarify.

“She’s going to stay in Parchment Tower,” says Meer.

“She’s *sleeping* here?” June doesn’t mask her irritation, but she’s returned her eyes to the vat of indigo fabric, stirring it as they talk. “Meer, be logical.”

“He asked me to set up the Iron Room. It’s all done.”

“No. That can’t . . . You can’t just ask some new friend to stay here and blame it on your father.”

“I told you, Kingsley invited her. But now he’s off-island,” says Meer.

“He did,” I say. “He emailed.”

“I *know* he’s off-island,” says June.

“So we have to be welcoming and make up for his sloth or negligence or whatever.” Meer grins at her, like they’re sharing a family joke.

“Meer,” she says.

“What?”

“You’re a very challenging peanut sometimes.”

“Be mad at Kingsley, not at me,” Meer says, laughing. “And be good to her like you are to Brock. You’re great and kind and a wonderful mama with a big heart. I know you are, really, so you don’t need to act grouchy.”

For the first time, June looks up from her work to examine me. As her eyes meet mine, she stops stirring the indigo vat. “Oh,” she says, light dawning in her eyes. “You’re Kingsley’s child.”

15

No more words on the subject are exchanged between them. Without any trace of her former irritation, June begins explaining that the enormous vat on the stove, which covers several burners, contains an indigo dye. She’s running an “offering” next week at the West Tisbury crafts market. She’ll bring the dye in a smaller vat on a hot plate. There will be clotheslines, tie-dye supplies, and so forth. For a donation, people can come and dye whatever they’d like. Today is a test run.

She hands me an apron. It’s made of white cotton and her hands stain it blue where she touches it. I take off my cream-colored henley and put on the apron over my black tank. Meer ties an apron on himself as well. It hangs over his shorts and looks like a dress. He redoes the elastic that secures his long hair on top of his head.

I begin as June instructs me, by squeezing blue water from fabrics over the sink, twisting them and wringing them. Then they go in another bath to set for a bit. After that, they must be wrung again and hung to dry.

“I could use the clothes dryer,” explains June. “But it’ll stain blue. And anyway, I like to see the color change as the fabric dries.”

She is right. As we work, greenish blues fade to teal. Blue-black fades to blue-gray.

I am tired and still shaky from vomiting earlier, but I do everything that’s asked of me. There is no music, no radio news, no podcast playing. No sound at all but June’s and Meer’s voices, now and again talking about whether something is rinsed well enough, or whether a certain shirt should go into the dye again.

At one point I excuse myself and check my phone to see if Kingsley has sent me anything, but there's nothing. I write to him:

I'm here at Hidden Beach.

I hope you didn't worry I'd be angry to find out about Meer. I'm not at all. I feel so lucky to have a family connection, even with someone I've only just met.

One thing: June didn't know I was coming. I'm not sure how that happened, but I think she's okay with me staying, at least for tonight.

See you tomorrow. /Matilda

Meer folds his apron down, takes off his shirt, and puts it into the pot. His shoulders are darkly tan, and he has the long, narrow look of someone whose weight hasn't caught up yet to his height. He has writing and drawing all over his torso. At first I think it's tattoos, but it's actually only Sharpie, half washed off. In the center of his abdomen, in bubble letters, it says *Read a freaking book*. Lower down on the left, where Meer presumably drew on himself, there is an upside-down picture of three skulls, in classic tattoo-artist style. On his upper back, someone has drawn an awkward cartoon sailboat with the name *FartFace* on the hull, plus a series of spirals that represent waves.

I tamp Meer's T-shirt down into the dye, watching the Shirley's Hardware logo sink beneath the surface. When I look up, there's another person in the room.

He seems familiar, but I can't place him at first. He's about eighteen, white, shirtless and jacked, like a surfer who spends time in the weight room—very good-looking in a brainless, living-his-best-life way. His eyes are huge and the brightest of blue. His blondish hair is bleached light at the ends. The color hasn't been refreshed in maybe a year. Like Meer, he's covered in Sharpie. There's a beautifully drawn donkey on one shoulder, and a seal on the other, plus a series of ornate anchors and an old-fashioned pinup girl on his left arm. His right arm has bubble lettering from elbow to wrist reading *Meer smells great all the time*.

"Are you Brock or Tatum?" I ask.

He grins at me, and his smile is so dazzling I can't help but smile back. "Brock." He turns to Meer. "Who's this?"

Meer explains and Brock hustles over to where I'm standing by the stove. He opens his arms. "Bring it in, Matilda."

"What?"

"You're Meer and Kingsley's family, and they're like family to me, so you're like family to me." He wraps me in a nice-to-meet-you hug that I've only encountered before in Hollywood, with some of Saar's actor friends. It's a lot of naked boy skin.

"Oh my god," I say when he releases me. I've put together why he looks familiar. "You're Sammy."

"Paul-David Brock."

"But Sammy. Meer didn't tell me you were Sammy."

"He isn't Sammy," says Meer.

"Of course not," I say, flushing.

I have seen Brock be Sammy for I don't know how many hours of my life. A lot. His TV show, *Men and Other Critters*, stopped having new episodes a couple years ago, but there are clips on TikTok all the time. It's impossible to escape videos of Brock saying "Don't tell me, I don't wanna know!" and "Girls are so much smarter than me."

He played the eldest of five kids being raised by three adult uncles. The uncles were clueless macho jerks, and Brock and his four television sisters ran those jerks absolutely ragged for many seasons.

"People think they know me sometimes," Brock says, hitching himself up to sit on the kitchen counter. "But they only know Sammy. Which isn't me. Which is a very, very long way from me."

I have an impulse to apologize, but my mother always says that many women apologize when they've done nothing wrong, like they're apologizing simply for existing. She never wanted me to be one of them. So I swallow my *sorry* and say, "Of course I don't know you. But I've seen you be very funny on TV. Good to meet you, Paul-David Brock."

"We're in the indigo," says June. "Are you in or out?"

"I'm in," says Brock. She hands him an apron and a bucket of damp cloth. "I left Sammy behind a long time ago," he tells me as he begins

wringing out the fabric over the sink. “I used to carry him around. Y’know? He was this younger, better version of me that everybody recognized. He always had funny things to say. He had his picture on billboards. I felt like the real me was just a worn-out, uglier Sammy. No idea where he ended and I started.” He stops working for a second and looks directly at me. “Well, the answer was to say goodbye to Sammy completely. And not ever think about him.”

“And how’s that going for you?” I ask.

“Well, it’s not actually possible. But it’s an idea. Kingsley and June, those guys effing saved me. I’m so ever-loving grateful.”

“Aw, shush,” says June. “We’re lucky to have you here.”

“Matilda, do you want to do your shirt?” Meer asks.

I have been stirring the pot, but now I collect my henley from the back of a chair. Using twine, we work together to tie strips that will remain white up and down the arms while leaving the body of the shirt to become completely blue. Meer is meticulous, measuring the distance between each piece of twine. “Is symmetry important to you?” he asks. “I have two inches between each.”

“Not at all.”

“It’s important to my mother,” says Meer.

“Symmetry is calming and centering,” says June. “It gives us a sense of balance. You’ll find Hidden Beach is symmetrical—four towers. And it has many symmetries within it. They contain and balance the chaos that lives in your father. That’s why we built it.”

I lower my henley into the vat of dye. Meer comes to look over my shoulder. “When this dries—I mean, when you wear it—you’ll look like one of us,” he says.

It’s true. I have come deep into Hidden Beach already, almost without realizing it.

I haven’t eaten or unpacked. I haven’t toured the castle or slept a night here. But my arms are indigo, up to my elbows. Like Meer’s. Like June’s. Like Brock’s. My henley will dry into the same family of blues as theirs, all born of the same pot.

My head begins to spin, the walls close in, and I pass out.

I open my eyes to find myself lying on a soft couch covered in worn velvet. I'm in a small room adjacent to the kitchen, a kind of breakfast nook. A round table is surrounded by built-in benches. A cutting board holds what looks like home-baked bread, partly sliced and gone gray with mold in the summer humidity.

June touches my forehead with a blue hand. Then she touches behind my ears, briefly. "You okay?"

"I think so."

"I'll make you a tincture." Above me on the couch is one of Kingsley's paintings. June notices me staring at it. "It's called *Cliffside Gothic*," she tells me. "Don't let it depress you."

The painting looms over the room, framed in black wood.

Cliffside Gothic shows a family of five:

a man, a woman, and three teenage girls.

Together, they stand at the edge of a cliff.

The wind is gusting, catching clothes and hair.

The girls are white and blond, all looking like
old money and lilacs, their

jaws strong and their

figures willowy.

They have serious eyes and are

dressed in white cotton.

They're in front of their parents with their feet at the edge of the cliff, so close that if any one of them takes a step, she will plummet.

Look a little closer, and you notice that while two of them wear dainty ballet flats,

the eldest girl is

barefoot.

Her feet are black with

ash.

Her fingernails are black with it, too.

Cinderella.

Meer comes in from the kitchen. “Too much indigo can be very intense,” he says solemnly. It takes me a beat to realize this is a joke.

“That and red-eye flights,” I answer, grabbing the arm of the sofa and pulling myself up. “Did you move me in here?”

“You were dead out,” says Meer. “Like a fainting lady in a movie or something.”

“Do you want to sleep?” asks Brock, peeking into the breakfast nook. And then to Meer: “She should probably sleep.”

June returns from the kitchen carrying a wooden tray on which are five dark brown bottles with eyedroppers and a tall glass of water. She sets the tray down and bends over it, squeezing two droppers of one thing, just a drop of another, and so on, until the water is a golden hue. “These will heal you.”

“What are they?” I ask.

“Herbal tinctures,” she says. “Some I make myself, others I buy.”

“But what herbs?”

“Passionflower, ashwagandha, star-of-Bethlehem, butterbur, and clematis,” she says. And in fact, the jars are labeled in the same lovely cursive as the signs in the mudroom, though the labels look waterlogged.

“I don’t know why I asked,” I confess. “I don’t know anything about herbs.”

“You can trust me. Ask the boys. I haven’t poisoned them yet.”

“That’s true,” Meer says. “I drink passionflower water and star-of-Bethlehem every day for breakfast and I look like this.” He puts his hands under his chin and smiles like a child in a photograph.

June swats Meer gently. “Don’t listen to him. He does no such thing.”

I pick up the glass of golden liquid. I take a small sip. Suddenly, I’m incredibly thirsty, but it tastes—well, bitter and deeply rotten, like oregano gone slimy in the back of a refrigerator. Like unspoken pain.

June, Meer, and Brock look at me.

“It’s good for you. Drink it,” says June. “Or don’t. No one’s going to force you.”

“Yum yum,” says Meer, then makes a gagging face.

I tip my glass and drink.

17

The four towers of Hidden Beach are known by paint color names, their doors labeled in June’s writing: *Parchment*, *Bone*, *Chalk*, *Oyster*. I follow Meer up the stairs in Parchment Tower. He gallantly carries my duffel and shows me to “the Iron Room” on the fourth floor.

“When I was little,” says Meer as we climb, “I always wanted a room at the top of one of our towers. Not because of the view, but because Kingsley has his studio at the top of Bone Tower. But I used to always wake up in the middle of the night, so my parents insisted I have the room next to their bedroom, on the second floor of Oyster. It’s better in the summer, because lower down doesn’t get so hot at night. But Tatum and I are top-floor boys now. We took over Chalk Tower.”

“Did Kingsley put you back to bed when you woke at night?”

“Mm-hm. He used to tiptoe in all exaggerated—you know, like a clown tiptoe—then sit on the floor next to my bed. He’d have me close my eyes so I could see the pictures on the insides of my eyelids. He’d ask me what I saw, and I’d fall asleep talking. Mid-sentence, I’d conk out because my eyes were closed.” We have reached the fourth floor and Meer stops in front of a door.

“He sounds like a good dad,” I venture.

“He’s a great artist,” says Meer, like that’s the most important thing in the world.

He takes me into the Iron Room. It’s curved on one side, like the tower. The windows are wide, dressed with plain white curtains. The bed, an ancient-looking ironwork four-poster, is covered in indigo-dyed linens. It sits in the middle of the room. There are no nightstands. The closet smells

of wood and is lined with empty shelves. There is no bar for hangers. No mirror, nor a chest of drawers.

“Did Kingsley ever paint you?” I ask.

“A bunch of times. I like it better if he just works from a photograph, though. Or from memory. Posing is very boring and your arms get sore, or your butt or whatever. And he gets mad if you move, because he wants to get you in the light the right way, but he’s forgotten you’re even a person. So you’re sweating and like, hungry for snacks. But then, when the painting is done, you feel like the opposite happened. Like Kingsley saw something inside your soul. And he put it on the canvas so everyone else could see it, too.”

After Meer leaves me, I rummage in my backpack for my phone. I should text my mom to tell her where I am, and Saar to say I arrived.

But my phone isn’t there.

I open the sleeve where I carry my laptop. That isn’t there, either.

Meer talked about being unplugged. “We have cell phones for emergencies and there are computers, but we keep all the electronics in a locked room and only go in there for tech mornings so we can catch up and handle things. Monday and Thursday.”

Did he really remove the electronics from my bag? Or did June take them while I was passed out on the breakfast room couch?

It’s unnerving. For the second time I wonder if it was a good idea to come here.

I am mostly unpacked when I hear voices in the hall. Male voices, young. Brock and someone else. I am guessing Tatum.

“Who’s here?”

“Where?”

“In the Iron Room. The door’s closed.”

“Oh, that’s Matilda,” says Brock.

“Matilda, like Meer’s sister Matilda?”

“Yeah.”

“She *came to visit*?”

“Yeah. She’s sick or something. She passed out on the kitchen floor.”

There's a pause. Tatum sighs. "Did we know she was coming?"

"*You* obviously didn't."

"Did *you* know, is what I'm asking."

"I did not."

"Did Meer?"

"Seemed to, yeah."

"She just what? Decided to show up? Does Kingsley know?" asks Tatum.

"I don't know what Kingsley knows."

"How long is she staying?"

"Probably just, like, for a visit. How long do people visit for?"

"You've been here a year."

"Oh, and what would you do without me?"

There is a thwacking sound, as if one of them has thrown a pillow. Then another thwack. Laughter.

"I contribute so much!" yells Brock. "You would be iron deprived without me, subsisting on powders and pavlovas and wineberries." More laughter. "I stocked the freezer this very afternoon, you butt."

"Did you get the marinated steak?"

"And the swordfish skewers and the chicken you like. I got all the things," says Brock. "Paid for with the effing innocence of my effing youth. Okay? I bought you steak today with the sacrifice of my childhood."

Tatum laughs. "Okay, seriously, that's good. Thank you."

"Arg," says Brock lightly. "You know I'm gonna eat like half of it."

"You got a lot, though?"

"Yeah."

"That's awesome. I owe you."

"It's nothing."

There's a pause. "But Matilda," says Tatum.

"Her room's right there. She can probably hear you."

Tatum's voice drops. "She shouldn't be here."

"I know," says Brock. "She's going to mess Meer up. Now he's going to be full of feelings all the time."

“We shouldn’t add another person,” says Tatum definitively. “It’s just been us, you know? She shouldn’t be in our business.”

18

No one is downstairs.

Meer said dinner at seven. My hair is still wet from my shower, but I put on a black cotton dress that I hope is appropriate.

The cavernous living room is minimalist but warm. The couches are a deep apricot color and look like they’re built of velvet spheres, linked together. One of the cushions is stained with dark liquid. The coffee table is double wide and stacked with books on art and architecture. From the wildly high ceiling hangs a mobile that stretches maybe eight feet across, turning in the breeze from the sliding doors that stand open to the evening.

There’s no art on the walls, except for one Cello painting that I recognize from seeing it online.

Odysseus Flees shows a man

standing at the wheel of a speedboat.

He wears a blood-spattered sweater and jeans.

He is very, very small. The painting is mostly ocean. Violent, terrifying waves.

Behind Odysseus, on land in the distance, a Cyclops lies dead,

stabbed through the eye with a spear.

You can barely make it out.

Odysseus braves this vast expanse of very dangerous ocean.

Escaping.

I haven't actually read *The Odyssey*, but I know it's an ancient Greek poem. Plus Saar and I played *Killer Odyssey* all the way to the end.

Odysseus, the great king of somewhere or other, leaves his kingdom to go fight the Trojan War. He ends up traveling all over the world. You play the game by boating around between levels on this wine-dark sea. At each level, you have to battle a legendary creature—like Cyclops, or Medusa, or a bunch of feral mermaids.

The mermaids are the worst to kill, actually. You can't slaughter them any of the usual ways. You have to drown them in the air, one after the other, by dragging them out of the sea and trapping them so they can't get back. They beg for mercy and struggle for breath.

It's brutal and misogynistic, but it's what you have to do to beat this level. And you can't be a gamer if you get mad about misogyny. It's threaded through practically every game. *Mario Kart*, even. *Angry Birds*. So I just save being pissed off for real-life situations. Plus, when I become a game designer, I'll make some superviolent games that don't also hate women. Or forget we exist.

Anyway, once you've drowned all the feral mermaids in the air, they shrivel up. Their scales form an excellent trophy sword you can use later on. After that, the other villains can be killed the normal way, like with swords and grenades and ice picks and carving knives.

Kingsley's painting is bleak. The water seems infinite, the tiny boat so vulnerable. Odysseus doesn't look like a conquering hero; he looks haggard and desperate. Like a man who's done awful, awful things in the name of self-preservation.

Beneath the painting, on the mantel of a large fireplace, are four glasses half filled with pink juice. They look like they've been sitting there a few days. There are two bowls crusted with yogurt and old granola.

I wander into the dining room, which houses a table that seems custom-made to match its wood walls and built-in shelves. The chandelier is green glass blown in oceanic, squidlike spirals. It's lit from within and casts strange shadows on the wall—but the table isn't set for a meal. On it are several old coffee cups and a plate sticky with crumbs and syrup. The floor is covered with bits of food and other trash.

The kitchen is orderly. The indigo pot still stands at the back of the stove, but the rest of the day's project has been cleaned up. The fabrics have all been moved to hang on lines outdoors. Sheets, shirts, skirts, and pillowcases, all in varying shades of blue, flutter in the summer wind beyond the sliding glass door.

Since the room is empty, I have an urge to search the cabinets, to look in the fridge and the pantry, to fling open every door and drawer and begin uncovering the part of my history that's always been missing. This is my father's home. My *father*.

What does he eat? What mug does he use for morning coffee? Does he own spices from India and Mexico? Collections of peppers and half-full jars of harissa and tahini? Or does he eat simple foods, saving his extravagance for his paintings?

I open the fridge. It's filled with glass jars of nuts and seeds, carefully labeled in June's calligraphy. Then there are liquids, also in jars: honey limeade, hibiscus tea, mint tea, milk, and cream. Sauces: parsley mint, pesto, tomato. And salad dressings: sesame, balsamic mustard. There are almost no commercial products besides a bottle of Heinz ketchup.

I can see June everywhere in this fridge, even though I just met her today. But I can't see Kingsley, or tell what's his. One vegetable bin is filled with zucchini and corn. The other is filled with small packets, like tiny manila envelopes. They are labeled in block capitals: *BROCK. JUNE. MEER. KINGSLEY. TATUM. And MATILDA.*

There are four packets with my name on them.

I only arrived this morning. Did June make them today? She said she didn't know I was coming.

Maybe this means she's planning to let me stay for a while.

I pick one up. I want to open it, but that means breaking the seal on the envelope. There will be no going back. So instead I take one labeled Kingsley, because there are many of these. A single one probably won't be missed.

I pry the seal open carefully—but the envelope spills anyway, because it is filled with a fine, herby-looking powder. The powder goes all over the crisper bin, down the front of my black dress, and across the door ledge of the fridge. Damn.

I dust my hands on my clothes and scan the kitchen for the best way to clean up the mess.

“What are you doing?”

I freeze at the voice.

A boy stands in the doorway. He wears jeans, but his feet are bare. His baseball cap keeps his face in shadow. He is silhouetted by the hallway light, his outline slightly menacing.

Tatum. Who said I shouldn’t be here. Who wants to get rid of me.

He steps forward. It’s my taxi driver.

The boy who charged me fifteen extra dollars to take me to the strawberry. The person I didn’t tip. He is gasoline and peppermint and resentment, hulking in the door. His cheekbones look angry.

“What are you doing?” he repeats.

My mother often says that some women (many women) act meek to pacify dangerous-seeming men. And that some women (many women) play innocent to avoid conflict. And that women in our society are taught to make themselves likable. To smile and ingratiate themselves at any cost.

She has many faults, but she didn’t bring me up like that.

“Hi, Tatum,” I say, as if we’ve been introduced. I stand in the light of the open fridge door, unapologetic. “Do you remember me?” I say. “From the airport.”

“I remember.”

“I remember you, too. Rude as hell.”

He shrugs.

“Did you know where I was going this morning?” I ask. “Did Kingsley tell you I was coming and you figured you’d just mess with me and leave me half a mile from this place?”

“No,” he says. “I didn’t. And he didn’t.”

I stare at him for a beat. “Meer didn’t tell you I was coming, either?”

“No.”

“That’s hard to believe. He was waiting for me.”

“Think what you want. He didn’t tell me.”

“Well,” I say, “you’ve got a nice racket going, charging extra when people are confused about directions.”

“That’s not—” He takes a step forward. “Why are you opening our packets?”

“I’m curious. This white powder. Is it cocaine? Adderall?”

“Very funny. This isn’t your fridge, Matilda.”

“So you know my name.”

“Meer told me you were here. *After* you arrived.”

“Wonderful. Then we’re sure to be the best of friends,” I say sardonically. “And yeah, it’s not my fridge, but I came to meet my father and he turns out to be off-island, so hunting around in his fridge is the next best thing. It’s hardly a crime.”

“Hold up,” Tatum says. He grabs a sponge from the sink and comes toward me. His hands are large and have writing on them in Sharpie. *Remember my name*, it reads on one hand. And on the other: *’Cause we made history*.

That’s a lyric in a song I absolutely love, but seeing it written on Tatum’s mean, unfriendly hands just makes me mad. He shouldn’t like *my* music. It’s annoying.

For a second I think he’s going to grab my wrist. He looms over me. But Tatum just uses the sponge to wipe the herb powder from the shelves and the ledge of the fridge. He takes the crisper bin out.

Meticulous, he removes each packet from the bin, keeping them sorted by name. He rinses the bin in the sink.

I watch him in silence. Finally, he replaces the bin in the fridge. Everything looks as it did before I opened the packet.

“I could help,” I say belligerently when he is done. “Since I made the mess.”

“You’ve done enough already.”

He is staking out his territory. Telling me, *you may be Kingsley’s daughter, but you don’t belong here*.

Doesn’t matter if I belong. I need to meet my father. For some people, family has nothing to do with biology, but I feel the pull of kinship. I’ve felt it since the moment I got that first email. Kingsley’s blood runs in my veins,

and I am not leaving because some rude emo taxi boy doesn't like the tiny mess I made in his kitchen.

"What's in the packets?" I ask accusingly.

"Chia."

Chia seeds are something people get in their smoothies in California.
"What else?"

"Herbs and collagen. The white powder is collagen."

"Why are the packets labeled with our names? Who makes them?"

"I do."

"You. What are you, some kind of nutrition expert at seventeen?"

"Nineteen," he says. "I make them under June's direction. She's a skilled herbalist and she gives us each what we need, systemically."

"Systemically," I mock.

"She asked me to make you four packets with collagen, hemp hearts, and chia seed for fiber and protein, plus ginseng for energy. It's meant to be welcoming, Matilda."

"You're expert at welcoming," I tell him. "Thanks for making me feel so at home. I'm impressed with your warm interpersonal skills."

"Fine. Snoop in the fridge all you want," Tatum says. "Did you look in the pantry yet? Have you opened the drawers? How about the medicine cabinets? There are several, and it might take you a while to look in every single one, but I'm happy to show them to you. No, wait, I have a better idea. Come upstairs and look under my bed. See what I'm hiding. Would you like to go through my wallet? Look at all the texts on my phone? Because I really want you to feel welcome here, and that's what you're supposed to do to make a person feel welcome, right? Let them invade your privacy?"

"It was literally a crisper drawer," I shoot back. "People do go in the crisper drawers at other people's houses, you know. Sometimes there is *fruit* in there. It's a reasonable, normal thing to go in a crisper drawer."

"You already admitted you were hunting around in Kingsley's fridge. And you thought it was full of drugs."

Okay, that's true. But he's terrible.

I turn my back and stomp out the sliding door.

I find Meer and Brock outside. They're playing Frisbee and grilling, simultaneously. They've got the grill set up near a huge tree by the edge of the cliff. Nestled in the high grass is a long picnic table and an assortment of mismatched wooden chairs. They're cooking up the steak Brock bought. They have a carton of premade potato salad, and another of coleslaw. Four large bags of potato chips, some beer and seltzer.

June is too busy to join us for dinner, says Meer. She's got projects going on, upstairs in her studios. Weaving and herbal work. And Tatum doesn't seem to be around.

"Yes, he is. I met him in the kitchen," I say.

"Really?" says Brock. "And did you love him? Girls love him. Or do you love me?"

"I love no one," I say. "God, you're a flirt."

"He's handsome, but I'm more fun."

"Shut up," I retort. "Do we know each other well enough for me to say that? I think we do."

I am not flirting with Brock after overhearing his conversation with Tatum. And I don't want to get near anyone anyway, since Luca knew everything about me and then decided I was a maladjusted creepy nerd-girl who didn't even deserve friends.

"I can shut up," says Brock. He looks down at the steaks on the grill and pays very close attention to flipping them over and brushing them with marinade.

I feel bad now. He looks like a scolded kid. "You got all different kinds of potato chips," I say, conciliatory. "So fun."

"There's barbecue, honey mustard, ranch, and a terrifying pickle flavor," says Brock, grinning at me. "I haven't tried the pickle yet. Do you want to do the honors?"

I'm upset with Brock for wanting to get rid of me, but it's very hard to hate him. He's a complete clown. He heaps my plate with steak and pickle-flavor potato chips. He worries about Tatum missing dinner. He tells a funny story about having his zipper down when he met Miley Cyrus. Then

he tells about the aftermath of that fire on the island across the way. “No one on the Vineyard can get a tree doctor or arborist or whatever anymore because all the tree doctors are spending their days on Beechwood, looking after the tree needs of the Sinclair family. Because they pay more than regular people. And so this lady at the grocery store, like an older lady from the Wampanoag community in Aquinnah, she told me she rented a chain saw and cut down this branch from her tree that was scraping her roof. By herself. Her grown-up children were mad at her because they said it wasn’t safe, but she told me that she was going to do all her own chain saw work from now on. Then she said the Sinclair family acts like they’re some kind of landed gentry going back to the sixteenth century. There’s no royalty in the USA and this land is Wampanoag land and everyone else is just squatting on it.”

“What did you say to that?” I ask.

“I said she was no doubt right and asked if she was ready to give chain saw lessons,” says Brock. “Then she asked if I did yard work and I said, nah, I’m an actor, and she said complimentary things about my physique. She was a little dirty-minded, actually.”

He’s bought a deck of cards on his outing to town. He pulls them from his pocket when we’re done eating. He wants to play a game called Mao where you don’t explain the rules to the new players. Meer and I will just have to figure it out as we play, says Brock, based on the penalties he doles out as the emcee.

“I’m going to completely fail, you know,” says Meer. “I literally can play war and go fish. That’s it.”

“Expand your horizons,” says Brock. He shoves aside the potato chip bags and deals the cards.

The rules become obvious to me pretty quickly. Jacks are wild, no talking, eights reverse play, aces skip the next player’s turn. Say “Have a nice day” when you play a seven.

“You’re freakishly competent,” Brock tells me. “Have you played this before?”

“Nah. But my brain is good like that.”

“I’m so confused,” moans Meer.

“Penalty for talking,” says Brock.

“Matilda talked,” says Meer.

“Penalty to Matilda, too.”

“I’m sorry I told you to shut up,” I say.

“Penalty for talking, again,” says Brock. “But that’s okay.”

Later, Meer walks me to the edge of the cliff, near where the staircase leads to the beach.

“You can see Beechwood Island from here,” he says, pointing. “It’s far, but you can. See?”

The setting sun is nearly at the horizon line. I can only make out a vague shape in the distance.

“The *Gazette* said the Sinclairs have a bunch of houses there,” Meer continues, “but the big one, the main house—that’s the one that burned.”

“People died, right?”

“They were a little younger than us.”

“Did you know them?”

“No. Two were in the family, cousins. And one was a friend of theirs. I got the names from the article: Mirren Sheffield, Jonathan Dennis, and Gatwick Patil.” Meer’s somber look changes to mischief. “Brock and I are going over there tonight. And Tatum’s coming, too.”

“To Beechwood Island?”

“Mm-hm. You should come. We have a boat docked in Menemsha.”

“Why?”

“Just to explore. I want to see it. Don’t you? I’ve never seen a burned building.”

“I’ve seen them on TV.”

“I don’t really watch TV. And anyway, it’ll be different in real life.” He turns away from me. “But don’t come if you’re like, scared or anything.” He says it like a kid in a cartoon, a silly imitation of peer pressure.

Thing is, I am scared. We’d be trespassing on a private island belonging to a powerful rich man, walking around in the ruins of a building where people just died.

But Meer bites his lip when he's thinking. He didn't fit in at school. He keeps a sketchbook full of ideas. He has a wildness inside him that doesn't know where to go, most of the time.

Like me. Like me.

"Count me in," I say.

"Good," says Meer. "Meet in the garage at eleven."

Just then Tatum begins to climb the stairs that lead up from the beach. He is dripping wet, a boogie board under one arm, dressed only in board shorts. His shoulders gleam in the light like they're made of liquid metal.

Meer runs down to meet him "My sister's here," he says, his voice low.

"I met her." Tatum speaks low, too, but I can still hear them.

"Won't you come hang out?"

"I need a shower. Haven't eaten." Tatum shakes his head.

"She's wonderful," says Meer. "She has this way about her, like she could conquer things. Like her mind is always going. But also, she fainted. It's like a dream came to life, you know? She's the sister I used to imagine, when I didn't have anyone to play with, before you came. Only she's real."

"Is she asking a lot of questions?"

"What? No. Well, yes, actually. But I'm not hiding anything from her, so it doesn't matter."

"We talked about this. You know what I think. I'm not going over it all again."

"You're going to change your mind when you get to know her because you'll see," says Meer. "We're blood relations. That's not the only kind of family, but it means something. She has my same nose, I think? Like Kingsley's."

"Later," says Tatum.

"But, Tatum," says Meer. "I want you to—"

"I'm really tired," says Tatum. He goes past Meer up the rest of the staircase. But he has to pass me, standing near the top of the steps, in order to get to the castle.

"Maybe you should have some ginseng," I say. "To improve your energy."

He doesn't answer.

20

One thing about gaming is, you burn through your rage. You've angry-birded all those evil pigs to death, or you set up a million killer plants to destroy the disco-loving zombies who are staggering across your lawn. You feel victorious and cleansed of the angry crap inside you—the ex who told lies about you and the friends who turned against you. The father who never wanted to meet you. The mother who prioritized a man and left you. The rude taxi boy with beautiful shoulders who hates you so much on sight he won't even give you a chance.

You clean out your fury by slaughtering mermaids and pigs and zombies. It's only later, when you put the game down, that you can think about why you liked it. And what it meant.

In *Something Rotten*, the game I was on with Saar before I left, you play as Hamlet. Like, from the Shakespeare play. And you're basically fighting your way through a castle full of deceivers and merrymakers in order to kill your murderous stepfather (King Claudius) and avenge your father's death.

Rotten has really innovative weapons. Not just broadswords, but grenades that explode like fireworks and a tiny flock of ravenous flying dragons, plus these small cubes you roll at your enemies that turn them into hedgehogs.

I have it on my laptop, and I was in the middle of trying to beat the Ophelia boss level. But June has locked up my devices. It's strange to be without social media, without games, without texts. My mind is buzzing. I pace the Iron Room.

I flip open my sketchbook and make notes about how to beat Ophelia when I get back to the game. Then I draw out an idea for a level that doesn't exist, a great hall. When Hamlet goes in, it's all in darkness, so he has to find a light switch. When he does, the green glass chandelier becomes a tentacled monster that comes to life and blocks his way. It shoots Hamlet with toxic slime, then reaches out to capture him by his ankles. Then it eats him by shoving him headfirst into its creepy octopus mouth.

At ten minutes to eleven, I put on sweats and sneakers and go down to meet Meer for our boat ride to Beechwood Island.

In front of the garage, Tatum stands staring down the driveway. He wears a cotton cable-knit sweater and track pants. His wide shoulders are hunched, his now-dry espresso hair is chaotic, his eyebrows dark and sullen.

He doesn't turn or acknowledge me.

I don't want to be alone with him. But I don't want to miss adventuring with Meer.

Neither one of us speaks. We just stare into the dark.

Glum trots out of the mist and drops a stick at Tatum's feet. She is looming and gray and shaggy, a really enormous creature, but she wags and woofs like any other playful dog as he picks up the stick. Tatum throws it hard and it arcs down the driveway. Glum scampers off.

After a beat, she's back, stick in mouth. She drops it and he throws it again.

"Is Meer running late?" I ask, finally.

Tatum shrugs. Not looking at me.

"What does that mean?" I say.

"He's like his dad. Not bound by the clock."

"He told me to meet him at eleven."

"Same."

Glum comes up again, eyes bright and friendly. I've always loved dogs, and a couple of my mother's boyfriends had them, but I've never had one of my own. I want to ask Tatum how old she is, who named her, and whether she is an Irish wolfhound or something else. But he's so cold that I settle for holding my hand out to the dog.

Glum sniffs me and then steps forward, panting, to let me stroke her ears. "Hello, my new pal," I say. "You are a delight. Yes, you are." As my hand touches the shaggy fur of her forehead, love wells up—the kind of instant love I already have for Meer. It's easier to have for animals than for people. There is so much in my heart and hardly any person to give it to.

"Glum's a terror and a horror," Tatum says, but he says it fondly.

“No, she’s wonderful. Why do you say that?”

“She craps on the rug.”

“With all this outdoor space? Can’t she go out whenever she wants?”

“She has inner demons. She’s expressing her anxiety. Or something.”

“What does she have anxiety about?” I ask. And then to Glum, who has dropped the stick at my feet. “You have a good doggie life, I think. Top-notch. Oh, look at you, wagging. You seriously crap on the rug inside? That’s hard to believe, my furry pal.”

“I’ll tell you something dark,” Tatum says.

“What?”

“Last time she did it on the rug, I was like, forget it. I’m not cleaning it. I saw it, but I let it sit there. And it was like, a big honking dog poo, not just a little squiggle. I swear, steam was coming off of it.”

I laugh. It’s like he’s peeled away his protective outer skin suddenly, letting me glimpse what’s underneath. The darkness, and also the sense of humor.

“Anyway,” Tatum goes on. “Whatever. First couple times she did it, I was worried. Like maybe she was sick. So I took her to the vet, which June did not want, because Kingsley doesn’t like dog hair in the car even though the car is seriously old and messed up, but also June doesn’t want the expense of the vet and she doesn’t believe in that kind of medicine. But I insisted. I said I’d pay for it. She gave me all these blankets to put in the back seat.” He turns to me for the first time in all this conversation and smiles. He has big, surprising dimples on both sides of his face when he does that. “But I let Glum ride in the front. We put the top down.”

Glum has fetched and now drops the stick at his feet. Tatum throws it again for her.

“Did you seat belt her?”

Tatum nods. “She was so happy. And when we got back, I wiped the fur off and no one ever found out. Anyway, the vet said there was nothing to worry about. But Glum—she kept soiling the rug. A different spot different days, so sometimes you wouldn’t see it, you know?”

“Ugh.”

“And then this one day I told you about, I just—I know it’s gross, but I had basically had it. I felt like, here is something bad and upsetting in the middle of the living room and none of you are going to even acknowledge it, because you know I’ll take care of it and make it go away? What’s going to happen if I leave it? How long are you going to pretend everything is clean when there’s a calcifying pile of dog crap stinking up the living room? How long?”

“How long was it?”

“Five days.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

I think back to the old pink juice on the mantel, the encrusted plates in the dining room, the trash and crumbs on the floor.

“Believe me,” continues Tatum. “They all just pretended this foul, rotten, toxic thing was *not there*. Right in the house.”

It’s a disturbing story, but I remind myself that he wants me to leave. Of course he’s going to tell a disturbing story. “I have lived with a good number of different people who were deeply messy,” I say. “But not like that.”

“You’ve lived with a good number of different people?” Tatum turns to me again, but this time, his dimples aren’t showing. There’s a delicate furrow between his brows.

“Yes.”

“Oh.” He pauses but doesn’t ask any more about it. “Meer pays close attention to some things, but other things aren’t even visible to him. I feel like that’s part of his nature, or his brain, or whatever. And Brock, he grew up working all the time, he worked his whole childhood, but at the same time he never had to like, do laundry. Or wash a dish. So even though he’s in this process of transformation, he’s basically constitutionally unable to clean anything.”

“I’m sharing a bathroom with him, so I already know.”

The dimples flash. “Brock showed up here like a year ago, saying basically, teach me how to be a person. And Kingsley said he could stay.”

“Teach me how to be a person?”

“Well, apparently not a person who thinks to clean up a pile of festering dog crap, but a person, like, in touch with his humanity. Which I guess Brock wasn’t. But he fell in love with Kingsley’s art and came here.” Tatum shrugs. “He’s not the only one to do that. He’s just the only one who’s here now.”

“Kingsley didn’t clean up the Glum poo either?”

“He did not.”

“And June didn’t.”

“June’s focus is on the tinctures. On the indigo. On her herbs and weavings.”

So that’s why Brock stocks the fridge. Because June and Kingsley don’t.

Tatum has a strong, wide nose. The area beneath his eyes is puffy, as if he’s tired. The delicate baby fat on Meer and the ripples of muscle on Brock have both been stripped away from Tatum, leaving a bunch of complicated hostilities and opinions sutured together with copper wires to make up a boy.

“Hoy!” says a voice from behind us. And there is Meer, wearing a sweatshirt that seems much too large. “I fell asleep,” he says, scratching his head. “Then I woke up.”

Brock trails behind him. “I fell asleep and then Meer woke me up,” he adds. “Why didn’t you come get us?” he asks Tatum.

“Didn’t know if we were really going.”

“Oh, it’s *on*,” says Meer. “The longer we wait, the more likely the Sinclair family will go back to the island. We need to go tonight.”

“Why are we going, at all?” asks Tatum.

“I have no idea,” says Brock. “But it’s been a while since we caused any mayhem.”

“And you want to bring Matilda?” Tatum asks. “Trespassing and all that? She just got here and we don’t even know her.”

And just like that, I hate him again. “I’m fine to go,” I say.

“Of course I want to bring Matilda,” says Meer. “I was waiting for her to come so she could be with us.”

“Waiting for her?” Tatum sounds scornful.

“We trespass all the time,” Brock explains to me. “We’re professional-level trespassers.”

“Beechwood is an *island*,” says Tatum. “Not just a piece of land down the road. And it’s owned by a really powerful family.”

Brock looks at him deadpan. “We trespassed on the Kennedy property,” he says. “And Ted Danson’s. And that place the Obamas used to rent. Powerful people and their ideas about their land don’t actually faze you.”

“Why are you people trespassing all the time?” I ask.

“For the swimming pools,” says Tatum, at the same time Brock says, “’Cause we’re absolute anarchic criminals.”

“Swimming pools and tennis courts,” Meer explains. “A lot of the summer rentals on the island turn over every week or two. People leave around noon, cleaning crews come in, and that night, the places are empty before new people come.”

“Most of them don’t have security systems,” says Tatum.

“Couldn’t you just fix up your pool?” I ask.

“Nah,” says Meer. “Too complicated.”

“How do you know which houses to go to?”

Tatum grins. “A girl I used to know works for a cleaning crew that a lot of these high-end places use. She gave me the passwords for a couple of their rental service accounts.”

“She was his girlfriend,” says Meer. “Last summer they used to go hook up in the pools like total porno heathens.”

“Shut up,” says Tatum softly, his ears turning red. “Anyway, this year I can still log in to a couple of them, so I just check their calendars.”

“So are you coming tonight or what?” says Meer to Tatum.

“I just think we should go somewhere else.” Tatum looks at the tops of his sneakers. “Anywhere else. On the whole Vineyard.”

“This is just a night adventure,” says Meer. “You don’t want to go on the night adventure, don’t go. But it’s not that different from the others.”

“It is different. You obviously know that.”

“Why?” asks Meer. His face is open and childlike.

“People died there last week,” says Tatum.

21

He goes anyway. The boys pull three Vespas from one corner of the garage. They offer me a spare helmet. They don't want June to hear the motors, so we walk the scooters down the long driveway in the dark.

No one has a phone, but I'm still holding a flashlight, so I shine it in front of us.

We walk mostly in silence till we're far from the castle. Glum trails us till about the halfway point, then turns tail.

Brock starts singing a nonsensical assortment of pop songs that are currently popular—"Call Me Maybe" mashed up with "Payphone."

"Brock," says Tatum.

"Shut up, you love me," says Brock.

"I love you," says Tatum. "But not your music taste."

"Oh blerg. Matilda, did you know Tatum has a banjo band of roving troubadours?"

Tatum turns to me, flushing. "The music program at school had bands. I did this one where we played traditional songs and like, seventies folk rock."

"There was a banjo!" yells Brock.

"I didn't *play* it," says Tatum. "But if I did, that would have been extremely cool, you judgmental butt."

Meer puts his arm around me. "I play ukulele, but I think I could torture Brock more with banjo. Do you play anything?"

"I play nothing, but I sing like a rock god," puts in Brock. "Nobody appreciates me."

"I thought you didn't need praise anymore," says Meer.

"I'm *trying* not to need praise," says Brock. "But I still really like it. *Do* you play an instrument, Matilda?"

"No, but I did choir at a bunch of different schools."

"Did you sing banjo troubadour songs?" asks Brock, dodging the fake punch Tatum throws at him.

"No. It was like, Alicia Keys and ABBA."

We've reached the bottom of the driveway. With no warning, mid-conversation, Meer and Brock throw on their helmets, turn on their headlights, and rev their motors. They take off to the left, down South Road.

They're gone before I even fully realize what they're doing. Their taillights quickly disappear over the hill.

Tatum gets on his scooter. It's mint green. "Put your helmet on. Let's go." He says it like it's burdensome.

I don't want to get on his scooter. I don't like him. But I'm not going to break my word to Meer. "Coming." I buckle my helmet and climb on behind him. My arms circle his waist as Tatum flips on his headlight and pulls out onto the road.

It feels strange and intimate. The cables of his sweater brush my bare arms. The wind is cold on my skin.

22

Menemsha is a really small fishing village. All I can see is a gas station, two fish markets, and a marina with a parking lot near the docks. There are houses up the hill, and maybe some more shops farther down the road.

Down one dock a ways we find the motorboat that belongs to Kingsley and June. It's large and shiny white, with a black hull and cushioned seats. The name on it reads *Marsh-wiggle*.

Meer steers us out of the harbor and into the open water. Looking back to the land, I can only see glimmers from houses not yet put to bed. The water around us is lit up by the boat's lights.

Beyond that, the ocean spreads around us, infinite.

Brock and Meer talk to each other, up by the wheel. I can't hear them over the roar of the motor. We head past the jetty and into the open sea.

I am so tiny in this enormous world. The water could swallow me easily. There's no telling how deep it is.

I have left my old life behind, and it was already
a life

adrift.

I'm nowhere. I spiral into the infinite space around and below me, unable to grab on to anything overwhelmed by the vastness of the sea and sky.

"You get motion sick?" Tatum in the back next to me, his long legs folded up to his chest for warmth.

"Not at all," I lie.

"You look queasy."

I hadn't realized he was looking at me at all. "I'm fine."

"Brock said you fainted. And got sick at the airport?"

I hate that those things are true, so all I say is "It's strange being out here at night."

"I actually love it," he says.

"The impossible looming void?"

"The infinity. Or the depths, or whatever. Everyday problems are unimportant out here."

I concentrate on Tatum's profile to steady my mind. His lower lip juts out as he squints against the wind. The dimples are hiding, but his freckles are clearly visible where the moonlight hits his face.

It's probably the fatigue talking, but I can't help thinking about how his waist felt underneath my hands as we rode on the Vespa, the way his body shifted as we leaned into the curves of the road.

Beechwood Island looms into view slowly, a dark shape before us like a variation in the black of the sky. At first I think it's only my imagination.

Meer circles it. The rocky cliffs give way to more approachable land, and I can make out some shapes that might be houses.

We come to a long wooden dock that sits at one edge of a cove where there is a sandy beach. A large sailboat is docked there.

Meer cuts our lights.

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Part Four

Beechwood

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A brick chimney stretches more than three stories high, but the walls of the great house no longer stand. The shingles at the base are burned black. The beams are intact in some places. Here and there, an empty window frame. Some parts are nothing but piles of rubble on the ground.

In the charred yard, a tree has burned. Its sad arms arch wide across the lawn. A tire swing, mangled and melted, lies below it.

Everything smells of firewood and charcoal. Under that, the smells are chemical and sour.

"I'm gonna look for the pool," says Brock. "This is too mother-effing dark." He has been fidgeting as I stand still in thought. Meer and Tatum are walking slowly around the wreckage.

"M-kay," I say, and Brock takes off to the bottom of the yard, where a wooden walkway stretches into the still-standing trees.

We stare at the wreckage. The back of my neck tingles.

"This is bad," says Tatum, looking at the scorched earth beneath his feet. "We shouldn't have come."

Meer blinks. "I'm sorry. It's worse than I thought."

"It's the *same* as I thought," says Tatum.

"I had this idea—I didn't know it would feel so sad," says Meer. He turns to me. "Do you want to know about the people who live here? The Sinclair family."

"*Lived* here," says Tatum. "Past tense."

"They still live on the island," says Meer. He walks over and touches the tree. His hand comes away covered in soot. "Most of them survived. And their other houses are fine. The fire didn't get near them. It said so in the *Gazette*."

"Who are they?" I ask.

"A super-old family. And the grandpa, Harris Sinclair, he's a publishing boss guy up in Boston. He owns newspapers and magazines. And he's got a brother or two, and three grown daughters. The daughters each have a house

on the island. This”—Meer gestures at the wreckage—“this was Harris Sinclair’s house.”

“I’m out,” says Tatum. “Gonna find Brock. And the pool, if there is one.”

“Wait.”

Tatum stops.

“I’m sorry,” says Meer, looking flustered. “I didn’t think about—I didn’t think about your— Are you upset because of—?”

“My parents?” says Tatum.

Meer nods.

“My parents died in a car crash,” Tatum says to me, sharply. “On the Vineyard, driving home in the snow. They swerved to avoid a deer, people think. But they were also high. My dad was driving high. They were high a lot. Anyway, their car caught fire in the impact.”

My chest floods with unexpected sympathy for him. He’s an orphan.

I should have guessed that, given that he lives with June and Kingsley, but I’ve been too caught up in myself to wonder about Tatum’s history. “That’s terrible,” I say, feeling like any words I say will be inadequate.

“Yeah, well. You didn’t know them. I’m just explaining so you don’t have to wonder what we’re talking about.”

My sympathy drains away. He’s so defensive and bitter all the time. “Fine.”

“I didn’t think about it,” says Meer. “But I should have.”

“S’okay. I didn’t have to come with,” says Tatum, softening. “That’s on me.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tatum socks Meer in the arm, gently. “Don’t take it hard. Just—lemme be on my own for a bit. ’Kay?”

“ ’Kay.”

And Tatum is gone.

Meer and I look at the ruin in silence. “I imagined the ashes would glow,” he says, finally. “Or the grand house would reveal its secrets, or something. I guess I thought it would be like stepping into one of our father’s paintings. I could see what he sees in his imagination all the time,

and understand it. All those burning buildings, the castles, the underworld, the girl with her feet covered in ash. Why are things always up in flames?”

“Did he see a fire?” I ask. “When he was younger? Is he painting something he knows?”

“If he did, he never talks about it.”

“Does he talk about being a kid?”

“Never,” says Meer. “Well, he’ll say something like, he only liked chocolate ice cream when he was a boy. Or he used to have a toy airplane. Or he saw ghosts, even. But he never talks about his family, or stuff they did together. All his true stories are from when he was already a grown-up.” Meer shrugs. “It’s how it’s always been. I figured coming here would be kind of like a journey to the inside of Kingsley’s head. And I thought you’d want to see it, too. But it didn’t turn out like I wanted.”

We follow the wooden walkway that Tatum and Brock took, going out of the yard. “I have something to confess,” Meer says.

“What?”

“I did know one of the kids who died. Who lived here. I mean, I knew her on social media.”

“I thought you weren’t on it.”

“Two mornings a week,” he says. “When we get the computers out. I knew Mirren that way. I knew her grandma Tipper, too, back when she was alive. Tipper was on the Vineyard a lot. She knew our dad. Anyway, Mirren and I texted. We said we should meet up when she was here this summer, only we never got around to it. First I didn’t see her message, and then when I wrote back, she didn’t have service on Beechwood, and so . . . We didn’t ever.”

“Did you like her, like as a girlfriend?”

“No, no,” says Meer. “I had a boyfriend last year. A summer person.”

“Oh.”

“I just—I do have some online friends, but no one who actually lives here. Because of the homeschooling and all. I mean, I have Brock now,” Meer goes on. “But he has zero interest in meeting people because he’s in recovery and living like a monk.”

“What about Tatum?”

“He has friends,” says Meer. “From school and his job and stuff. But now they don’t . . . Anyway. They’re all leaving in the fall and I don’t even like them. But Mirren, she was just across the water, so we could have hung out. She used to post these travel collages, not of places she’d been—because I think she was mostly here on the island in the summers—but like, places she wanted to go. When she was in college or out of school, or someday. She wanted to see wildlife, like big animals and apes and birds. Rainforests in the Congo and stuff like that.” The words are spilling out of him.

I am beginning to understand that Meer is a curious mix of qualities. He seems utterly relaxed and generous with his time and energy while also being slightly unsocialized. He’s got that sweet baby face and seems confident in his body—but he clearly didn’t have enough game to meet up with Mirren Sheffield, even as a friend, though he has access to a motorboat and she was on this island all summer. He’s come here now that she’s dead, which is a little ghoulish, and yet he seems innocent about how it might come off.

“I don’t have a lot of friends, either,” I say. “Or really, any.”

“You don’t?” Meer stops walking and turns to me. “You seem like, well, like anyone would want to be around you. Like you’d be popular.”

“Well, what you’re seeing on my social media isn’t most of my actual life.”

“You told people when your mom moved away.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t say I was eating lunch alone in the cafeteria. And that everyone at school wrote me off as a strange, angry nerd-girl.”

Meer puts his arm around me and we start walking again. “I like strange, angry nerd-girls,” he says. “If that’s what you are. I’d totally eat with you in the cafeteria.”

“Oh good,” I say. “I’d eat with you, too.” We reach a place where the pathway stretches around the perimeter of the island, and I follow Meer as we walk along a cliff’s edge. “Are you going to college?” I ask. “I mean, I get that you don’t like institutions. But are you doing something like that, anyway?”

“College isn’t for me.”

“I meant something *like* that.”

“What would I do?”

“Like, apprentice to a tattoo artist or a cheesemaker or something. Or do an outdoor education course where you trek across mountains.” Kingsley clearly has so much money, Meer could go anywhere, learn anything. Does he just want to be idle?

“Whatever,” he says. “I don’t want to be a cheesemaker.”

“Travel to Japan? Become a high-level ukulele player? I don’t know. What are you into?”

He doesn’t answer for a beat. “What are *you* gonna do?” he finally asks.

“Study game design at UC Irvine.”

“Like what, like board games?”

“Video. Invent them, code them, design how they look, that kind of thing.”

“I’m so game deprived,” says Meer. “I feel like I’m into them, but I don’t even know where to start. I tried *Temple Run*, but it made me sweat.”

I laugh.

“What’s the best game you’ve played? Tell me.”

I’m not sure what he’ll like, but I describe *Killer Odyssey*. And then *Arkham City*. Meer keeps asking, “What happens next?,” so I tell him the plot twists like stories as we make our way through the dark.

24

Brock and Tatum are volleying on the tennis court. Dim night-lights shine onto the green clay. Brock plays shirtless, wearing board shorts and Crocs. Tatum has rolled up the sleeves on his sweater.

“Where did you get racquets?” calls Meer.

“There’s a hutch,” says Tatum, breathing hard. “It isn’t locked.” He serves, and his sweater rides up to show a strip of skin above his pants. “It’s got a mini fridge with water and soda if you’re thirsty. And there was a basket of balls.”

“Plus a weird lemon,” says Brock, who has missed the serve and is now running after a ball.

“An ordinary lemon in a weird place,” Tatum corrects him. “It was in with the balls, like a joke.”

“Did you all take lessons?” I ask. I don’t know how to play tennis.

“I taught them both everything I know,” says Brock, failing again to return Tatum’s serve.

Tatum turns to me and Meer. “It was a gym option in school,” he says. “Should we play snowball?”

Snowball turns out to be a ridiculous game in which we put ten tennis balls on one side of the court and nine plus the lemon on the other. Brock and I throw our balls (and lemon) to Meer and Tatum’s side while they’re throwing theirs over to our side.

The team with the most balls on their side of the court loses.

It’s frantic and fierce. The lemon falls apart with repeated injuries. I get hit with balls many times—and manage to hit Tatum with almost as many. We play for half an hour, maybe? Forty minutes? I lose track of time, but my breathing is hard and I am staggering.

Suddenly, I stumble and skid across the court, scraping my palms and wrists. Pain shoots through me, and when I pick my hands up, they are bloody.

The boys stop throwing. The balls bounce and roll to stillness. The lemon does nothing.

The tennis court comes into focus around me.

And the trees around the court.

The tragedy that happened just beyond the trees.

I realize I had forgotten everything but the game.

“We never set a timer,” Brock moans. “It’s supposed to be played in five-minute innings. We could have gone on forever.”

“Until we collapsed,” says Tatum.

“Until we starved and dehydrated and died and then we were nothing but skeletons, still playing,” says Meer.

“The haunted tennis courts of Beechwood Island,” says Brock. “It has a ring to it.”

They are united in this idea that they could not have stopped themselves, that they were somehow unable to exit the game once they set it in motion.

“Matilda? You okay?” asks Brock.

“She’s not getting up,” says Meer.

I feel like crying. My knees are bruised; my wrists hurt. My hands are ripped raw by the surface of the court.

I’m so damn tired. This island is so strange and sad. But I don’t want to seem weak.

I’m a guest, and they’re all at home.

They live in a castle, and I don’t live anywhere.

They all know each other, and I’m a stranger.

And Tatum doesn’t want me to be here.

I stand up. “I’m fine,” I say. “Only a flesh wound.”

That’s a Monty Python joke. Brock laughs, but the other two look blank.

I tuck my bleeding hands into the pockets of my sweatpants.

The boys begin arguing about whether they can play Snowball again without a timer. They decide to set up bowling instead, using a load of empty water bottles they have discovered in a recycling bin.

Tatum thinks they should find some water to fill the bottles partway so they won’t tip over so easily. Meer says that if they have water in them they won’t fall over easily *enough*. Brock looks through the recycle bin and wonders which of the Sinclairs drinks vodka while playing tennis and which one drinks Chablis.

Tears well behind my eyes. I don’t want to cry in front of them and have them think I’m crying about falling down. Or ask what I’m crying about. Or *not* ask what I’m crying about.

I don’t even know exactly why I’m crying, whether it’s my father not being there or my mother not being there, or the strange wonder of meeting Meer, or Tatum being so mean. Or whether it’s seeing the wreckage of the Sinclair house and knowing people died there so recently, people younger than me.

I leave the boys and follow a wooden walkway lit dimly with night-lights. Crickets chirp in the bushes. The roar of the ocean isn’t far away. I

can smell the burned wood of the decimated big house, the salt of the sea, the sweetness of the beach roses.

I reach a quaint house with a fence around it. The windows are dark on the side I'm on, but I can see lights on at the back of the ground floor, and lights upstairs, as if people left in a hurry.

A Ping-Pong table lives in one corner of the yard. There are Legos strewn across the porch. Nearby, a wooden staircase leads down to a tiny sand beach. I head down, kick off my shoes and roll up my pants. Then I wash my hands in the water. It stings, but also cools my burning palms and rinses off the dirt and gravel. I press them on my T-shirt to dry.

I turn when I hear a voice. "Matilda. There you are." Tatum stands on the beach behind me.

"Hey."

"We didn't know where you went."

"That must have been nice for you."

"What? No. We were worried." He pulls the sleeves of his sweater back down to his wrists and folds his arms like he's cold. "The guys are searching for you."

"Oh." I'm embarrassed. "I went to wash off my scrapes."

"We had bottled water," Tatum reminds me. "From the mini fridge. You could have used that."

"Well. Salt water is better for wounds."

"Can I see? Your hands."

He comes over and takes my fingertips in his, flipping my hands so he can see my palms. His touch is gentle. "Those are deep scrapes," he says.

"Yeah."

"You're shivering."

"I'm fine."

He says nothing but pulls his cabled sweater over his head and hands it to me. The muscles of his forearms flex under his freckled skin as he holds the sweater out. "Take it," he says when I hesitate.

The T-shirt he's wearing is tissue-thin from years of wear. It reads *La Biennale di Venezia 2008* and has a splotch of blue paint on the shoulder.

“Is that my dad’s old shirt?” I ask.

He looks down at his chest. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t imagine he was a guy who took home souvenirs.”

“He has a ton of clothes because he gets paint on them.” Tatum shrugs. “Let’s go down to the boat.”

I hate being in this weakened position, walking wounded. I hate that my face is puffy from tears. Tatum’s probably gloating about how my first night at Hidden Beach was nicely miserable without him really having to do anything. Now he’ll just need a few more rotten things to happen and I’ll run away. He’ll be rid of me and have his boys’ club to himself.

I even hate that he’s giving me his sweater, because it makes me feel small when I’d rather be a warrior. But I’m cold and exhausted, so I put it on. It smells of tangerine sunblock and laundry soap. It’s warm from the heat of his tall, irritating body and his bad personality.

I follow him to the dock.

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Part Five

Fairy Tale

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I come downstairs the next morning a little after noon, wearing the UC Irvine sweatshirt Saar bought me and a pair of shorts. Groggy.

June is alone in the living room, ironing under the gentle spin of the massive mobile. She has piled indigo clothes and linens in an enormous heap on the couch. Folded garments sit on the coffee table. “In high school I worked at the Gap,” she says. “They taught me how to fold.”

“Do you need help?”

“That’s all right. You’re a guest here.”

“Is there coffee?”

“No.” June smiles. “Kingsley and I stay away from stimulants because they deregulate the nervous system. Caffeine, nicotine, preservatives, nasal decongestants.”

“You have a lot of rules.”

“What do you mean?”

“No electronics. No stimulants.”

“They’re not rules,” says June. “They’re suggestions. The idea is to encourage social responsibility but not dictate it. I don’t want anyone to feel obligated. People should be in touch with their own systems, their own needs.”

I am not sure I see the difference between rules and suggestions.

“I know Tatum gets his iced coffees in town,” June goes on. “The boys love their potato chips and their store-bought coleslaw. I’m not judging that, or forbidding it. We just all feel better, and we’re at our most creative, when our bodies and minds aren’t jacked up on artificial foods and outside stimulants. And you know, Hidden Beach is where Brock was able to complete his recovery. There’s something nourishing about the way we live, even if it’s not what you’re used to.”

I’m silent for a minute, trying to figure out what I think. She claims she’s not rigid, but it seems like she *is*. She says she’s not forbidding anything, but she *is* forbidding. “You should have asked before you opened my bags and took my electronics,” I tell her. “Since it’s only a suggestion and not a rule.”

“You’re right,” says June. “I’m used to being the maternal figure, making calls on what’s going to be best for the boys and then guiding them to their best choices. But of course you’re different.”

“You didn’t guide me, actually. You just took my stuff.”

“Meer said he told you how we do things here.” She picks up a stack of linens and puts them in a large cardboard box. “But you have a good point. I should have asked. Why don’t you see how you feel with keeping electronics to a minimum?”

“I’d actually like my phone, please.”

She stares at me for a beat, then tells me that since it’s Monday, my devices are available in the office till two.

“What time does Kingsley get home today?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Will you tell me when you know which plane he’s on?”

“I won’t be checking my texts.”

“So he’ll just show up, later this afternoon?”

“Or he might not.”

“How will you know? Like, how much to cook? Or whether to wait up for him?”

“I never know what Kingsley’s plans are. That’s not the way our partnership works. You will need to be patient and discover what occurs. Why don’t you have some breakfast?”

“Is that another *suggestion*?”

“It’s an offering,” she says. “You’re a guest in my home and I want you to feel welcome and nourished.”

When I have eaten, June shows me to the Oyster Office, good on her word to give me access to my electronics. The room is at the base of Oyster Tower. It has one curved wall, similar to my bedroom. A wooden desk and chair are lit by a single lamp, and by the light that streams in the window. On the desk are six laptop computers, including mine. There is a bowl with five charging cell phones, also including mine. June gives me a piece of paper with the Wi-Fi password and leaves me alone.

On my phone, four texts from Saar.

A mirror selfie of him in a tight-fitting blue suit on his way to an industry event.

Stylist says baggy pants are over but I am REALLY NOT SURE. Might have regrets tomorrow.

You good? You didn't make fun of my suit, which makes me think you might be dead.

Checking in from LA. How was the dad meet? I googled Kingsley Cello and !#\$%&*.

And finally: Matilda! You okay? Pls confirm not dead. You know I have anxiety.

I should have checked in. It hadn't actually occurred to me that Saar would be wondering how I was.

I send him a video game gif from *Something Rotten*: Hamlet slaying a dragon. Your suit = rockstar vibes.

I think about telling him more—explaining about Kingsley being gone, meeting Meer, who is my brother, the indigo, the trip to Beechwood Island—but some part of me doesn't want to give a blow-by-blow of this journey to my anxiety-ridden, overexercising adult roommate, kind as he is. I want to just have it for myself. And I can't quite put it into words, anyway. So I write: We did a tie-dye project.

Saar writes back right away. It's super early in California, so I can picture him doing what he does every day at this time: lifting dumbbells in his garage gym, wearing his ancient Juilliard sweatpants.

Tie-dye, WTF?

Apple Cash \$400 sent by Saar Adler. For snacks and stuff you might need.

You've got this, Matilda. Lemme know when you need a flight home. I'll book it for you.

I heart his text, shut Messages, and google *Kingsley Cello Cinderella*.

I have heard my father's voice in a few video clips, but never on a podcast. This one is about contemporary art, and it seems to be the only program of this nature that Kingsley's ever done.

With my earbuds in, it sounds like he's right next to me. His voice is deep and his American accent standard, like the accents of wealthy people on TV, but he has a very slight lisp, which softens his authority.

The podcast is linked to some kind of art journal. The idea is to interview creators in depth about a single work of art. This one is about *Cliffside Gothic*, which was apparently displayed in a Cello retrospective that happened at the Tate Modern.

The host begins with a couple compliments, which Kingsley laughs at, and a biographical question, which Kingsley avoids. Then a question about the painting.

"There's this Grimm story I grew up with," says Kingsley, speaking slowly. "In it, a father sets three brothers into competition with one another. He wants to see who deserves the family house, the inheritance.

"One becomes a barber. The second becomes a blacksmith. The third becomes, what is it? A swordsman. A fencing expert, something like that. They all become masters at their crafts, and in the end, the swordsman wins the house—but he never wanted to be pitted against his kin. In fact, the three brothers love each other so much they decide to live in the house together all their lives, and in the end—I'll never forget this—in the end, they're all three buried in the same grave."

"Wow," says the host.

"Same grave! No wives, no partners, no children. Nothing and no one more important than their brotherhood." Kingsley pauses, then asks, "Are you like that with your brothers?"

"Me?" The host sounds confused.

"Yes. Do you have brothers?"

"Sure. But we're not like that. They're both accountants."

Kingsley laughs. "The point is, the father sets the brothers against each other and they do everything he wants. They spend years perfecting their crafts for his judgment. But in the end, their bond is stronger and more important than all that parental cruelty."

“And that’s what *Cliffside Gothic* is about?”

“Efraim.” Kingsley pauses. And waits.

“Pardon?” says the host, eventually.

“I assume you have looked at this painting, probably for some time, before interviewing me about it.”

“Yes. Yes, I have.”

“So you know that it is not a painting of brothers who love one other.”

“It’s a portrait of the family in ‘Cinderella,’ ” says the host. “Cinderella with her feet covered in ashes. With ash under her nails. Now, what’s the significance of that tale for you? Is it a favorite childhood story?”

“I just told you my favorite childhood story. It’s a pleasant one, don’t you think?”

“It’s got a very happy ending. Have you painted *that* story? The one about the brothers who live out their lives together?”

“I have not.”

The host coughs. He seems flustered. “But why ‘Cinderella’? And why the cliffside? This painting has gotten you a lot of attention. Our listeners are going to want to know the story behind it.”

“Families who pit their children against each other rarely end up with kids who want to be buried in the same grave,” says Kingsley. “The tale of the three brothers is a lovely fantasy, but the tale of ‘Cinderella’ is true.”

The host chuckles. “Many people would disagree with you. Isn’t ‘Cinderella’ about being rescued by a fairy godmother and finding Prince Charming?”

“It’s about sibling competition and hatred and never being considered good enough. That stuff happens all the time in families. Rich, poor, educated, working-class. All kinds. That’s why it’s true,” says Kingsley. “Look, Efraim. Thanks for having me on your show. But we’re done here. If I wanted to explain a painting, I wouldn’t be an artist. I’d be a critic.”

June startles me as the podcast ends. She's standing in the Oyster Office doorway. I don't know how long she's been there.

I take out my earbuds.

"It's two o'clock," she says. That's the time when she closes up the electronics.

I could insist on taking my phone. And my computer.

But she's right that I'm a guest in her home. And I don't want Kingsley to be annoyed that I'm ignoring his rules when I haven't even met him yet. So I plug my phone back into the charger and stand there awkwardly as June shuts the light and then locks the door behind us. "What happened to your hands?" she asks as we walk back into the living room.

I glance down. They look pretty terrible. "I fell."

"Where did you go?" she asks. "What made you fall?"

I shrug. I'm not getting the boys in trouble over our Beechwood Island adventure last night.

"I worry about Meer going out late," she says. "But I don't want to restrict his rhythms and impulses. I want him to be in touch with his own organic urges. That's why I don't limit his mobility."

"You don't let him use the car," I point out. "Isn't that a limit?"

"The car is Kingsley's." She takes hold of my hands and examines them. "I used to be a nurse. Let me help?"

"Sure. Thank you."

June leads me back to the kitchen. She makes more tea. She dabs my hands with some kind of astringent.

"What kind of nurse were you?" I ask.

"Critical care."

"Didn't you have Meer when you were—"

"Pretty young?" she says, smiling. "Yes. But I'm older than I look."

I don't say, "You were with Kingsley when he was with my mother, weren't you?" And I don't say, "Did you encourage him to abandon my mother and me?" Though certainly those questions run through my head. Instead I ask: "Why did you stop nursing?"

“I wanted a creative life,” she said. “A hospital is an institution. You clock in, you clock out. There are protocols. Hierarchies. I don’t want to live in the confines of that. It was what my parents believed in. What they wanted for me. But Kingsley rescued me from that kind of life. He saw the creative spirit in me—the weaver, the fabric artist, the herbalist. His other women may have been muses,” she says. “They may have drawn out his creativity with their beauty, but in me, Kingsley saw a creativity that matched his own. Even when I couldn’t see it myself. He saw how I yearned for a free life, and that together, we could escape the confines of the institutions that had shaped us.”

“This castle isn’t an institution?” I think of all the labels. The *suggestions*.

“No,” she says. “It’s the opposite of that.”

“I’ve read a lot of different things about my father’s childhood,” I say. “Italy, the Midwest, the tuberculosis sanatorium. But obviously he doesn’t always tell the truth.”

June smiles as she puts her cotton balls and astringent neatly back in a wooden box.

“So what is it?” I press.

“The truth?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. I think you’re asking about truth in a misguided way.”

“How so?”

“The truth about Kingsley is whatever story he’s telling at the moment, because that’s the story his soul wants to tell. I’m not attached to any particular idea of his past, and I’m not attached to any one definition of his present, either. I take him as he shows himself to me.”

“I just—I’m trying to get a picture of him. That’s all. In my head. Something more than what’s online.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Just like, why didn’t he tell you I was coming? But he told Meer? And why did he leave without telling me, when he wants to meet me?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know the answers to any of those questions.”

“What’s he like, then? Like, what music does he listen to? Or what are his favorite foods? Or could I—could I see his sketchbook?” The words pour out. “Meer said he always keeps his hands moving. I’m like that, too. I don’t really draw, but I make video game maps and sketch out weapon ideas and stuff. I’d like to see what Kingsley does. Like, maybe there’s something that’s the same, between us? Something about how our minds work that I inherited from him?”

“I can’t show you his private notebooks, Matilda.”

I feel myself flush. “Would it be okay to see his studio, then?”

“There are projects in my own studio that are pressing today, so I’m going to go to work now. But I’ll think about it.” She steps into the pantry and comes back with a syringe. She pulls up the edge of my T-shirt sleeve. “This is an antibiotic. Your hands are very inflamed and it will help you heal.”

The needle is in my arm before I even fully understand what she’s doing to me.

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28

In my dream, I am asleep in the Iron Room. I know I am asleep, because one tenth of me is conscious. The world outside my window is black. That's confusing, because I know I left the Oyster Office at two in the afternoon.

I can't wake up any further. I am under a blanket of ice in a frozen sea.

I am still wearing my UC Irvine sweatshirt. The high neck feels tight around my throat.

Kingsley stands over me. He is home from his trip. My long-lost father.

His hair is threaded with gray. So is his beard. He looks much older than in the few photographs I have seen of him. He is tall—well over six feet, genes I didn't inherit. He wears an old black T-shirt, stretched out at the neck, covered with spatters of paint.

"I knew a girl like you," he whispers. "Isadora. Persephone."

I want to say that I am her daughter, but in my dream, I can't wake up enough to speak.

"She had my baby," he says. "But I left her before it even happened. I took a different path. It was so long ago."

I want to say that I am that baby. I try to reach my hand to him.

I cannot.

"Melinoe," he says. *Meh-lih-no-eh*.

I don't know what that means.

"Melinoe," he repeats.

I reach for him but my arms will not move.

29

Kingsley was supposed to be home by now.

But he is not.

I've been here four days, and he still isn't home.

I have looked in the fridge, the freezer, and the pantry. I've stared at the spines of all the books in the living room.

I have wandered into the lower part of Parchment Tower, finding empty guest rooms and a carpeted music area supplied with various string instruments and bongos.

I have examined each painting on the walls, including Kingsley's *Cliffside Gothic* and *Odysseus Flees*. I've stared at the mobile in the living room and at the tentacled glass chandelier.

And while I have a sense of my father's taste—organic shapes contrasted with empty space, natural materials and surprising bursts of color, a love for old painters like Vermeer and Caravaggio more than modern artists—I don't know who Kingsley really is, at all. The only thing I've found that changed my idea of him is a note. I discovered it tucked into a junk drawer in the kitchen, forgotten among rubber bands and matchbooks, though it doesn't seem old. In handwriting that isn't June's or Meer's, it reads:

Oh, Peter Pevensie of Narnia,

I have heard your news. I think of you all the time.

Eustace Scrubb

I know the Narnia series he's referencing. I read them when I was eight. Peter and Eustace are characters in the books.

But who is he writing to?

Meer tells me Kingsley read the series out loud to him, but the note isn't to him.

"He didn't call you Peter, and he was Eustace?" I ask.

"No. And why would he pick Eustace? Eustace is like, the most loserish character."

The two of us are in the ocean together. Sunny morning. Tatum is at work driving the taxi van, but Brock is stretched on the sand, a book on top of his face. June disappeared after breakfast the way I've learned she usually does, bringing a tray of sandwiches and powder packets up to her workshop in Bone Tower.

“What do you think is keeping him from coming home?” I ask.

“Nothing,” says Meer. “Anything. Something unexpected that caught his attention. Please, Matilda. Don’t take it personally. He’s just very relaxed about time and plans.”

“Do you think that’s why he didn’t offer me a plane ticket?”

Meer dives under a big wave, then pops up to reply. “Did you expect him to send one?”

“It’s just—he’s a famous artist who lives in a castle and I’m a kid with a job at a coffee shop. The flights cost a thousand dollars.”

“I had no idea,” says Meer, letting his feet float to the surface. “That’s a ton of money.”

“I got help from my mom’s ex-boyfriend. It was okay in the end. I just—I wondered why Kingsley didn’t offer.”

“He’d totally want to pay for your flights, if he’d thought of it,” says Meer now. “He just doesn’t think that way. My mom handles all the stuff for the household. His agent and gallery arrange all his work travel.”

Really, what I want to know is, does Kingsley want to know me?

And if he doesn’t, why did he invite me? Were his emails just the idle whim of an entitled egoist? Or were they the sincere overtures of a great but unconventional man?

What will it feel like to be in his presence, to be seen as his daughter? Or to talk to him about ordinary stuff—like what to put on the toast we’re making, or what classes I should take next year?

“He offered me a painting,” I say, after a beat.

“Oh, I’m sure you can have the painting,” says Meer.

“Doesn’t he have to, I don’t know, see me and say I can have it? Or wouldn’t there be paperwork, since it could be valuable?”

“I don’t think so,” says Meer. “No one would question that it’s yours.”

“Why not?”

“ ’Cause it’s a painting of you,” he says. “He told me to give it to you if he got delayed or whatever. Want to see it right now?”

Turns out the painting is in Meer's room. We climb the stairs in Chalk Tower to the fourth floor, where my brother and Tatum both have their bedrooms.

"Does it have a name?" I ask Meer as we go up. "Your room?"

"Like the Iron Room? No. It's just called Meer's room. But we do call our floor Top of Chalk."

Meer's bedroom walls are wooden, like the rest of the castle. His bed is just a mattress on the floor. On the shelves are several mason jars filled with his collections: purple rocks, shells, sea glass. The carpet is littered with dirty clothes and cups of water. Stacks of folded laundry are piled against the wall instead of put away in the closet. The walls are dense with art, the pictures layered on top of each other. There are a couple weavings, deeply textured and folksy; a series of tattoo-art photographs; some pictures of chickens cut out from a catalog.

A painting of me leans against one wall.

"Sorry I'm chaotic," says Meer. He points at the picture. "I think Kingsley got a photo of you off Instagram? But then obviously he did his thing that he does."

My legs feel weak and I sit down heavily on Meer's mattress. The painting is indeed based on a photo of me I posted a couple months ago. But it's also nothing like that photo, at all.

My hair swirls around me in the wind,
 lifted away from my head as if I'm in a
 cyclone.
 My face is solemn. I kneel
 dead center on a
 poorly constructed wooden raft.
 And like Odysseus in the painting downstairs,
 I am in the middle of a ferocious sea.
 My fingers dig between the boards of the raft,

tense with effort, the muscles of my arms straining.

I look like a scared little girl, without parents.

And like a warrior, bereft of weapons.

“What’s it called?” I ask.

“*Lost.*”

I put my hand to mouth, my throat choked.

My father has painted me lost. Because he lost me, before I was even born.

When he made the painting, he hadn’t reached out yet.

And now he wants me to have this piece of his heart.

He’s giving me the gift of him seeing me. Understanding me.

“I brought it up here,” says Meer, “because it’s like a proper picture of the sister I used to draw when I was a kid. Like he pulled you out of my imagination. But I’m even happier for you to have it.”

“It’s scary how much it looks like me,” I say.

“It really does.” He sits down next to me, stretching his legs out along the floor, his bare feet sandy.

“But is that how you imagined I would look?” I ask. “I’m out on a raft in the middle of the sea.”

“Well, I imagined you happy, actually. But yeah, on boats sometimes. Or on planes or trains. Or in cars.”

“In transit? How come?”

“I’d imagine you coming to visit.” Meer looks at me eagerly. “Do you like it? Do you like the painting? I want you to like the painting.”

“I love it,” I tell him. “But it makes me sad.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s right.”

“What do you mean?”

“About where I am. How it feels in my head.”

Meer nods. “He’s almost always right about that,” he says. “If he’s painting.”

Next time we access electronics, I email Kingsley. I don't tell him I saw the portrait, because Meer said he wants to give it to me himself, but I try to put into words how desperately I want to see him.

Come back soon, if you can.

There's so much I want to know and understand about you—I want us to know and understand *each other*. I'm here in your beautiful home, waiting.

If you won't be back today, could we talk on the phone? I have mine with me until 2 p.m.

I add my number, but Kingsley answers me fifteen minutes later with an email.

Matilda,

Sadly, I am getting on a plane to Italy right now. My work there will take some time and I will have bad cell service. I hate the phone anyway, so it would be better to write.

I'm very glad you're here at Hidden Beach. So glad! Really. Please stay as long as you can. Meer loves having you. /K

He's a busy man, I guess. Artists have to travel—I know that from having lived with so many of them. But couldn't he spare a day, at least, to come back and meet his daughter before going to Italy?

I want to plead with him, but I've already done that. More begging won't make a difference. He absolutely knows what I want and he's choosing not to give it.

But I also know he cares, or he wouldn't have made a portrait of me. He wouldn't have offered me that painting.

What was it my mother said about him? *Strange. Obsessive. Wounded.*

The only thing I can think to do is try to make him *want* to come back even more than he wants to go to Italy. Kingsley speaks in images, not in emails or phone conversations, so I photograph a page in my sketchbook.

It's my design for the tentacled chandelier that comes to life to battle Hamlet—the one based on the chandelier in the dining room here at Hidden Beach. In the drawing, the monster is throwing a chair across the room with one arm, wrapping another arm around a table leg, and, with a third, threatening a small female warrior with a mane of dark curls.

Will Kingsley think I'm a terrible artist?

Sure. He might think a thousand rotten things, but he didn't become a famous artist by being afraid to show people his sketchbook. And I shouldn't be afraid to show people mine, either. After all, he might look at what I've drawn and see his daughter, in his dining room, working her imagination on the world he's built. A person with a mind that's alive.

That might be enough to bring him back to Hidden Beach.

I send my father the picture.

31

"I got divorced from my parents," says Brock. "When I was fourteen. It was beyond ugly."

Meer has gotten us up ridiculously early to go clamming. He's got a set of car keys hidden in the garage, plus a set of house keys in the box marked *Spoils of War* in the mudroom. "That way I can open the office. I mostly respect my mom's suggestions, but we do watch movies or whatever, when she's not around. Except that these days, she's *always* around." Basically, today he stole the Mercedes before June could wake up and say no.

Now, Brock and I squat at the edge of Lake Tashmoo, which is really a cove. It's low tide. In the water, Meer and Tatum stand with a pair of long rakes. They have a kids' blow-up floatie, and inside the floatie is a mesh bag where they put their catch.

Brock and I have smaller rakes and a bucket. He's shown me how to look for depressions in the sand that suggest a clam is underneath, then rake through to dig it up. "My parents had a vicious divorce," he says. "They lost their minds and spent most of the money from *Men and Other Critters*—on drugs, in my dad's case. And on lawyers. And it freaking wrecked me, 'cause I realized there was literally nobody capable of taking care of me. In

fact, I had been taking care of *them* for years. I was making all the money, and they were just spending it.”

“What made you decide to come here?” I ask.

“I got legally emancipated and lived with a nanny the studio set up for me ’cause I was still working. I didn’t see my parents anymore. I wouldn’t even speak to them on the phone. I was so full of rage—just absolute fury. I honestly felt like I’d do something terrible to them if I saw them, so I didn’t. I still won’t. I just stuffed all that rage inside and did my job all day, grinning and cracking jokes.”

He says he worked for two more years like that. And in that time, he was essentially raised by the coke-snorting comedians whose charm kept *Men and Other Critters* renewed season after season. Those guys taught Brock many disgusting and illegal things, but at least they paid attention to him.

When the show was canceled, he rented a house in a small town on Cape Cod and planned to finish school there. He was sixteen. He liked the idea of being far away from Hollywood and being a regular kid. But fame didn’t make him popular. “Those kids could smell the Hollywood on me,” he says, digging with his shovel in search of clams. “They hated everything about me that had made me so much money—how I looked, my hair, the way I laughed, everything.”

At first he got beaten up. Then he got ignored. Sometimes he’d get tired of being ignored and he’d run his mouth. Then he’d get beaten up again.

“My skin broke out. I had a growth spurt. I couldn’t get work on TV. By the time I graduated high school, I was washed up and had no reason to be anywhere on the planet. After a few months of absolute insanity in New York, I was high all the time and I had to check into rehab.”

“What did you take?” I ask.

“Ritalin, mostly. And cocaine. I would just go, go, go. It made me feel important. But then one of my guys from *Critters*, he had gotten sober. When he saw me like that in New York, he told me I had to get off it all. Immediately. And he was right.”

I look over at Brock. His blondish hair is lit up by the sun. He’s wearing a bright green fleece and board shorts decorated with SpongeBob. There’s a Meer Sharpie drawing of a dolphin on one side of his neck. He looks like he’s never worked a day in his life, like he’s never had a problem.

“When I was well enough to move to this group home for outpatients who were under twenty-one,” he says, “I saw a painting of Kingsley’s online. The one with your mom in it, actually. Persephone escaping the underworld and looking—well, she looks so happy and relieved, you know? Like I wanted to feel.” Brock examines the clam I just dug up. “That one’s too small, you gotta put it back. We can only clam the big grown-up clams. We gotta leave the babies to grow so we can get them later.”

I glance up at Meer and Tatum. They’re shirtless, Meer soft and graceful, Tatum made of burnished wood and copper wire. Meer’s hair is in a high bun, and he’s wearing reflective sunglasses. He’s splashing around and only half clamming. Tatum digs methodically.

“I was newly sober when I got obsessed with your dad,” says Brock. “I traveled to see some of his paintings, like at LACMA and MASS MoCA and stuff, but that didn’t really scratch the itch. So I hired a private detective to find him. Because you know, his gallery won’t say where he lives. The detective dug around and sent me here, to Hidden Beach. I just showed up.”

Brock pauses because he’s hit a spot in the sand that has a lot of clams. It’s a small jackpot, and we dig them up together. “How did you end up moving here?” I ask.

“I think Meer was lonely. And maybe Tatum, too. There used to be a whole community. Like, when Meer was little and Tatum lived with his parents in the pool house, there were other people, other kids. All these creative people, playing music and taking photographs and weaving or whatever. But by the time I came, all of them were gone. Meer and I got along right away even though I was like, not even a functional person. And Kingsley saw me as having escaped something terrible. And that was a big deal, actually, because it was a new way for me to see myself. Like, I thought I’d been banished from Hollywood, lost my family, become an addict, and all that was shameful. But he saw it as escape. You know how there are escapes in his paintings? Persephone escapes the underworld, Odysseus escapes the island of the Cyclops.”

“Sure.”

“And I had escaped the trash fire of my addiction, and the trash fire of Hollywood. So Kingsley liked that about me, like I was one of his artworks come to life. He wanted to put me in a painting, and the painting took weeks and weeks, and by that time, it was pretty clear Meer was happier

with me here. And like I said, maybe Tatum, too. So June said I could stay as long as I needed, for my recovery.”

“What’s the painting of you like?”

“There are these fairy tales where people are trapped in the bodies of animals. A bunch of different tales. And in the stories, they take the skin off and burn it —and after that, they can be human all the time. It’s very weird.”

“You had a skin in the painting?”

“He painted me standing next to a bonfire that’s burning an old donkey skin, yeah. Like burning the old version of me. The canvas isn’t here anymore. Kingsley sold it not that long after he finished it. To a private collector. But it really looks like me. It was wild to see.”

“What’s the name of it?” I ask.

“It’s called *Sammy*,” he says.

32

That night, June makes clam chowder and bakes a fat loaf of soft wheat bread to eat with it. She sets the dining room table with candles and is sweetly maternal with all three boys. She’s kind to me, as well, asking gentle questions about my sketchbook, which she calls an “art practice.”

When I ask her, she tells stories about Meer when he was little. “He loved making pretend tinctures. I gave him lentils and water and organic food coloring and lots of little jars. I set up a worktable for him out by the garden and he’d just mix and fizz and mix and fizz while I pruned the plants.”

She tells stories about Tatum, as well. In the castle’s early days, he and his parents spent summers in Parchment Tower. His mom and dad were teachers and had long vacations, but they “wanted to be free of institutions and rigid hours and pension plans and educational legislations,” so they accepted Kingsley’s offer to live in the pool house year-round when Tatum was ten. “We always called Tatum a selkie,” says June. “You know, like a seal who’d turned into a boy but was really a seal in his heart. He was never

out of the swimming pool, never out of the sea.” She smiles at Tatum, who is looking down at his plate. “Selkies are ocean folk from Scottish legends. Loyal first to the world beneath the sea. Kingsley painted Tatum that way.”

She gestures at a canvas, about eight feet wide but only two feet tall, that hangs on one side of the dining room. I’ve seen it before but haven’t looked closely since it’s mostly ocean, spreading from one end of the painting to the other. Now I stand to examine it.

“Please don’t,” says Tatum.

“Oh, go ahead,” says June to me. Then to Tatum: “You inspired Kingsley, and that connection of painter and subject is a very special one. Don’t shrink from having it witnessed.”

Selkie Child depicts a friendly sea,

warm blue and lit through with shafts of sunlight.

The waterline is near the top of the painting, and mostly the sea is empty.

But look a little closer and

on the far left of the wide, wide painting, there is a seal.

He is nearly the same color as the sunlit sea, camouflaged in its depths.

Keep looking and you see

the same seal, several more times,

so that the painting tracks his passage through the water.

On the right side of the painting,

a boy climbs out of the sealskin, still underwater.

It’s clearly Tatum.

Same coffee curls, same freckles, but he looks maybe ten years old.

The far edge shows the sealskin having drifted to the bottom of the frame, while

the human boy’s head is above the waterline.

Hours after dinner, the boys and I sneak out again. We take the scooters to Aquinnah, where the Plum Road Estate is between renters. We swim in the estate's enormous heated pool, looking up at stars. Steam rises off the water as it connects with the cold night air. My hair floats around me.

Next morning, June takes me out to pick wineberries, deep into the property by a groundskeeper's cottage. We bring the berries back and make jam, together with Meer. That night, Brock returns from a jaunt to town with a cooler full of oysters. June skips dinner, but the four of us stand around the kitchen island and eat them with hot sauce and lemon, opening them with a single special knife.

On the beach, while the rest of us lay out big cotton blankets, and while the rest of us eat our way through a wicker hamper of potato chips and strawberries, and while we slather ourselves in sunscreen and fuss about with the rusted blue beach chairs, Tatum always throws off his sweatshirt and walks directly into the water.

He wears goggles. He swims straight out to the horizon, like the ocean doesn't seem dangerous to him. Like it's his home.

We lose sight of him quickly. He goes off to the left or to the right, and much farther out than I'd ever want to go.

I wonder what he's running from.

I also think he's a bit of a jerk, just ditching what the rest of us are doing, acting as if his swimming is important somehow—a priority that no one else can really understand.

I miss my phone, but as days pass, I begin to lean into the rush of the ocean and the voices of the boys. I've found a book to read, a Narnia fantasy that Meer says is Kingsley's favorite from the series. I barely remember it from when I was younger, but it's good. In it, a boy becomes a dragon and he's miserable. Trapped. He can only turn back into a boy by having his dragon skin painfully ripped off by a lion.

The boy is Eustace Scrubb. The name on the note I found in the kitchen drawer.

The story also makes me think of the tale about the donkey skin burned to release the trapped human inside. And of Brock's escape, and the way it captured Kingsley's imagination.

When I'm tired of reading, I write game ideas in my sketchbook, or tell the boys the plots of video games I've played. They listen like we're sitting around a campfire and I'm a counselor telling ghost stories. While I'm talking, Meer draws ornate patterns on his own skin, or makes other people do it. He is mapped over with bubble-letter sentences and dolphins and skulls and pinups both male and female. The new entries are dark and black, and the old ones beneath them just a delicate blue.

One day, while Tatum is in the ocean, Brock interrupts me explaining the plot of *Luigi's Haunted Mansion* to say that the internet told him Sharpies contain neurotoxins.

"Shut up," says Meer. "Tell me good news only."

"I'm serious," says Brock. "I don't know what neurotoxins do, but what if they make you so you can't have sex or something?"

"Well, that would suck," says Meer. "But probably strawberries have neurotoxins, too."

"Strawberries are pure and good," says Brock, popping one in his mouth.

"You don't know that for sure. They could be a silent killer."

"Strawberries make you virile."

"Liar."

"Okay, I made that up. But they don't have neurotoxins. Don't try and ruin them for me."

"Let me draw on you," says Meer. "Let me make you pretty."

"I'm already very pretty," says Brock. "You drew on me yesterday."

"You'll be even prettier."

"Fine. Neurotoxin me up. When I die, the internet will be like, he kicked Ritalin but he was done in by an overdose of permanent marker."

He flops over on his belly and Meer writes bubble letters across his back. *LOSER.*

"You look gorgeous," I tell Brock.

"I can read with my back skin," says Brock. "I know what he wrote. Meer, why are you such a little butt?"

"It's my nature," says Meer.

As the sun lowers in the sky, Tatum finally comes out of the sea. He flops down next to me, wet.

I'm in my green bikini with a baseball cap shading my eyes. My head is propped on a rolled towel and I've been explaining how in *Luigi's Haunted Mansion*, there's a level of this creepy building that's a garden, with water lilies and grass growing out of the floor, vines and flowers everywhere, taking over.

"Is there food?" Tatum asks. The water forms droplets on his shoulders where there's still a bit of oil from the sunblock. He's breathing hard.

"We ate everything but the cut-up apple," says Meer.

"I'll take that," says Tatum. Brock digs in the cooler and tosses him a mason jar filled with apple slices.

"Go back to the story, Matilda," says Meer.

"This angry gardener ghost is the boss of the level. So when he sees you, he waters this evil piranha plant and it explode-grows up to the top of this tower."

"What's this story?" asks Tatum, his mouth full of apple.

I explain and go on. "Then this pineapple plant attacks." Meer takes hold of my arm and writes *I am the sister of Meer Sugawara* down its length. Still telling the story, I take back the Sharpie and write *I am the brother of Matilda Klein* on his collarbone.

Brock puts his hand out for the pen and comes to sit at my feet. He draws on my ankle. "Does this look like the piranha plant?" he asks.

"Ish," I say. "In the game it has spiky teeth."

He writes *Piranha Plant* next to it, with a big arrow.

"Oh good," I tell him. "Now no one will be confused and think it's a dick."

"It does *not* look like a dick," he says, mock offended.

"Mm. Kinda does."

"It doesn't. Does it, Tatum?"

"I want to hear more about the pineapple plant," says Tatum, sitting up to look at my ankle. "Oh wait. That looks like a dick."

“Ugh,” says Brock. “I can only draw spirals. Fix it. Okay? I’m sure Matilda doesn’t want a dick on her ankle.”

“That’s fine,” I say. “It’ll wash off.” I don’t want Tatum drawing on me. But he’s holding the Sharpie already and adjusting his position to get a good angle.

“What happens with the pineapples?” he asks.

“You dodge them,” I say. “It’s not that hard. And then pretty soon you get one of my favorite weapons in the whole game, which is like a . . .” I stop because Tatum is resting his left hand, still cold from the ocean, on my calf in order to stabilize it.

He’s put the pen cap in his mouth and is building Brock’s dicklike piranha plant into a big, twisted plant monster with angry branches, much more like what I described. The pen inches down the curve of my calf, past my ankle, and down onto the front of my foot.

Tatum stops and brushes the sand off my skin.

“Go on,” says Meer. “The weapon.”

“Oh, it’s a circular chain saw with a spinning wheel.”

“Love it,” says Brock.

Somehow I manage to talk them through the whole level and answer Meer’s questions about weapons, but I really have no idea what’s coming out of my mouth. All I know is the feel of Tatum’s hand on my leg and the light pressure of the pen on my body.

33

The way they think, Kingsley doesn’t owe anyone anything.

Not his time, not his attention, not his money.

Certainly not information about his plans. He lives at Hidden Beach because he loves the people, and the land, and the castle, but he is not obligated to be here. His life is free of constrictions, and that means he is liberated in a way most people are not.

June explains it to me on what is probably the tenth day of my visit: “Just because Kingsley wanted to be here last week does not mean that he wants to be here *this* week. It’s no reflection on me. Or Meer. Or Tatum, or Brock, or Hidden Beach, or Martha’s Vineyard. We all have value, irrespective of his current interest in us.”

She and I are sitting in the kitchen before she goes up to her studio with her tray of food. Her hands are busy with a small loom she has set up on the table. She has a basket filled with balls of different wools, which she threads through the loom.

Tatum stands at the counter, shaking the powder from one of the little packets into a blender full of fresh wineberries from the bushes over by the groundskeeper’s cottage. He’s up early this morning, for work.

“Kingsley will come when he is hungry for us and what we offer,” continues June. “And we are free to go, at any time.” She ties off a piece of yarn. “Tatum and Meer have always been free to go, even when they were very young. Right, Tatum?”

“That’s right,” he says, softly.

“And they’re free to go now, if they choose. They just have reasons, at present, that they like to stay.”

Tatum brings us tall glasses filled with wineberry-banana smoothie.

“If they ran away,” I ask, “wouldn’t you go looking for them? When they were younger, I mean.”

“They never did run, but no.”

“You’d let them leave? Little kids? When it’s your responsibility to keep them safe?”

“You’re stirring up trouble, Matilda,” says Tatum.

I turn to Tatum. He is so infuriating. “It’s just a conversation.”

“It’s okay,” says June. “I *would* look for them,” she acknowledges to me. “But I don’t think I’d make them come home. I’ve learned that forcing people into things is a very painful choice, even when it appears necessary. Even when it’s for their own good. Because once you force them, they begin to fear you. And that fear can easily become hate. Hate is very hard to undo.”

“I don’t think a child would hate you for bringing him home,” I say.

Tatum looms over me. “June took in a kid who was full of rage and grief,” he says. “A kid who was mean, who lashed out at her all the time. She kept me in school and taught me healing practices and she had endless patience with me when nobody else did. And then she took in Brock. He was a complete stranger, absolutely lost and only barely sober. He was just a collection of tics and television mannerisms. He didn’t even know if he was a person underneath it all. And June was patient with him, too. She let him stay. So you are absolutely not going to misunderstand her way of thinking as not caring.”

June puts a gentle hand on his arm. “I said it’s okay,” she says. “You make it sound like I’m a saint.” She turns to me. “Domestic situations don’t need to be permanent. You can let go of the idea that the world owes you stability. When you do that, you stop being angry, because you have no expectations.”

It’s true. I am angry.

At Luca, for dumping me and making everyone hate me. At my mother, for leaving. At my father, for not being here. At myself, for needing a parent when I’m supposed to be an adult.

“If you don’t like waiting for Kingsley, you are free to go,” says June.

She’s right. I should grow up and let go of my expectations of other people. “I appreciate your hospitality,” I say. “It’s time to stop waiting for something to happen.”

This isn’t a quest to understand my origin. It’s just a visit that’s gone on too long.

My father doesn’t care enough to come back and know me.

This place is a beautiful, depressing trap. I should be spending a normal summer after high school, playing video games and earning money and listening to music and making friends with people who will be first-years at UC Irvine. I should be shopping for stuff I need for college—not sitting around in a state of suspended animation, waiting for a man who isn’t coming. “If I can use my computer, I’ll arrange for a flight back to LA tonight,” I tell June.

“Don’t.” Meer is standing in the doorway, his hair tousled from sleep. “Please. Do not go.” He comes over and sits on my lap, almost knocking over my smoothie.

“You’re too big to be a lap boy,” I say.

“I’m not.” Meer wiggles around and tucks his legs up so he’s in a ball. “Stay here and be my sister. Matilda, I’m serious. I need you to stay. Please. I have plans for us that haven’t happened yet.”

“What plans?”

He laughs and gets off my lap to pour himself a cup of smoothie. “I’m planning plans, okay? They’re gonna happen, but they take *logistics*, and I suck at those. But also, I want you to meet Kingsley. I want you to know our dad. And understand him. Because he’s what connects us. Please? Please stay?”

I tell him I will.

34

Half an hour later, Meer takes me by scooter to Meadowlark Barn, which is a dairy farm that has a small shop on the property. It sells homemade cheese and freshly laid eggs.

It’s probably too late to get their pastries, Meer tells me. They sell out. But when we get there, the shop has two raspberry scones left. We also buy a carton of eggs and two hunks of cheese, but mostly we’re there so Meer can say hello to the chickens. Yes, there are chickens hopping across the lawn in front of a large triangular coop. There are maybe forty of them.

As we eat, Meer squats down and gives tiny scone scraps to the birds. He says encouraging things to them. “You’re a good nice roundie one with a sharp beak,” he says. “Yes, I noticed your beak. I like how it’s so pointy. Did you lay an egg today? Did you do a good job?” He turns to me. “I read that when chickens start laying, like the first couple weeks they ever lay, they lay mini eggs. Isn’t that cool? They have to work up to a big egg.” He sighs and flops down to sit on the grass. “You made me think about later,” he says. “Like do I want to learn tattooing or travel to Japan or what . . .”

“And?” I sit down next to him.

“And maybe one question is, do I want chickens? And maybe goats and a horse and another horse to keep it company, and maybe some ducks?”

“Why later?” I ask. “Why not now?”

“Later is better,” says Meer. “I’m an at-home boy at the moment. But I just wanted to tell you that you made me think. About a life beyond Hidden Beach. And that’s part of why I don’t want you to leave yet.”

I pick a spiky pink clover blossom and rub it between my fingers. “Why exactly?”

“I feel like there might be more thinking that will happen if you stay. It’s very selfish of me.”

A fat brown hen waddles in front of us, pecking at a bit of scone near Meer’s feet.

“You could have chickens now,” I tell him. “And still be an at-home boy.”

That night, June skips dinner again. We eat at the picnic table: grilled fish with crispy, burned skin shoved into warm hot dog buns and piled with the boys’ favorite coleslaw; and tortilla chips with green-tomato salsa that June made back when everything in her garden was still unripe. Icy bottles of beer and seltzer chill in a cooler by our sandy feet.

As Brock and I take plates back to the kitchen, Tatum brings his guitar outside. He sits on the table with his feet on a chair and tunes it. I’ve heard him messing around with it in the evenings, but he’s never played in front of anyone in any formal way since I’ve been here. Meer sees him tuning it and runs up for his ukulele.

They play folk-rock-type stuff I mostly don’t know, the kind of songs I think Tatum played with his high school band. “Ain’t No Ash Will Burn,” “Seven Bridges Road,” “Man of Constant Sorrow.” Brock joins his voice with theirs on a few songs.

I lie back on the long grass and listen, letting the music fill my head. I watch Tatum’s hands move across the strings. He seems completely immersed in these simple songs. He has none of the rock swagger of the guitar boys I know in California. He’s not performing. He’s just playing and listening, unselfconscious.

It’s the way he does most everything, I realize. From swimming in the sea to making smoothies to playing guitar to drawing on my leg—whatever

Tatum is doing, he gives it his entire attention.

It's completely dark out when he plays the opening the chords to a song I love. It's by a band that has only two albums so far. They're called Wooden Cage, and I know all their music. Their first big hit was this song from the second album. It's been everywhere this spring. The lead singer's voice is ragged and has huge range.

Meer looks at Tatum quizzically. "What is it?"

" 'Wasted' by Wooden Cage."

"I don't know this one."

"It's a good song. Play it," says Brock.

Tatum sings the first line, low. "We all stayed out too late / We fell apart and made mistakes."

Then he stops. Looks at me.

Self-consciousness comes into his face. Just the thing I was thinking never does. He flushes slightly and his upper lip twitches. "Never mind."

"Go on," I say, sitting up.

But he still hesitates.

If I sing it, maybe Tatum will change back into the boy who isn't performing, isn't second-guessing himself. "We all stayed out too late," I sing. "We fell apart and made mistakes."

He picks up the guitar mid-verse.

They said we didn't matter

So we mattered to each other

When we get to the chorus, Brock sings with us, and Meer finds his way with a simple ukulele part.

Our youth is wasted

We will not waste it

Remember my name

'Cause we made history

Na na na na, na na na

Our voices meld and lift to the epic black sky.

Tatum is smiling, his face lit up by the fast-melting candles. My heartbeat is slow and steady. I am filled with love for this place I wanted to leave this morning.

35

I am alone in the living room the next morning when someone knocks on the door.

This has never happened. We don't have visitors.

There is no support staff. No repair workers come. All deliveries go to a post office box.

The knock comes again. June is somewhere upstairs, as usual. Tatum is at work, and Meer and Brock have gone to town for groceries.

When I answer the door, Holland Terhune stands there. Holland from the airport. She's wearing baggy jeans, a tank top, and a baseball cap. "I was hoping this was the right place. Some guy coulda come out with a shotgun and ordered me off his property, right? But instead it's you. Yay."

She's such a flirt.

"You didn't answer texts," she continues, "so I came over to see if you want to hang out. It's not just me and Winnie. All my girls are here now. I had a lot of family stuff going on last week. It ate me alive and I couldn't even function. But it's done and now my life is basically just one big rager."

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"You told us where you were staying."

I don't remember that, but I was a wreck when I met her. "Sorry I didn't answer," I say. "We're mostly unplugged."

"Whatever. You're a poor communicator. It's not the worst thing. Are you going to invite me in to see the castle? I feel like that's what people do. The home of the great Kingsley Cello. I'm insanely curious."

Realization washes over me. She didn't come here to make friends.

Holland knows who my father is. She came here in search of him, and he is the reason there are so many texts from her on my phone. "You want to know about my father," I say, accusingly.

"I'm sorry. Yeah."

"I remember now. At the airport, you said I looked like someone you knew. And you talked about something you'd just shown Winnie on your phone. Right?"

"We'd been looking at one of his paintings. Online." Holland ducks her head apologetically. "You look just like Persephone. The Kingsley Cello *Persephone*."

"So you figured I was related to him? That doesn't even make sense. He's painted tons of models. He didn't have *children* with all of them."

"People on this island know he lives here. And they talk. Half of them would actually have driven me here for a couple hundred dollars." She grins as if it's cute that she bribed people to find out if I really was the person she thought I was, and got them to tell her where my father's property is.

"You would have shown up here whether you'd met me at the airport or not," I say. "Right? You would have found a way to get access to Kingsley, whatever happened, because people go on these pilgrimages to him."

"Kind of," she says.

"He's *my* father, Holland," I say. "I came here *invited*. Kingsley wants me here. You don't get to just show up and try to lay claim to him. He's a private person and this is a private home and you're intruding on someone you don't even know by pretending you want to be friends with his kid. Don't you see how obnoxious that is?"

She steps back, startled at my burst of anger. "Look, I went about this all wrong," she says. "I'm sorry. Really. I should have just asked you about Kingsley. I should have asked if I could come over."

"Ya think?" I'm about to shut the door in her face, but she puts her hand against it and looks me straight in the eyes.

"Matilda. Seriously. Listen."

"What?"

“I’m sorry. I’m a dolt and a wench and I’m not even going to bore you with the whole story of *why* I acted like such an idiot in this particular situation, but can I talk to you like a person for a minute?”

I don’t shut the door on her. “Okay. Say what you want to say.”

“This man means something to me. Kingsley Cello. Not the same thing he means to you. Of course not. But the paintings—they talk to me, somehow. About myself. About feelings I can’t express. About my messed-up family. He’s painting stuff that feels like it goes down into the core of me, and that’s the honest truth. I’ve wanted to come here for a good long while. And it kept not being possible. But now I’m here, and I promise I’m not gonna steal a painting, or photograph any secret ones and put them on the internet. I know he’s out of town and I don’t think you’re gonna introduce me to him, ever. *Ever*. I just—it would mean so much to me if you would let me in to see the house. And whatever paintings are easy to show me. Then I’ll leave. Is there any possibility of that, or do you fully and totally hate me?”

“Fine.”

“Really?” A smile spreads across her face.

“Fine,” I say again. “Come in.”

I say yes because what Holland says about Kingsley’s paintings is what I feel about them, too. Like he’s talking to me, impossibly and also maybe inevitably. Like he’s putting the way I feel about being human into images. Showing parts of me to myself.

I know June would want me to turn her away, but I don’t really care what June wants anymore. She pushed me to leave and she hasn’t been around all week since then. I’m responsible to Meer, and I don’t think he’ll mind at all.

I walk Holland through the dining room, the living room, and eventually the kitchen and the breakfast room. She’s full of nervous, friendly energy, rattling off a nonstop barrage of questions.

Who’s the artist of the mobile?

Why hasn’t my dad come home?

Who all lives here? Do I have any cousins?

Is my brother home? When do I expect him back?

She knows I said I don't date girls, but everyone's a little bit bisexual. Don't I agree?

Tell about the selkie painting.

Tell about the Odysseus painting.

What's in the various towers? Have I been to Kingsley's studio?

Do we really not have regular use of a car? What is this being unplugged about?

In the breakfast nook, Holland zeroes in on *Cliffside Gothic*. The Cinderella painting. She stops talking abruptly.

Then she sits down heavily on a bench. I realize she's on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"You okay?"

She takes a deep breath. "Oh god."

"What?"

She puts her hands over her face for a moment. Takes a deep breath. Then she looks at me again. "I should explain something."

"Go ahead."

"My family—the family stuff I was talking about in Edgartown. That kept me busy all week. That was the Sinclair memorial, actually."

"They're your family? The Sinclairs."

"Yeah. My granddad's brother Harris owns Beechwood Island," says Holland.

"Harris who was married to Tipper," I say, remembering that Meer knew Harris's late wife.

"Mm-hm. My mom used to visit Beechwood in the summers."

"So the kids who died—"

"They were my second cousins, I guess, technically. Plus this boy who was their friend. I knew them all from summers here, or sometimes we'd get invited to Beechwood for a weekend. My mom is still close with her cousins." She wipes at her eyes. "Anyway. The memorial for Johnny and Mirren was the day after I got here. And I was so stupid, Matilda."

“What do you mean?”

“I thought somehow that I’d put on a black dress and do this mourning ritual with my mom and everyone, and that would be it. Like, I thought that after the service, I’d feel better. And it would be completely easy to spend the last part of summer in the rental house with my girls, just partying and lazing around before college starts. But it turns out not to be easy at all. I keep crying. At unexpected times. And my extended family has been up in Edgartown for weeks now, and they keep having dinners. They want me to come, so I go. I *want* to go, because they’re all so freaking wrecked. And I’m wrecked, too. But my friends don’t understand. They’re mad I keep leaving them. And taking my car, because that means they don’t have the beach pass and whatever.

“Then this other cousin of mine, we were supposed to meet up, but he blew me off a bunch. And I don’t know why he didn’t show, or what I did that made him decide to ditch me now, of all times. I wouldn’t have thought that kind of thing would matter so much, but it actually gutted me. Because I lost Johnny and Mirren, so it feels like the threads connecting me to all the family in my own generation just burned to ash and blew away. I’m very . . .” Holland trails off. She stands and paces the room a couple times.

I wait.

“I know I’m lucky as hell,” she says finally. “I shouldn’t have dumped this on you. I’m not trying to make you feel sorry for the poor little rich kid. But it’s just freaking sad and I’m going through it.”

“It’s okay.”

“This is a picture of them,” she says, pointing to *Cliffside Gothic*. “My aunts, when they were young. That’s my aunt Carrie, the Cinderella. And that’s my aunt Bess and my aunt Penny.”

“That’s your *family*?”

“Absolutely no doubt.”

“Kingsley knew Tipper Sinclair,” I say. “Is that her? The mother in the painting?”

“Yeah.”

“Why is your aunt Carrie Cinderella?”

“I have no idea.”

“Why are they on the edge of a cliff?”

“I don’t know. But it looks like the cliffs on Beechwood.”

36

After absenting herself from our meals for well over a week, this evening June is making an enormous meringue. A “pavlova,” she calls it. It’s the size of a lasagna, and she’s topped it with whipped cream and a thousand wineberries, blueberries, and blackberries, dusting the whole with powdered sugar. “Dessert for dinner,” she calls out, when it’s ready.

I come in from the living room, where I’ve been drawing in my sketchbook, and follow her out to the picnic table with napkins and silverware in my arms.

I haven’t told anyone about Holland coming by this morning because they never have visitors—so I’m surprised to see that tonight there is a dinner guest. He’s already standing at the table with a glass of wine in his hand, talking to Meer and Brock.

Gabe is unusually tall and very thin, probably about fifty. He’s Black with cropped graying hair and wears a cream-colored linen suit that hangs on his frame as if he once filled it out with more muscle. He tells me he’s based in New York but he’s been coming to the island since he was a kid, part of the long-existing Black community vacation scene outside Oak Bluffs. He met Kingsley and June here fifteen years ago when he tagged along with a filmmaker friend to a party at Hidden Beach.

Now he’s Kingsley’s cultural property lawyer. He handles “relationships with galleries, purchases by collectors, and estate planning.” June invited him over because an offer came in for one of the more famous paintings, *Prince of Denmark*. But she can’t get Kingsley to sign the paperwork, she says. Off in Italy, he isn’t answering email or telephone calls. She wants Gabe to talk her through the options, since the buyer is eager to close the deal.

“What’s the painting?” I ask.

“It’s a *Hamlet* thing,” says June. “It caused a big drama when the Whitney showed it.”

“How come?”

“Critics called it overly violent, untrue to Shakespeare, all that. They said it was a cheap offering aimed at creating a sensation. Not that Kingsley minds. He never cares what critics say.”

“And the offer’s for eight million,” says Gabe, “partly thanks to the controversy.”

“Eight million, for one painting?”

“It’s in a nice frame,” says Gabe, winking.

As we eat, he asks me questions that seem light and friendly at first. Where am I from? Am I headed to college? What do I want to study? But when he’s had a couple glasses of wine and the meal is winding down, he fixes me with a stare. “You came for money, yes?” he asks, slurring his words only slightly. “Your father’s money?”

“No.” I put my fork down.

The rest of the table goes silent.

“Come on. You’ve got college to pay for,” Gabe says. “And while there aren’t a lot of eight-million-dollar paintings, there are *a lot* of two-million-dollar paintings.”

“I’m not after money,” I say, squirming. “Kingsley’s already giving me a painting. That’s more than enough. I didn’t ask for *anything*.”

“I don’t know about him giving you a painting,” says June, sharply.

“The one he made of her,” explains Meer. “*Lost*. That’s for Matilda to have. She has it in her room now.”

“Kingsley’s paintings aren’t birthday presents for his models,” says June. “Just because Matilda’s in *Lost* doesn’t mean it’s hers.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Gabe says to me. “But it’s my job to look out for Kingsley. Not June, not Meer, and certainly not any other children Kingsley might have. Just the man himself. And I need to tell you that gifts of paintings don’t just happen casually when he’s not at home.”

“I have it in an email,” I explain. “And Meer knows about it.”

“I do,” says Meer. “He asked me to make sure she got it. I just didn’t know she needed paperwork or whatever.” He turns to his mother. “You know he never thinks about practical stuff like that.”

Gabe frowns. “Let me talk to Kingsley before you take it. He knows you’re here?”

“He invited me.”

“That doesn’t sound like Kingsley. I wonder why this sudden surge of fatherly interest.”

I feel my face heat up. I don’t know why this lawyer is trying so hard to put me in my place. “I graduated high school,” I say acidly. “And my mother moved to Mexico without me six months before that. I can only guess Kingsley’s been keeping track of me. And maybe when your mother abandons you, your father might feel a tiny bit parental. I mean, I’m just guessing.”

Gabe gives me a smooth smile. “I’m sorry about your mother,” he says. “Just give me a beat to sort out the gift. It’s no good trying to sell a painting if you can’t trace its provenance. You have to be able to prove your rightful ownership and track it back to its origin.”

“I wasn’t going to *sell* it,” I say. “Ever. It’s the only thing I own from my father.”

“You don’t own it yet,” says Gabe. “That’s what I’m telling you.”

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The rest of the meal is awkward. I don’t eat any more. My throat is closed with embarrassment and confusion.

After Gabe goes home in a rideshare car, June heads directly to Bone Tower without another word to any of us. Meer disappears somewhere, and Brock treks through the kitchen wearing nothing but a bath towel, heading to the outdoor shower.

I stand at the window of the living room and watch as Tatum handles the chaos of the picnic table. He loads dirty dishes into a bucket and makes his way through the tall grass to the castle.

He shouldn’t have to do everything alone. I go to the kitchen and begin putting away things June left out. I am loading the dishwasher when Tatum comes back, a stack of leftover containers in his hands.

“Oh hey. Thanks for that,” he says.

“Sure.”

The last time we really had a conversation was when he told me to stop stirring up trouble with June, defending her like she’s immune from all criticism because she’s been good to him. We haven’t been alone together since. “Gabe was being harsh,” he says. “You should have that painting.”

“Doesn’t sound like it’s mine unless Kingsley comes back to give it to me.”

“The picture of me isn’t mine, either.”

“He never paid my mom for posing for *Persephone*. Did you know that? Then he sold the painting for millions. It’s messed up.”

“It’s his art, not hers, though.”

“Yeah, but it’s her *face*.”

Tatum looks over from where he’s scraping plates. “Can I ask what happened with your mom? You said she moved to Mexico, earlier.”

I turn off the water and think how to answer. I am sort of surprised he’s asking about my life away from Hidden Beach. Meer, for all his curiosity about what’s in my sketchbook and what video game stories I can tell him, for all his enthusiasm for drawing on me and swimming with me, visiting chickens, making jam, and generally sharing his life with me, hasn’t asked me about my mother. He does know she left, from my social media, but he mostly exists right here and now—not in the past and not in the future. And Brock is caught up in his own recovery. He’s eager to try to explain his own complicated journey and he’s unendingly curious about trivia—What’s my opinion on Lady Gaga? What songs did I sing in school chorus? Why is everyone obsessed with passion fruit when it’s yucky?—but he doesn’t have the bandwidth to delve into other people’s painful histories.

“I suppose my mom is a bit like my father,” I say, finally. “As in, she doesn’t feel obligated to me.”

“Go on.”

“You know how some parents, when their kid is cranky, or messing around when it’s time to go somewhere—you know how some parents say okay, then, I’m leaving without you! Bye! And they leave the playground, or wherever? They maybe even go a ways down the street until their kid

comes crying and running behind them, begging not to be abandoned, promising to be good. My mom was that mom. She was always pretending to leave without me. It was how she'd get me to behave. But there are other parents who would never do that to a kid. They would scold the kid, maybe, or coax the kid, or pick the kid up, or even get mad, but they wouldn't threaten to leave a little person they're responsible for. You know? She just—she always left open the possibility that she'd go away without me.”

Tatum's face looks so concerned, it makes my throat close up.

“I'm fine,” I say. “I'm practically an adult. I'm not supposed to need my mommy anymore. I mean, that threat sucked when I was little, but she didn't actually leave me, then. She always fed me and bought my clothes and a lot of times she was kind and sweet, but she was just more interested in love and adventure than in this child who was tagging along on her life. It was feminist, in a way. And now she's totally within her rights to go live wherever she wants.”

“Is that what she did?”

I turn the water back on and focus on the dishes as I talk. “She's got a new man. He lives in Mexico City. I didn't want to go because of school stuff.”

“That's awful,” says Tatum, wiping his brow with the back of his arm. “She just left you?”

“For a guy she'd known a week.”

Suddenly, I feel like I've said too much. I don't want to give Tatum knowledge he can use against me. I take the sticky pavlova tray and scrub it under the hot water.

“I felt like my parents left me, when they died,” Tatum says, softly. “Because they weren't sober, and they were driving—and you know, how could people do that when they have a kid, tucked up in bed, expecting his parents to come home safe? How can you even make that choice, to get behind a wheel when you know you shouldn't? When you're *everything* to somebody? Why wouldn't your kid be worth the trouble it takes to call the taxi service? It's money, but not a lot. A little bit of time spent waiting for the car to come. If you loved your kid, wouldn't you bother to spend twenty dollars and wait ten minutes? But over the years, I came to think of it differently. Driving that car, it was just a dumb mistake. They got high too

much. They weren't thinking straight. They were flawed people. I stopped feeling like they left me on purpose."

I look into Tatum's huge brown eyes, so often glaring and defensive. His face is open. He has suffered a lot. The thought of that little boy, the selkie boy in Kingsley's painting, the one who swims so joyfully and feels at home in the ocean, the thought of that little boy abandoned by his parents in their deaths—it brings tears up behind my eyes. I can't actually say anything. A million stock phrases spin through my head, but none of them are adequate. So I just nod at him, taking in his loss and the long time it took for him to recover.

"What happened with your mom?" he asks. "Like, how did you find out she was leaving?"

"I begged her to stay. We were living with this guy, Saar. She wanted to leave him. And I said, instead of Mexico with the new boyfriend, maybe the two of us could get a place, a little apartment? I'd get a job and contribute to expenses. And I'd sleep on a foldout sofa. Even a studio apartment would work, just anywhere cheap. I tried to paint a happy picture, you know? To coax her into it. I said we'd decorate it with thrift-store finds and make it nice. We actually haven't lived on our own together since—" I think back. "Not since I was seven. In Rome."

"What did she say when you asked her to stay?"

"That I could come with her to Mexico, but she had to follow her heart." I stop the water, close the dishwasher, and dry my hands. "She's always following her heart." This is the first time I've actually told anyone how hard I begged. "I said, 'isn't part of your heart with me? I'm the one who's always been here. Please can't we get an apartment? Let me finish high school. Let's live together.' But it turns out I'm not the type of person who inspires feelings of devotion."

Tatum has stopped moving. He's looking at me, paying attention to every word.

"She said I could get my GED from Mexico if I wanted," I continue. "And that she was in love. If I loved *her*, I wouldn't stand in her way." I can't look him in the eye. "She was gone the next morning when I woke up. She texted me that she knew I really wanted her to be happy, and she was looking at this wonderful chance at happiness and she absolutely had to take it."

“She left without saying goodbye?”

“Well, she texted.”

Tatum makes a noise in the back of his throat.

“That’s how we left most of the time,” I say. “After Kingsley kicked her out and after this guy abandoned us in Rome when I was little, Isadora never got dumped again. She always left first, told them later. I just—I never thought she’d do it to me.”

For a second, I think he’s going to hug me.

I step back, impulsively. I don’t want him to hug me, because Tatum is obviously not a good person for me to have told all this personal stuff to. Just because we had some kind of a moment right now, talking about our missing parents and our abandonment issues, and

just because he plays guitar like an unselfconscious angel-boy and

has impossible muscles in his shoulders, and

just because he cleans up when no one else will,

and takes the dog to the vet, and

just because he asks questions that other people don’t,

that does *not* mean I want to be wrapped in his long arms and feel his whole strong body pressing so close to mine that I can smell the dish soap on his hands and the meringue on his breath.

Because Tatum is a very sullen taxi-van driver.

And he’s judgmental. And critical. And secretive. And untrustworthy.

And very irritating a lot of the time.

Also, he does not want me here on his territory. Or in his boys’ club.

So he’s not allowed to hug me, even though it would feel really, really good to be hugged by him right now.

38

He doesn’t try anyway. He puts soap in the dishwasher and starts it up.

To avoid the awkwardness, I go into the dining room, where I find yesterday's breakfast dishes, and this morning's, shoved to the side of the table to make room for a pile of what looks like Kingsley's clean laundry. The clothes are jeans, stained with paint despite their trip through the washer, and a number of linen shirts, likewise paint-stained. They're wrinkled and should have been hung to dry.

Kingsley has been gone three weeks at this point, and June's doing his laundry *now*. What does that mean? Is he coming home soon?

There are flies buzzing around the room. The breakfast dishes are sticky and the milk in the cereal bowls has gone curdled and lumpy in the heat.

"Ugh," says Tatum behind me. He's looking at the dishes. "I thought we'd done them all."

I begin stacking plates. In terms of her personality, June doesn't seem the type to leave messes like this. At one time, she covered the castle with labels and suggestions, written out meticulously. Also, she's so industrious. She makes weavings, does the indigo, makes tinctures, bakes bread and makes jam. She spends almost all of every day up in her workshop. But at the same time, there's the unmowed lawn, the dirty bathrooms, the growing piles of dishes, the dog crap on the living room rug, the beautiful round swimming pool choked with rotting leaves.

"It's disgusting in here," Tatum mutters. "I wonder if there's a fly strip somewhere in the pantry."

We head back to the kitchen with our hands full of dishes. "June used to be a nurse," I say as I run hot water into the bowls. "I think of nurses as orderly. And there *are* things about her that are very orderly. But—"

Tatum calls from the pantry where he's hunting for fly strips. "She wasn't a nurse. She told you that?"

"She said it was a long time ago. Maybe before you knew her?"

"She's forty," he says. "I've known her eighteen years. She was my mom's best friend from high school." He comes out of the pantry with a cardboard box of flypaper.

"Was she something *like* a nurse?" I ask. "I don't know, a medical technician?"

"No. When June took up with Kingsley, she had just dropped out of college. She was waitressing in Brooklyn."

I swallow. “But she injected me with something, because my hands got cut.”

“What? When?”

“The day after we went to Beechwood Island.”

“What did she give you?”

“I don’t know. An antibiotic.”

Tatum bites his lip and closes his eyes for a moment. Then his dark lashes flutter open. “What did it do to you?”

“I passed out again, I think. I was really tired?”

“I think she gave you a sedative,” he says quietly.

“Really?”

Tatum looks at his feet. “Okay, I *know* she gave you a sedative.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry. It was already done when she told me. She had me carry you upstairs.”

“Why would she do that?” I ask, reeling.

“There was nothing to sedate. Did she tell you I was screaming or something? Or that I was violent?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“She doesn’t like me. And she’s angry that Kingsley invited me without telling her. But you don’t just sedate your unwanted stepchildren.”

“Matilda,” says Tatum. “Don’t blow this up into—”

“You carried me up four flights of stairs,” I interrupt. “When I was passed out. What on earth did June say was the reason?”

Tatum lifts his gaze. “She said she felt it was needed,” he repeats. “And I trust her judgment.”

“You do?”

Tatum looks me full in the face. “Yes,” he says. “I trust her judgment.”

Late at night, I sit in the Iron Room with my sketchbook on my knees, writing out the possibilities as I think of them. I draw big cartoon arrows between ideas when they connect.

Why would June sedate me? Was there something she didn't want me to see that she got rid of while I was asleep? Like, could she have moved a painting so I wouldn't see it, or disposed of some kind of evidence?

I did investigate her house pretty thoroughly. I rummaged through the fridge and asked Tatum if the packets were drugs. Later I scoured the bookshelves and peeked in the empty rooms. I questioned the contents of the tincture drink June made me.

Maybe she sedated me to threaten one of the boys. That is, by drugging me, she was saying *look what I can do, without your consent, if you break my rules*. And she told Tatum about it, for sure. Was she sending him some kind of message?

Then I have questions about Kingsley.

Have he and June had a falling-out? Is that why he's not coming back?

Why would he alienate his late patron Tipper Sinclair by painting her as the wicked stepmother in "Cinderella"?

Why won't he sign off on the sale of *Prince of Denmark*, when his household is mostly living off groceries bought with Brock's royalty money and Tatum's paycheck?

Why is anyone here hurting for money at all?

I need more pieces of the puzzle, and I decide to start with *Prince of Denmark*. Maybe I can find out why Kingsley doesn't want it sold.

When I'm sure the castle is asleep, I take a flashlight and tiptoe down the stairs to the mudroom. There, I search until I find the box labeled *Spoils of War*. It's an old wooden fishing tackle box, labeled by the boys when they were young. In it are layers of sectioned trays filled with tiny pebbles, shells, beach glass, crab claws, a couple dried-out sea stars, some multisided dice—treasures probably saved by Meer.

In the bottom tray is a set of keys.

As quietly as I can, I put the box back where it belongs. Then I unlock the Oyster Office and pull out my computer.

I start by searching for *Kingsley Cello Prince of Denmark*. The first things that come up are some of the negative reviews June mentioned, from when the painting was displayed at the Whitney Museum. “The painting’s needless gore is not going to be elevated by Cello’s name-check of Shakespeare’s most famous play.” “Better suited to a splatter film.” “Cello imagining himself as both the villain of *Hamlet* and as victim at the hands of an Asian prince is a strange ploy with unpleasant racial undertones.”

I switch to an image search.

Kingsley’s gallery lists the painting. And even though I’ve played a zillion first-person-shooter video games and watched a good number of horror films, there’s something about the violence in it that makes me catch my breath.

Prince of Denmark shows a scene that Shakespeare never wrote.

It is set in the present day.

A young man with

long black hair and a round face

kneels on a bed covered in indigo linen.

He is shirtless, and his arms are covered in what look like tattoos.

Lying in the bed is a bearded man, presumably Claudius, the king.

He looks like Kingsley.

Hamlet’s knife is raised—

but his victim is

already dead.

Blood soaks the sheets.

Stab wounds cover the king’s chest.

Hamlet is Meer.

And he has killed our father.

The painting is recent. Meer looks just like he looks now.

And Kingsley painted himself as a victim.

Is there something wrong here at Hidden Beach, something far beyond sloth, decay, and neglect—something that would lead Kingsley to paint his son as a murderer?

I make notes in my sketchbook, searching for a connection between the violence attributed to Meer in the painting and the eight million dollars Kingsley doesn't seem to want. I try to draw connections between the sedative June gave me and Holland's great-aunt Tipper knowing Kingsley, Meer and Tatum's reluctance to leave Hidden Beach after high school, Kingsley's impulse to see me and then his sudden departure.

But I come up empty.

I begin opening the cabinets in the office. I've been in this room many times, and I've stared at the books and the objects on the shelves, looking for clues to my father's character, but I've never searched behind the closed doors. June has always been downstairs when I've had access to the room, or the boys have been sitting here with me, staring at their devices.

I don't know what I'm looking for. Anything that will help me understand the situation. Maybe a letter from Gabe's law firm about a pending separation between Kingsley and June, or a receipt for some enormous expense that would explain why there doesn't seem to be any money. Something.

I've been through the cupboards and now I'm shining my flashlight into drawers filled with paper clips and sticky notes.

Nothing important.

I am down on my knees to look in the lowest drawer, which holds mailing labels and spare manila envelopes, when I see the edge of a fat spiral notebook that's gotten shoved under the desk. I pull it out.

This isn't Meer's sketchbook, which is hardbound and basic black, covered with stickers of sharks. And it's not one of mine, which have graph paper because I like drawing maps. This book has a clothlike brown cover. In block print, at the bottom, it says *Cello, Summer 2012*.

It is Kingsley's sketchbook. But why is it shoved under the desk? Did someone hide it here, or did he just drop it before he left town?

I have never seen any of my father's drawings. He always presents as a skilled, meticulous technician, working in oil paint. He has never offered

the media any access to his preparatory materials or to any work that's not fully finished.

The pictures in the first half of the sketchbook are fairly ordinary: pencil drawings of Glum, asleep, with imagined monsters looming over her. Sketches of trees that are probably somewhere here on the property. Some drawings of Brock, in profile, laughing—maybe studies for a second painting of him.

Then there are pictures of the teenagers who died in the fire. Drawings of Mirren, her cousin Johnny, and Gat, their friend. The first sketches are based on a photo that I saw when I looked up online articles about the tragedy. Kingsley has captured the way Mirren tucks her hair behind her ears, the way Johnny squints into the sun, the way Gat smiles like he has a good secret. Later drawings of the same people deviate from the photograph. Kingsley puts the three of them lying on the beach, their hands across their chests like they're lying in coffins. Then he tries them on the widow's walk of an old New England house, all with their backs to an enormous dragon, who curls herself around the house, her mouth open above them.

Then, surprisingly, there is a series of drawings in Sharpie. The thick nib of the permanent marker gives these sketches a much bolder, more cartoonish feel, though the line still looks very much like Kingsley's. He's drawn some monsters, some castles—elements of the fairy tales and classics he uses so much in his paintings.

And a piranha plant. With spiky teeth.

It's a bit different from the one Tatum drew on my leg. But it's the same kind of plant. From the garden level of *Luigi's Haunted Mansion*.

The drawings of Mirren, Johnny, and Gat could have been done any time after the Beechwood Island fire. It happened a week before I arrived on the Vineyard.

But the piranha plant, no way. That drawing has to have been made *after I arrived at Hidden Beach*.

And yet, that's impossible.

Kingsley hasn't been here to draw it.

One of the boys has to be drawing in Kingsley's sketchbook. But why? And which one?

I've seen Tatum draw on Meer, and he draws with confidence. And though Brock claims he can only draw spirals, and his piranha plant was objectively terrible, he could be hiding his skill. Maybe all this time at Hidden Beach, he's been apprenticing to Kingsley?

More likely, the drawings are Meer's. My brother keeps a sketchbook of doodles and tattoo ideas. He covers himself and everyone else in Sharpie. He told me he's "not an artist"—but he was also homeschooled by his parents. "June had so much to teach me," he said. "And so did the ocean. And Kingsley."

Meer could have been trained by Kingsley to paint like Kingsley.

Is it even possible, what I'm thinking?

That Meer draws in this sketchbook because Meer is painting Kingsley's paintings.

That Meer isn't leaving Hidden Beach to go to college, or do anything else, because he already has a career that pays him millions.

That Meer, not Kingsley, painted *Prince of Denmark*, and that's why the painting shows the son conquering the father figure.

And Meer, not Kingsley, painted me on a raft in the middle of the sea. Because it's Meer who would have seen that picture on my social media. And Meer would store the painting in his own room instead of in Kingsley's studio.

But why would Meer be painting for Kingsley?

Did our father leave his family ages ago to adventure across the sea like Odysseus, after training my brother to carry on his legacy?

I look through the rest of the sketchbook, hoping for more information, but it's only half full. The rest of the images don't offer anything I can make sense of. The artist returns to pencil. There are many, many drawings of goblins and gargoyles, crushed up next to one another, laughing and lurking in what looks like a cave, or maybe they're under a bed.

They really do look like Kingsley drew them. I recognize the sense of threat in each image, the ugliness inside the beauty, some impossible-to-articulate quality of line. The feeling of claustrophobia, the laughing faces.

When I finally lift my eyes from the sketchbook, morning sun is pouring through the windows. I tuck the book under my arm, put my electronics

away, and shut the lights.

I need to talk to Meer.

40

He's sleeping without a blanket, wearing pajama pants and no shirt, lying in front of a white plastic fan. The hot air ruffles his hair, which has come out of its usual bun. Since his mattress is on the floor, his sheets spill onto the carpet.

I sit on the edge of the bed and tap Meer softly on the shoulder. I expect him to roll over sleepily and ask me to go away, but he bolts up to sitting, seemingly completely awake in a heartbeat. "Is it Dad?"

"No. He's not back yet."

Meer flops back and looks at me. "Oh, Matilda. I thought you were my mom, waking me up. Ugh, I'm so tired."

"He might be back today, though."

"Mm? Why do you say that?"

"June was doing his laundry, like getting ready for his return."

"No, *I* was doing his laundry," says Meer, rubbing his eyes. "I just finally got around to it, is all."

"Oh." I can hear the disappointment in my own voice.

"I'm laundry boy," says Meer. "I'm just not diligent."

"So he's not due back."

Meer plops a pillow over his face and talks from underneath. "No, Matilda. He hasn't called me or texted me or emailed me. Or my mom."

"Not once? All this time?"

"Same as every time you ask."

I haven't asked in ages. "Really?"

Meer takes the pillow off his face. "That's the hundred-percent truth I just told you. I don't know what else to say."

"Okay. Don't be annoyed. I just thought the wrong thing."

“Why are you even awake? It’s very early.”

“I didn’t sleep.”

“And why are you getting *me* up?” asks Meer, staggering to his feet and pulling his hair off his neck, gathering it with an elastic from his wrist. He disappears into his closet, and I can hear him rummaging for clothes to wear.

“Have you seen the painting that just sold? *Prince of Denmark*?”

“Of course,” says Meer, still in his walk-in closet. “I posed for it. Then it got shipped off to the gallery.”

“I found a sketchbook of Kingsley’s,” I say. “From this summer. It had a date on it.”

“He was here most of May and June,” says Meer. “He always has a sketchbook. He always puts the date. I can’t find my other shoe.”

“Yeah, but he was drawing in Sharpie. Like you do. Meer, can you come back out? I’m trying to talk to you about something important.”

He reappears, wearing board shorts and a T-shirt, hopping on one foot as he shoves a socked foot into a sneaker. “Here now. What about *Prince of Denmark*?”

I take a deep breath and look him in the eye. “Have you been doing Kingsley’s art?”

“What? No. What do you even mean?”

“In the sketchbook I found, it wasn’t just that he was drawing in Sharpie. Anyone can do that. It was that he drew something I told you about. The piranha plant from the video game. Remember?”

I hand Meer the sketchbook. He sits down on the mattress and flips through it, stopping when he gets to the Sharpie pictures. “Ha. I told him for years that Sharpies are awesome for drawing! He always said real artists use soft materials like charcoal and oil paints. But look—he tried the Sharpie.”

“Turn forward.”

Meer gets to the piranha plant.

“Kingsley can’t possibly know about that level in *Haunted Mansion*,” I explain. “So there’s no way he could have drawn this.”

“Hm.”

“So I’m asking you, Meer, if you drew it.”

“No,” he says. “I didn’t.”

“I don’t think Brock has anywhere near the skill, and Tatum doesn’t have time, with his job and all the swimming. June never heard about the piranha plant, so it has to be you.”

He closes the book. “I don’t know what to say, Matilda. It’s not me. What’s your logic? I don’t even understand what you’re saying.”

It starts to sound outrageous as I say it out loud: “Kingsley taught you to draw and paint like him. You’re homeschooled because he was teaching you. He wanted you to do it so that he could—so that he could leave, I guess. So that he could escape this life and you could keep painting, as him, for as long as he’d reasonably live.”

Meer shakes his head.

“Or he’s dead,” I say. “That occurred to me, too. Like he could have trained you because he knew he was dying. And he’s been gone a long time now and all this is a cover-up so you can sell paintings for eight million dollars.”

“Oh god, he’s not dead,” says Meer. “He’s been emailing you. He’s just — Look. I know it’s really hard for you that you haven’t met him. And it has been a strange time, with the waiting, and my mom being upstairs all day. But he’s done lots of paintings with scary plants. Like this one he did of a poison garden. And another, like a Sleeping Beauty thing, a castle covered in briars.” He taps the sketchbook. “I don’t think this is your piranha plant at all. I think this is just Kingsley imagining plant monsters, which is a thing he does.”

I look at Meer’s kind face.

I love him. I am not sure I believe him, but I love him.

“Okay,” I say.

There’s a thump in the hall then as Tatum bounds up the stairs. “Meer!” he barks, sticking his head in the open doorway. “Tell me you didn’t order a box of live animals.”

Meer and I follow Tatum to the kitchen. Brock isn't down yet. Glum is closed in the pantry, barking and barking. On the counter is a large package with holes in the lid.

"It's my poultry!" shouts Meer when he sees it. He hugs me happily. "I did it! What you said? I'm raising chickens. And whatever. I supercharged it. You'll see."

"Damn it, Meer," says Tatum, scowling at the box. "You decided you like chickens literally last week."

"I've liked them for a long time!" says Meer. Then he peeks into the pantry at the barking dog. "We should put Glum outside."

"We're out of dog food," says Tatum. "I couldn't get her to go out."

"She can have bacon," says Meer. "There's leftover." He rummages in the fridge for the bacon, then lures Glum outside with it and shuts the front door.

Back in the kitchen, Meer lights up again. "I ordered them super rush," he says. "With Brock's credit card. Brock said it was okay." He lowers his voice. "Don't tell my mom I got them delivered to the house. Kingsley likes everything sent to the post office. But it turns out you can't get poultry delivered to a PO box. It's like, illegal or something."

"Got it," I say. I pour a glass of water and drink the whole thing, trying to clear my head after being up all night.

"She won't ask, though," says Meer. "She won't even notice."

"How is she not going to notice *chickens*?" Tatum asks.

"We're gonna build a hutch over on the faraway part of the property. It'll be economical in the end, because of all the eggs," says Meer. "And it's not just chickens. It's a poultry grab bag."

"What?"

"The guy who owns Meadowlark, he told me where I could order birds from. I went on the website thinking oh, maybe I'll get Silkies because they're just so hilarious-looking. Those are the super puffy ones. Then I thought no, maybe Plymouth Rocks, because they're absolutely classic. Those are the black-and-white ones with the red combs. You know?"

Tatum shakes his head. "We have nowhere to put poultry. What are you thinking?"

“It’s gonna be fine,” says Meer. “I’m building a hutch. Anyway, I couldn’t decide, and then I saw they do a grab bag. Like, an assortment. You just get what you get and you don’t get upset.”

“Assorted *chickens*?” asks Tatum.

“It’s a grab bag of *poultry*,” Meer corrects him. “Ducks, turkeys, chickens, pheasants, geese—there could be anyone in there. And the best thing is, it said in the reviews, sometimes you just don’t know what it’s going to be until it grows up. Because if you know nothing about poultry, which is frankly what I know, you might think it was a chicken. Then it turns out it’s a pheasant! Or a turkey. Or whatever. I think we’ll be able to tell the ducks, for sure. They have that flat bill.”

I love Meer’s huge enthusiasms. And his optimism. I love that he listened to my random idea about raising chickens now and took action. He’s doing something to make himself less idle, to maybe find a passion or a direction that could make him happier. Here, in the sunny comfort of the kitchen, it doesn’t seem possible that he’s a genius painter masquerading as his famous missing father. He’s a poorly socialized sweetheart with low executive functioning and a dream of raising poultry.

Tatum is annoyed. “Another responsibility is not what we need right now,” he says. “What do we feed them?”

“You can buy chicken feed at the hardware store,” says Meer. “Everybody knows that.”

“I can’t believe this,” says Tatum. “We can barely take care of Glum properly. We *don’t* take care of her properly.”

“Yes, we do.”

“And with everything else that’s going on—these are living creatures.”

“I love you and your eggs,” Meer says to the box. “I love you even if you’re turkeys.”

“Meer!” barks Tatum. “You have to send them back. I’ll borrow the car and figure out how to ship them, and Brock will get his money refunded. Okay?”

“Brock doesn’t mind.”

“I mind. If we can’t get a refund, we’ll figure out how to give them to some neighbor who keeps . . . ducks, or whatever they are. God, we don’t

have a pond. Where were the ducks going to swim?”

“In the pool?” guesses Meer. “I didn’t think about that.”

“The pool is disgusting, and if it wasn’t, it would be full of chemicals.”

“Do ducks actually *need* a pond or do they just *like* it?” Meer goes on. “Maybe we can get them a splashy pool, or a tub of water for swimming.”

“No!” says Tatum. “They’re not staying.”

“Leave Meer alone,” I snap. “Why shouldn’t he keep poultry and build a hutch? Maybe he wants to farm some of this land. Or just have them for pets? He’s allowed to figure it out and have something to do that interests him.”

“You don’t understand,” says Tatum.

“I don’t see why *you* get to say no,” I argue. “This is Meer’s home and he’s eighteen and I don’t see why you think you’re the boss here.”

Tatum runs his hand through his hair. “June and Kingsley won’t like it.” He turns to Meer. “The timing is really bad.”

“Do you hear the way you talk to him?” I say. “You’re condescending. And controlling.”

“Because he’s not looking at the whole picture. He’s acting on impulse.”

“So let him act on impulse. Let him see what he can do.”

“I’m right here,” says Meer, softly. “And I’m going to take my poultry to the pool house. I’m going to unpack them because I care that they’re living creatures. Then I’m going to buy some feed and figure out how to build a hutch and not talk to Tatum till tomorrow and then it will be fine.” He picks up the box. “Matilda, you can come help if you want.”

42

Meer walks out.

I start to follow him, but Tatum grabs my arm. He does it very gently. It’s just a tap, really, but he keeps his hot palm on my elbow. “What?” I snarl.

“You don’t live here,” he says, almost in a whisper. “You’re a guest in this house, and you haven’t met Kingsley yet.”

“So? Meer is my brother.”

“Please, Matilda. Don’t mess with a situation you don’t understand.”

“Stop trying to control me,” I say. “You’re just a boy.” His touch on my elbow remains.

Tatum looks at me, hard. Like he’s thinking.

“What?” I say irritably.

And then suddenly, without deciding, I am standing tiptoe, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him. His mouth is warm, and for a hot second I think, what on earth have I just done? He doesn’t want to kiss me, this is going to be so awkward, how did I even get here, pressed up against him?

But then Tatum kisses me back, and the salt-air smell of his hair is around me, and I stop thinking. I just am.

I have known I wanted this,
this whole time,
but also without knowing it.
I didn’t want to want him,
because he infuriates me,
with his damaged-boy vibe and his all-boy crew and
his secretive nature and
at the same time, underneath all that,
his integrity.

Integrity, because Tatum cares.

He makes sure there’s food on the table,
makes people smoothies,

takes care of the things it seems like June used to do but no longer does.

He takes the dog to the vet and lets her ride in the front seat and pays the bill himself when no one else will.

This isn’t like other first kisses I’ve had. Those were tentative and slow. Instead, we are kissing wildly, with all the built-up anger and fascination and admiration between us pulsating in our mouths as they press against one another.

Tatum puts a hand on my face and the other in the tangle of my hair, and I am lost in the wonder of this unusual boy, and the fact that he is here, with his lips on mine.

But after a short while he puts his hands on my shoulders and pulls away. “Matilda, wait.”

“What?”

“This is a bad idea.”

“Why?”

“It’s just—Kingsley. And Meer.”

“Meer won’t mind.”

“I just can’t. You shouldn’t be here. I don’t want to.” He walks to the other side of the kitchen. “I don’t want to,” he says, louder.

“You seemed like you wanted to, just now.”

“But I can’t. I don’t.”

“Fine, then.” My face is hot with embarrassment. I’m so confused. “I don’t want to, either,” I say, cruelly. “I was just bored.”

I head across the property toward the pool house with my mind racing.

Why doesn’t Tatum want to kiss me?

He obviously does want to kiss me. But why does he also *not* want to kiss me?

He said it was because of Kingsley, but that can’t be true. Kingsley’s not even here.

And why would Kingsley care?

And Meer, I feel like Meer would just roll with anything that happened. Meer is thinking about tattoos and poultry.

Maybe Tatum thinks something’s wrong with me, the way Luca said. It was stupid of me to lunge at him when I’m sleep-deprived and emotionally unstable and angry at him. That’s a bad kind of kiss in any case, and I don’t even like him as a person.

I’m not actually attracted to sullen, territorial taxi-van drivers.

I certainly don't think a wounded orphan boy who has no plans or ambitions is any sort of decent boyfriend for a girl who's mourning her unattached mother and suffers waves of paranoia during which she becomes convinced that her beloved brother is a forger.

The pool house arcs around the deck next to the circular pool. It has several sliding doors. In many of its rooms are unmade beds, as if people left years ago and no one's bothered to look in there since. There are books still on the nightstands.

I find Meer in a sunny space that clearly used to function as a sort of lounge. There are sliding glass doors on two sides. A sectional couch faces a fireplace and a huge patterned rug covers the floor. My brother sits in the center of the room with the box next to him.

He is surrounded by baby birds. Their cheeping has a slight air of panic.

I won't think about Tatum.

And our kiss.

And how it felt.

And how he said he didn't want to.

I will concentrate on supporting my brother.

"How many birds did you get?" I ask Meer, sliding the door shut behind me.

"Ten."

I sit down carefully on the rug, being sure not to squash anybody. Four of the chicks are yellow and fluffy, with sharp beaks. Then there are two ducklings: yellow, slightly darker, with flat, baby pink bills. Two of the other birds are larger, with brown backs. One is white, with a long neck. Then there is one little stripy bird.

Meer says he thinks the brown-backed ones might be turkeys, but I think they're a different kind of chicken. The white one doesn't seem like anything we recognize.

He also says tomorrow he's going to buy wire and wood to build a hutch. He's looked up different designs online.

Glum stands at the sliding door, looking in. "Go away, you had your bacon," says Meer.

We set up water for the chicks. Meer sprinkles dried split peas across the rug, which is already scattered with little baby bird poops. “They’re gonna be happy here for a night or two,” he says. “And then I’ll hook them up in style.”

“What are you naming them?”

“Definitely that one is Malt Ball.” Meer points to a brown-backed one. Then to a yellow chick: “That one’s Sunshine.”

“Come on. You can do better than Sunshine.”

“No, I like it. It’s pure,” he says. “It’s unpretentious.”

I point to another chick. “That’s Basil Fluffington Webster.”

“My god, why?” Meer laughs.

“It has webbed feet, so Webster. And Fluffington should be obvious.”

“But how come Basil?”

“We need a pretentious one to counterbalance Sunshine.” I point to a duckling. “How’s Cotton Ball? To go with Malt Ball.”

“Should they all be named Ball? Like Cotton Ball, Malt Ball, Hair Ball?” suggests Meer. “Oh, Bowling. And um, let’s see, Fire.”

“Is Ball their last name?”

“No. Middle. Their last name is Sugawara. If you take an animal to the vet, they write your last name as the animal’s.”

“So is it Puddleglum Sugawara or Puddleglum Cello?”

“She’s Cooper-Lee. So now we have Cotton, Malt, Hair, Bowling, and Fire.” Meer is pointing at poultry, assigning names as they toddle around. “Do you like Volley?”

“Meh.”

“Oh, Foot!”

“Foot is good.”

“This one is Foot.”

“How ’bout Sour?” I say.

“Sour Ball. Yup. That’s seven balls. Eight if we use Volley,” says Meer. “Oh wait, let’s chuck Volley and do Masquerade instead. You can be Masquerade Ball,” he says to the bird with the long neck. “You’ll like that,

won't you? It suits you really well." He looks up at me. "And then Sunshine Ball and Basil Ball Fluffington Webster. Is that good with you?"

"Just Basil Ball Webster is better."

"Oh my god, it makes no sense," says Meer, collapsing in giggles. "I love it all so much."

Glum's ears are on alert. She stares at us through the glass.

43

Tatum and I are in an unspoken, awkward truce,
pretending we never kissed,
pretending we're not looking at each other,
pretending neither of us is angry.

Over the next few days, with that going on, the four of us try to build a hutch for Meer's poultry.

It turns out to be hard. None of us has any skill with tools. The supplies are expensive, and Brock rolls his eyes as he puts down his credit card.

We put the hinges on wrong.

We haven't bought enough chicken wire.

Our supports tip inward because they're not anchored or not even, or something.

The roof won't go on the way we thought it would.

After four days of trying, we give up. Meer decides to let the chickens keep living in the lounge, even though Tatum thinks it's a bad idea.

He can't help but be charmed by them when he visits them in the pool house, though. He sits on the floor, long legs tucked under him, and memorizes their names. Foot and Cotton seem to like him, especially.

The days are strangely empty once we abandon our hutch project. We go clamming again one day and pickle cucumbers another. We have a poker game at the picnic table using buttons for chips. We play Scrabble and drink beer.

June stops joining us for dinner completely. She has started baking in the middle of the night, when we're all asleep. Each morning a new loaf of bread sits on the wooden cutting board, but she is nowhere to be found.

I try not to look at Tatum. I try to pretend nothing ever happened between us, even when he's the only one in the kitchen with me. Even when he's blending strawberries and collagen and chia seeds and putting a smoothie in front of me, early in the morning.

One day Tatum has a new trespassing idea. We all meet that night in the garage and he leads us on foot across South Road and up a long driveway. "The Robertson estate," says Tatum. "All ours."

"Why have we never done crimes here before?" asks Brock. "It's so nearby."

"The owners are always home. But this year, they cleared out to do like, a tour of Europe." Tatum taps one ear. "You hear a lot when you drive the taxi van. I found out today that they've been gone more than four weeks already."

We reach the estate and he leads us through an opening in a hedge. There, surrounded by trees and far from the house, sits a large rectangular pool. It's edged in stone. Around it are lounge chairs, low tables, and a rectangular gazebo for shade. Under the gazebo is an outdoor kitchen.

Brock throws off his sweatshirt and cannonballs into the water. Meer does likewise. I'm kicking off my sneakers and struggling with the zip on my hoodie. When I look up, Tatum is staring at me.

His dark eyes with their fringe of black lashes meet mine, then look away.

"What?" I ask.

"I've been meaning to tell you. I bought these—I bought something," he says, very soft.

I stop with my zipper and step toward him. I think:

This boy, this closed-off and infuriating boy, this dutiful and hardworking boy who

kissed me once, whose

cold hand on my leg completely derails my thoughts, who

seemed to understand about my mother leaving me—

he's going to
let me in.

Meer and Brock are out of the pool already and rummaging in a small outbuilding that contains blow-up floaties, foam noodles, and beach balls.

"What did you buy?" I ask Tatum.

Meer hits Brock with a foam noodle.

Brock hits Meer back. "That was an illegal move!" yells Meer.

"This is a lawless swimming pool!" yells Brock, whapping him again with the noodle.

Tatum has turned his attention to them now.

"What did you buy?" I ask again.

"Um. No, it's stupid," says Tatum. He shakes his head.

"How come?"

He shakes his head again. "Never mind, Matilda."

"What?" I ask again.

"You don't need to know. It was a bad idea."

"Tell me."

He's closed back up again, like a book that's been slammed shut.

"Why are you so secretive?" I snap. I pull my hoodie over my head and toss it on a lounge chair.

Hurt crosses Tatum's face. "I'm not."

"You are. It's like a way of life for you." I busy myself taking things out of my tote bag.

"What does that mean?"

"It's impossible for anyone to know almost anything about you."

"Really?"

"Tell me," I say, sitting down and looking him in the eye. "Tell me what you bought today, Tatum."

He is standing still, his arms at his side. "No," he says. "I decided not to."

"It's literally the simplest question."

"No."

Anger fills my body. “That’s what I’m talking about. You deliberately brought up a topic, said you wanted to tell me something, then flipped and informed me that I didn’t need to know it. Why? There’s no reason to do that but to make me feel bad.”

“I didn’t—”

“Yes, you did, Tatum. You one hundred percent did that.”

He wrinkles his forehead. “You’re reading into it. I changed my mind, is all.”

“You kiss me and change your mind. You make up excuses instead of saying what the hell you actually mean. You live and breathe secrets, Tatum. You disappear all day. You swim out to sea so far that no one can even see you anymore.”

“I disappear to work, Matilda. I’m not a child anymore. I can’t keep living off Kingsley. I have to contribute.”

“Nothing adds up. It’s like you can’t wait to get away from Hidden Beach half the time. You escape into the water whenever you have a free hour. But also, you stay here. At the castle. You only go into town if there’s an errand. You’re antisocial.” He tries to interrupt me again, but I’m on a roll now and I just talk over him: “Why don’t you leave the island if you don’t want to be here? Go to college or find a job in some new part of the country? You used to have friends in high school, girlfriends, whatever, a band—but school just ended and you don’t see a soul. Your whole world is Brock and Meer.”

“And you.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me. I don’t know why I thought even for a second that things were any different. You tell me not to defend my brother and you tell me June sedated me. You tell me things aren’t my business. Every single thing you do pushes me away because you want Brock and Meer and Kingsley to yourself again.”

“That’s not it.”

“Think how narrow you are. Your universe can’t just be guys together doing guy stuff, trespassing and clamming and cementing the patriarchy and the boys’ club all the time, holed up in your castle. Don’t you see what an absolute weasel you are for wanting that?”

Tatum bites his lip. “You have it wrong.”

“Then tell me,” I say. “Tell me the right version.”

“Mom and Dad, don’t fight,” calls Brock from the pool.

Tatum turns away, but I reach out and grab his hand. “I *need* to be here,” I whisper. “I am lost. Okay? I don’t have any home right now. My mother is gone, and I need to see Kingsley to figure out who I am, and what I’m made of. I need Meer, too. He’s my family.”

He wrenches his hand away from mine and pulls off his sweater, then the T-shirt underneath it. He strides to the pool without a word, dives in at the deep end, and swims laps, furiously.

I turn my back and go sit in the Jacuzzi.

After I’ve been alone for twenty minutes, Brock climbs in and asks me to tell him the story of the *Something Rotten* video game. So I do, and I’m almost to the plot twist when we hear a voice:

“Matilda Klein. In my hot tub.”

Standing at the break in the hedge is Holland Terhune.

“Sorry,” says Tatum, pausing his swim. “We’re totally trespassing.” He heaves himself out of the pool and goes over to his towel.

“This is *your* house?” I say.

“Did you not know?” Holland says.

“No idea. We, um, borrow functioning pools. Various places on the island.”

“My functioning pool is your functioning pool,” says Holland. “Stay. Hang out.” Then, to Tatum: “Seriously, you don’t have to leave.” And to Meer: “Are you Meer? You have to be Meer.”

He nods, grinning. “How do you know Matilda already?”

“Oh god, long story, but basically I stalked her,” says Holland. “After she puked very cutely at the airport and almost needed a medic and then we rescued her with wintergreen gum and advice. Wait.” She squints at Brock, who is with me in the Jacuzzi. “Is that Sammy?”

“*Men and Other Critters*. Yeah,” says Brock. “Paul-David Brock.”

“No, from the Kingsley Cello painting,” says Holland. “With the burning donkey skin.”

“You’ve seen it?”

Holland shrugs. “My family owns it,” she says. “They’re big art collectors. You’re better looking in real life.” She winks at Brock and then looks at her phone and sends a text. “The others are on their way out. You’re going to love these sluts, I promise you.”

In a matter of minutes, five girls appear through the gap in the hedge, all in bathing suits. Winnie I’ve met already, and there’s also Olive and Jia, Agnes and Amma. They bring with them two bottles of rum, a pile of gray and white beach towels, a cooler of soft drinks, and some speakers that push music out into the night air.

The rest of the night is a blur.

Tatum talks to Amma for too long, sitting on the edge of the pool while she stands in the water.

He lets Winnie climb on his shoulders in the pool. He helps her back up when she falls. His hands wrap around her legs to keep her stable.

Agnes makes a rum and Coke and hands it to Tatum in a red plastic cup. He bends down to hear what she has to say, above the sound of the music.

I hate that I notice every single thing he does. I don’t want to be thinking about him. Or talking to him. I don’t care what he thinks, because he’s manipulative and controlling and strange and friendless and a moody weasel on top of all that.

But I clock every gesture, every smile, every time his eyes glance my way.

It makes my sternum hurt.

I lose track of how many drinks I’ve had.

44

Next morning, around eleven.

The boys and I are hungover. Except Brock, who abstains.

Not for the first time, I wish there was coffee at Hidden Beach.

We stand around a loaf of home-baked white bread that June left us in the night. We saw her briefly when we came in from Holland’s. She wore an

indigo apron with her sleeves rolled up. She didn't ask where we'd been.

"My head hurts," says Brock. "I didn't even drink." He looks seriously underslept.

"I'll make you a thing," says Tatum, staggering to the fridge. His hair is sticking up. He has skipped his morning swim and wears pajama bottoms and his favorite cable-knit sweater. Bare feet.

"Oh, me too," says Meer. "Because I did drink." He seems to have slept in his swimsuit.

"Me too," I say. "But don't make a yucky thing." I made an effort to brush my teeth and shower before I came downstairs, because I felt I couldn't possibly face Tatum and all my complicated feelings if I was smelly at the same time. My head is splitting open and my eyeballs feel like they might explode.

"We should eat eggs," he says now. "So we get protein."

I hate that he's probably right. I want him to be wrong about everything. Because he wouldn't tell me what he bought. Because he talked so much to Amma. And carried Winnie on his shoulders. And put his head down to hear Agnes.

"Aren't raw eggs a hangover cure?" I ask. "With hot sauce? People drink it in the movies." My face feels swollen. I'm simultaneously hungry and nauseated.

"Eggs contain cysteine," says Tatum, "which breaks down acetaldehyde, which is what causes hangovers. I don't know about the hot sauce, but bananas are good because the potassium helps—"

"Oh my god don't tell us," says Meer, running all his sentences into one. "It's way too boring just feed us what we should have I am such a sad boy right now I don't think rum is my drink and I will never have it again."

I grab a Sharpie and Meer holds out his forearm for me.

I write *No Rum*.

"Those are my words to live by," says Meer. "Now and forever. And did I tell you I barfed? I barfed in the night it was very dramatic with disgusting noises that I couldn't even believe came out of my body."

"I barfed, too," says Tatum.

“So that’s why it smelled like barf in the bathroom already,” says Meer. “It was your barf. I wondered if I had already barfed and couldn’t remember it.”

“Nope,” says Tatum.

“Well, no thank you for smelling up the bathroom.”

Tatum has filled the blender with bananas and milk. Now he’s hovering over it with a bunch of June’s brown bottles: butterbur, willow bark extract, some other things. He adds ice and turns the blender on.

Meer and I cover our ears. “It’s so loud,” I moan. “The blender was never that loud before.”

Meer lies face down on the kitchen floor, scrunching his eyes in pain.

Brock takes eggs from the fridge and sets them on the counter.

Tatum stops the blender.

“I thought I was well enough to scramble eggs,” whimpers Brock. “But I’m not.” He leaves the eggs on the counter and lies down next to Meer.

“Did we play shoulder wars?” asks Meer. “I feel like we did.”

“I was on Brock’s shoulders,” I say. “Fighting someone. Fighting Olive.”

“You put a crick in my neck with your thighs,” says Brock.

“Oh, you poor man,” says Tatum.

“She rode on me because I’m the better warrior,” says Brock.

“Don’t flirt with me, Brock,” I say. “I feel pukey.”

“I flirt with everybody,” he says. “I used to get paid for it.”

“Is that sad or good?”

“Yes.”

I laugh.

“I maybe should stop flirting with everyone,” says Brock. “It’s maybe a pitiful behavior. But on the other hand, maybe it’s my nature and maybe I like that about myself. Also, I hooked up with Amma.”

“You did?”

“Just a mini. Fifteen minutes in the woods, which was kind of awkward.”

“Use protection,” I say.

“It wasn’t all the way, sheesh. I said *mini*. I’ve been a monk this year at Hidden Beach,” says Brock. “You’re not supposed to like, sex it up when you just got sober.”

“Don’t say ‘sex it up.’ ”

“Except maybe if you’re married or something. Then you can sex it up. Also, Agnes played footsie with me in the hot tub.”

“You’re terrible.”

“I’m delightful,” he says. “Wait, do you think I’m a butt?”

“Not usually. But maybe last night.”

“Do you think Jia likes me?” asks Meer. “She’s so pretty. But I don’t think I made a good impression.”

“You told her you like boys,” I say. “So I don’t think it matters.”

“I think I only looked at her because of the rum,” says Meer. “Or because I never meet anyone. It was confusing.”

My eyeballs feel like they’re made of liquid fire, but I stagger toward the eggs and take the lid off the butter dish. “Let me have some banana goop,” I say to Tatum.

He pours me a glass. I drink the whole thing down. It tastes like sweet moss.

While Tatum pours out the rest of the goop for himself, Meer, and Brock, I crack eight eggs. I add heavy cream and salt, then scramble them in butter.

I slice the bread June baked and toast it in the broiler.

When the food is ready, Tatum has gotten both Meer and Brock to drink their goop and persuaded them to relocate to the dining room.

As I put a plate of toast and eggs in front of him, Tatum looks up at me. “Thank you,” he says. “I mean it. I know you feel terrible, too.”

He reaches out and touches my hand. A flame runs through me. The gesture feels like an apology and a spark, the start of something I don’t understand.

I am not sure if I forgive him.

“We should see them again,” says Meer. “When my head is attached to my body. I love Holland.”

“I don’t think so,” says Tatum.

“You’re so antisocial,” I snap, my irritation from last night coming back full force. It’s not even logical, because when Tatum actually *was* social, talking to Winnie and Amma and Agnes, I didn’t like it at all.

“I’m not,” he says.

“You are.”

“I don’t care about seeing them,” says Brock.

“Let’s totally see them,” says Meer. “Maybe June will let us have them over outdoors? Like when Gabe came to dinner. Or we can meet up on the beach.”

“Let’s absolutely not,” says Tatum.

“I’m going back to bed,” I say. “I got up on the wrong side of it.”

“Matilda, don’t,” says Meer.

But I say, “Bye, all you people,” and head upstairs.

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Part Six

Bone Tower

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When I wake next, someone has slid an envelope under my door. It's just plain white paper covered with tiny writing, a dense print that reaches the edges of the paper in places.

It reads:

I don't want to be antisocial.

Or a secretive person.

I don't want to hide from the world on a hidden beach.

I don't want to hide from people I used to be friends with. Or from new people.

I don't want to be cold (my father was cold).

I don't want to miss out on knowing you because I lost my parents

or because I hate my job

or because I am ashamed of things I've done.

You are right. I need to get away (I want to get away) and

I also need to stay (I want to stay).

Before you got here, I couldn't articulate that. So something is changing.

God, Matilda, I'm going to wish I didn't write this, and I'm going to wish I didn't stick it under your door, but even though I know I'm going to wish all that, I am still doing it.

Maybe you want to go see Wooden Cage?

With me.

Tatum.

Inside the envelope are two tickets. For Wooden Cage.

My band. That I love. "We all stayed out too late / We fell apart and made mistakes / They said we didn't matter / So we mattered to each other."

My head swirls.

Tatum bought me these tickets. He bought *us* tickets.

Even though he said he didn't want to kiss me.

Downstairs, the late-afternoon house is silent.

I look outside. Tatum's goggles are on a hook outside the mudroom so he's not in the water. He could be at work.

Get a grip on yourself, Matilda. You're going to college in ten days. You're in a fragile state. You've been jealous and angry, and this boy is a terrible choice, a tortured loner who knows nothing about video games and is likely to drown any day. He's clearly stuck in a life he doesn't want, still grieving his parents. He's basically stagnant and festering.

Also, he might regret writing the note.

He actually said he *knew* he'd regret it.

But I want to throw myself into his arms. I do. I want him. I just want him and that's all there is to it, and now I know that he wants me, too.

I'm heading toward Tatum's room when I hear barking outside. And then—an unearthly scream. And quacking.

It's coming from the pool house. I take off running.

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My breath comes hard with the unexpected burst of energy. I rush across the overgrown lawn, across the pool deck, and through the open door of the lounge where the birds live.

Blood is strewn across the carpet, mixed with bird poo, chicken feed, and split peas. Glum has shoved her massive body halfway under the couch. She is throwing herself around under there. The birds that are still alive are screaming in a way I didn't know was possible.

I heave myself onto the dog, pulling her with all my might by grabbing her rib cage, but she's enormous and determined. I can't move her back when she's lunging forward.

I keep yanking on her and look around the room. There are little white and yellow feathers everywhere.

I can see—oh, it's horrible—carcasses of six dead birds. The remaining four must be under the couch, but I don't know how many are left alive. Glum is surging forward, growling, tipping the couch up and down.

I decide to move the couch itself. I let go of Glum and head around to one end and try to lift. But it's too big. There's nowhere to get a good handhold.

Suddenly, Tatum is in the doorway. He sees the situation and throws himself flat on the floor, reaching deep under the couch.

He's trying, I think, to pull Glum by the neck, but she doesn't wear a collar. "I can't get hold of her!" He wrenches himself back and up and runs to the other side of the couch. "Pull it away from the wall."

The couch is very heavy, but together we're able to yank it back and toward Glum a couple of inches.

As we do, the last of the screaming stops.

By Tatum's feet, blood and feathers. A wing.

Glum, still hunting, backs her body out from under and runs around to where I'm standing.

I look down. By my feet is a lone duckling. It's Cotton, still alive.

"Hold the dog!" I cry.

Tatum runs to where Glum is trying to push past my legs, aiming to kill the duckling. As he grabs Glum and holds her back, I scoop up the tiny feathered body and clutch it to my chest.

Glum twists and struggles but Tatum gets a grip on the back of her neck and stays firm. As soon as he gets the dog partway under control, I run outside with Cotton.

The duckling is so light and fragile I worry I will break its tiny bird bones just by carrying it across the yard.

I realize I am crying.

In the castle, I go up three flights to the bathroom I share with Brock.

I lay a towel in the bathtub and set Cotton down on it, gently.

She seems unharmed. She waddles back and forth, quacking.

I fill a water glass and set it in the tub so the duckling will have something to drink.

I bang on Brock's door and tell him I need him in the pool house and not to bother the bird in the bathroom.

Tatum has a pile of black plastic garbage bags, some bottles of cleaner, rags, and paper towels. He has opened the sliding doors to air out the lounge. He has closed Glum in another room. He gave her some water and leftover fish from dinner.

"There weren't any more survivors," he says, softly.

I tell him what I did with Cotton. And that Brock should be on his way.

Tatum sits down on the couch, which still lies at an irregular angle. His voice is choked. "The birds shouldn't have been in here. They should have had a hutch."

"I know."

"We shouldn't have had them at all, actually. No one knew how to care for them. I should have given them away, but—"

"I yelled at you to let Meer have them," I finish.

"I didn't need to listen to you. I know Meer isn't a big one for following through on ambitious projects. And I know wolfhounds have a high prey drive. I just—I didn't want to be the bad guy. To Meer. Or to you."

We sit in awkward silence for a minute. Then I start cleaning and Tatum joins me.

We put on rubber gloves. We roll up the soiled carpet and take it outside so we can bring it to the dump. We sweep up the feathers, the split peas, the chicken feed. We spray-clean the blood and the bird poop, scrubbing the leather of the couch with a rough brush.

I say "rest in peace" to each dead bird we pick up. I wrap their bodies carefully in paper towels to save, in case Meer wants to bury them. I say their ridiculous names and tell them goodbye. Hair, Bowling, Fire, Basil, Sunshine, Sour, Foot, Masquerade, and Malt.

We are about halfway through the project when Brock and Meer arrive.

We tell them what happened. "Did you maybe leave the door open?" asks Tatum gently.

“I didn’t,” says Meer. “I would never.”

“But by accident?”

“Don’t say that!” cries Meer. “I didn’t. I fed them after you went swimming and I closed the door all the way. I always do.”

“But—”

“Stop it, Tatum! Don’t make it my fault, because it’s not!” Meer puts his hand over his mouth and runs off, heading toward the woods.

Brock stays to help us clean.

When we are done, Tatum gets the house keys from the *Spoils of War* box, unlocks the office for his phone, and calls the Farm Institute. It’s a teaching farm that offers educational programs to the community. Will they take our duckling?

They say they will, and offer to send someone to pick it up. But knowing June won’t want visitors, Tatum says he’ll bring Cotton to them.

They give him instructions. We line a cardboard box with a towel. We cut some air holes in the lid. We put Cotton inside.

Still covered in dog hair, blood, sweat, and cleaning fluid, we take the Mercedes without asking. We load the box with Cotton onto the floor of the back seat, taping down the lid.

Brock says he’ll stay with Meer. “I’ll help him bury the bodies. And we’ll say goodbye, or whatever.”

We are silent on the drive. I am exhausted. I open my window and let the air whip my hair around my face. I stare out at the lush green of the island, the sweating bicyclers, the weathered wood buildings.

Hidden Beach is never going to be my home.

Being here is not going to heal my wounds.

I hoped Kingsley might offer me an identity. Some stability. He built this beautiful castle and has lived here Meer’s whole life. He’s put down roots. But at the same time, he feels no obligation to the place, or the people in it. It’s falling to pieces. Dirty. Overgrown. Neglected.

Something is rotten here. June doesn’t take responsibility any longer and is only around in the middle of the night. Kingsley has abandoned everyone

for some reason she won't explain. There isn't any money even though his paintings sell for millions. Meer is an aimless, friendless kid who knows almost nothing about life in the world beyond Hidden Beach. Brock is focused on his recovery and unsure how to handle June and Kingsley's absence, because he idolizes their way of life.

I have been a petulant child, waiting for my daddy to come and tell me I am worth something.

Only Tatum, enmeshed as he is in June's suggestions and her healing arts, only Tatum is trying to be an adult. Trying to take care of everyone.

47

After we drop off Cotton, Tatum drives us to the hardware store. "What are we getting?" I ask as he pulls into a parking spot and turns off the car.

"Glum was hungry."

"She was?"

He sighs and looks at his hands on the wheel "I told you when you got here that I get tired of doing stuff. Remember, I left the dog crap on the carpet?"

"I remember."

"That was before you even came, and the neglect is just getting worse and worse. Brock buys groceries. He does. And June bakes bread. But besides that, it's like they deliberately can't see what's happening around them. They refuse to see it, and Meer won't, either. He's useless at tasks, even when you tell him what you want him to do. *You're* helpful, but you're only temporary. And we're always fighting."

I nod.

"And Kingsley hasn't given us any money since March." Tatum bites his lip.

"I figured something was up with expenses."

"Anyway. Weeks ago, I told Meer to buy dog food. I said it was his responsibility. I gave him the money for a whole month's worth, and I just told him to buy it. Take the car, or figure out how to bring it back on a

scooter—whatever. His problem to solve. And I asked him to feed her, too. Morning and night. I said I wasn't doing it anymore. Because I was mad at him. I thought I was teaching him responsibility or something. Like *I* was his dad. Anyway. Glum might have gone for the birds anyway, with the door left open. But we haven't had any dog food in the house for two days. I *knew* we didn't, and I told Meer to get it. But he forgot again. I should have done it myself." Tatum's face crumples and he puts his palms over his eyes. "I'm never going to get out of here if I can't save any money. And I'm never going to save any if I keep paying to run this house and put gas in the scooters and feed people and feed Meer's birds and feed our dog. But I *have* to feed the dog. Not just pay for the food but feed her myself. Because no one else does it."

"He feeds her sometimes," I say, because I've seen Meer do it.

"Sometimes isn't enough to take good care of a dog. She hadn't had anything but table scraps in two days."

"And June won't do it?"

"Not anymore. I want to leave this place so badly, but I can't, if Glum isn't going to be all right. She hasn't been all right, even when I'm right here. And I don't know where I could go that I could take her."

I reach out and gently stroke his hair. It's soft, despite its wildness. I undo my seat belt and climb halfway across the front seat.

I wrap my arms around Tatum. I kiss his temple as he sits with his hands over his eyes.

He lets me.

And we sit like that for a while, me curled uncomfortably on top of the gear shift, my arms around his neck and his hands over his face.

It begins to rain and the car windshield dots with raindrops.

Then Tatum turns.

I kiss him gently. It feels terrifying and true. We are finding our way to each other in the middle of darkness.

"I got your note," I whisper. "Please don't regret you wrote it."

"I don't," he whispers back.

He kisses me again and this kiss, long and warm and serious, this kiss dissolves all our anger. It's me forgiving him and him forgiving me and the

two of us deciding that what's good between us is one hundred times more important than the bad.

His lips are terribly soft and his cheeks are rough with sunburn and stubble. I think about how he's this otherworldly boy, and at the same time so hardworking and loyal, so strong in a crisis. He is a miracle of contradictions that I may never understand, but he is here in my arms, his mouth on mine, his hands on my face and in my hair.

Then I stop thinking of anything at all.

In the hardware store, Tatum lets me pay for four enormous bags of dog food. I long ago spent Saar's four hundred dollars, but he said he would buy me a return plane ticket, Isadora paid my first semester's tuition (which wasn't very much after financial aid), and I have about two hundred left from my coffee shop job.

Back at Hidden Beach, we lug the food bags into the mudroom. We close them into a cabinet marked *Dangerous Explosives* in Meer's ten-year-old writing.

We pour kibble into Glum's empty dog bowl and give her fresh water.

Then we grab our swimsuits and race into the sea, washing off the sadness and horror of the day.

Nine of those poor birds are dead.

Meer is heartbroken and angry.

Something is very wrong between Kingsley and June. He may never be coming back to her. The castle is dirty, the lawn is wild, the swimming pool fetid. But the roar of the sea is in my ears. My body is lifted on the swell of its waves.

Tatum's slippery arms wrap around me and my heart thumps against his as his salty lips meet mine.

June and Meer are in the living room when we get back. She has cooked something besides bread for the first time in many weeks. They have bowls of vegetable soup on their laps. Meer's face is puffy, as if he's been crying.

"I told her everything," he says as Tatum and I come in, wet from our swim and shivering in the evening cold. "About Glum and the birds. Brock and I buried them underneath a tree."

"Thank you for cleaning out the lounge," says June. "Both of you. But I'll also thank you not to take the car without asking."

"We had to," I say.

"I'm sure you thought you did," says June. "But you could have waited until I was downstairs and then simply asked. As it stood, if I had needed the car, it wouldn't have been there. That's why we have the scooters. So the car is there if I need it."

"You haven't been awake during the day in ages," I say, but Tatum puts his hand gently on my back.

"Sorry, June," he says. "It won't happen again."

When we've all had soup, the boys go outside to play Frisbee by moonlight. Usually there's shouting and laughing, and often I am with them—but today they're relatively quiet and I stay inside and escape into my sketchbook.

It has really been a day.

June is heading upstairs, leaving the kitchen a mess, when I ask her to wait.

"Yes, Matilda?" She stands in the living room with her hands at her sides, as if she is performing patience and doesn't want to be here.

"I don't want to tell you how to run your house," I say. "Or your life. But I know what it's like to need a parent and have nobody to turn to. To want someone to show up for you."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know what's gone on between you and Kingsley that he's not coming home even though he invited me here. And I don't know why you sleep most days and make bread at midnight. It's not my business if you don't like to clean up after yourself. But Meer is my business now. He and I both feel it."

“You think I’m not showing up for him,” she says.

“I think he bought a grab bag of poultry and left a whole bunch of creatures to crap all over your pool house and you never noticed. Literally, ten birds— making noise. We tried to build a hutch for them. There was wood and chicken wire. We were hammering and using the electric screw gun. None of it seemed to even register with you, when it was going on under your nose.”

“It’s a big property,” says June. “I’m not keeping tabs on every part of it, all the time. I don’t see what’s wrong with Meer pursuing his interest in raising poultry without assistance from his parents. He had advice from the people at Meadowlark, and they know much more about it than I do. He’s allowed to make his own choices.”

“He wanted you to notice. That’s what’s wrong.”

“He didn’t tell me about it. That’s a simple solution when you want someone to know about something. You can tell them. Meer knows that. In fact, you could have told me, if you wanted me to know.”

She has a point, but I don’t think it’s the one that matters. “He was screaming, in his way, for you to pay attention to him. For you to put him first. And it turns out there’s nothing short of a bloodbath that will get you to look at your son.”

She takes a step toward me. “Every single thing I do is to put Meer first.”

“That’s not true.”

“It *is* true. I am giving him the gift of time. The gift of being free of obligation. The gift of this summer with his sister, which is what he wants.”

I don’t know what she’s talking about. She’s never here. “You’re up in your studio, weaving and brewing tinctures and doing whatever else, and you’re sleeping through the day. The house is dirty. Things need repair. No one’s buying dog food.”

“The boys can take care of that.”

“Can’t you just be his mother?” I cry. “Can’t you just look out for him? Be on his team?”

“I’ve told you, I *am* looking out for him,” she says sharply. “And you have a pretty narrow idea of a mother. You want me to do *what*? Keep track of Meer’s whereabouts? Mow the lawn? Clean the bathrooms? I think it’s

pretty obvious that there are terrible mothers who do those things. And while we're talking about it, I don't see you criticizing Kingsley. He's not expected to keep the house nice. He gets to be great just for being himself. For being a man, and an artist, and for having money."

"This isn't about Kingsley. It's about you."

"*Everything* is about Kingsley," snaps June. "With you. With Meer. With every single person here." She glances at the closed door to Bone Tower, as if longing to go upstairs. But she sinks onto the couch. "Do we have any wine?"

I go look in the pantry. There are two bottles on a high shelf. I get a footstool and bring one down. I open it with a corkscrew and pour her a glass.

"Thank you," says June. "I'm sorry I angered. I generally try not to let my emotions be triggered by other people's issues."

"Well," I say. "If it's any consolation, I'm an unusually infuriating person."

She cracks a smile. "People look at my life—at least, I imagine they do—and see me as liberated from the confines of society. Right? I didn't become the person my parents wanted me to be. I haven't had to earn money. I've opted out of being beholden to big pharma and western medical ideas. Those institutions, those companies that run people's lives sometimes—they don't shape me."

Yeah, that's how people see her, I think. Or at least, how I saw her when I first met her.

"Kingsley and I have an unconventional union," she goes on. "Other people can live with us in our house or on the property. He can go traveling for as long as he likes and he doesn't have to be accountable to me. At the same time, we can be life partners, joyfully choosing each other as long as we feel moved to do so." June stops for a moment and rubs her forehead. "That's the story I've been telling myself for a very long time. But I don't know if it's true."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a homemaker," she says. "That's the name for what I am. But I never called it that." She turns her face away from me. "I wish you'd never come, Matilda. Because I was deep in the indigo, I was weaving and

making my tinctures. I was the partner of the amazing Kingsley Cello and I lived in a castle. I kept busy with those things, with the dog, with the boys, and until you came, I never thought *I run his home for him and he keeps me*. I never considered that I don't have my own money, or how I'm the woman behind the great man, the invisible helpmate." June gestures out the window at the sea, toward Beechwood. "I always looked down on Tipper Sinclair," she said. "She was a bit racist, a bit narrow-minded. But she had good manners. She was thoughtful. You had to be around her a while to notice what I disliked."

"The painting in the breakfast room. She's in it," I say. "*Cliffside Gothic*."

"Yeah, well. Kingsley paints his friends. But Tipper isn't important. The kind of woman she was—that's important. A housewife, a stay-at-home mom. She stood for ordinary life, for tradition, for assent to cultural norms. And my whole thing was I didn't assent. But that was wrong."

"How so?"

"I *am* Tipper," says June. "And that's exactly what Kingsley wanted all along. I'm like Tipper in a different dress or something. A different castle." She gestures at the kitchen. "I stay home while he goes out. He makes the money and I have none of my own. I cook for him and sleep with him, and sure, we've had a lot of fun, and sure, I don't look like some Betty Crocker homemaker from 1958, but y'know what? Massachusetts doesn't have common-law marriage. Gabe explained this to me just the other night. It doesn't matter how long I've lived here, with him, doesn't matter that Kingsley has paid for my whole life since I was twenty years old and I don't know how I'd even *begin* to earn my own living—none of this is mine. None of it will be mine when he dies, either. It'll be Meer's."

"Tipper had a ring on her finger that meant she owned half of everything. Plus, she had family money, so she wasn't dependent on Harris anyway. The stay-at-home mothers I talk to at the crafts market? They have college degrees. They have networks of friends and family they rely on, besides their husbands. Also, half of them are lesbians and don't even have husbands. Anyway, I've been supposedly liberated from all the confines of conventional womanhood, I've been supposedly living this free, artistic life. There have been some good parts to it." She wipes her eyes. "But then you came in here with your college plans, your fierce way of talking, your

sketchbook, your obsession with video games and your anger about everything! Oh, and your questions about our way of life. You just set yourself up here, and you brought a kind of madness. The boys adore you, they circle you, and there's this different energy swirling through the house. I can see myself through your eyes. I'm a goddamn housewife princess, alone in a castle. Waiting for my man. I don't know if I hate you for making me see that, or love you for it."

Before I can say a word, June stands and heads upstairs to Bone Tower, leaving her wineglass on the coffee table.

I lean back on the puffy orange couch and stare at the mobile twirling overhead.

Did my father leave my mother because in June he'd found a kindred, unconventional soul who was an artist in her own right?

Or did he trade one beautiful adoring groupie for another who seemed less of a feminist, less centered on herself, and more likely to be the housewife he ultimately wanted?

49

Midnight. I pad through the dark house barefoot, wearing a camisole and boxer shorts. I climb Chalk Tower to the top floor.

Meer's bedroom door is open. He lies sprawled on top of all his covers, mouth open, snoring gently.

I tap quietly on Tatum's door. He lets me in.

Same curved walls as my own room, but lived in. Not too messy, but some clothes are on the floor. Moonlight shines through the shades in thin strips.

He's got an old stuffed harbor seal, dingy white. Some high school yearbooks, plus some books about herbs and healing from the library. Novels, mostly the kind you get assigned in school. There's a photo of a couple who must have been his parents. Around them on the wall are pictures of Tatum with various friends he must have had before he became so reclusive.

I wonder why he no longer sees them.

“Can I sleep next to you?” I ask. “Just sleep.”

Of course part of me wants to kiss him and take off all our clothes, but it has been an incredibly overwhelming day, with the dog and the poultry. For now I just want to feel Tatum’s presence. I want to know I’m connected to someone who has been through this day with me.

He nods and I climb into his bed. His sheets are flannel, even though it’s summer.

I have never slept next to anyone. Not my mother, not Luca—not with anyone in the same bed.

It takes a couple minutes to get comfortable. Tatum smells like sea salt and toothpaste. We have to figure out how to be next to one another.

In the end he presses his chest against my back and wraps one arm across me. I knit my fingers through his. Into my hair he whispers, “You said to me once that you’re not the type to inspire devotion.”

I’m surprised he remembers. “Yeah.”

“What did you mean by that?”

“I’m just not. It’s a fact. There’s like, objective evidence that I don’t.”

“You mean your mom leaving?”

“Um-hm. But also—my friends in high school. I had this boyfriend for about half a year. Luca. And when we broke up, they all went with him. He was angry because I said mean stuff and stole his car. So he started badmouthing me, like twisting things about me into their ugliest shape. And they all just dropped me, like I’d never mattered.”

“You stole his car?” Tatum sounds amused.

“More like drove it without asking, but yeah. And I realized that even though I’d spent every weekend with this crowd of people for a really long time, I was just a placeholder to them. Like, I occupied the place of *Luca’s girlfriend*, but it could just as easily have been another girl in that spot. In fact, there was another girl in that spot pretty quickly, so they were all *her* friends then instead of mine.”

He whispers into my hair. “I was devoted to you from the second I saw you.”

“You were *not*. You aren’t even devoted to me now. This is all very new. Don’t say pretty things you don’t mean.”

“You don’t know, Matilda,” he says, his hand squeezing mine. “I saw you dragging that duffel bag that was twice as big as you, looking so exhausted but also so fierce. You were obviously a fighter, and obviously lost—but so determined to find your way. I felt like I was in the presence of, I don’t know, a supernova or something.”

“But you were such a weasel that day.”

“I had just been yelled at by my boss. And also, when you see a supernova you don’t always know what to *do*.” He runs his thumb gently over the back of my hand. “Supernovas are scary. A person might, like, try not to get hurt by one.”

I laugh.

“Then you were in our kitchen, suddenly, like magic. I saw you rummaging around in that refrigerator and it was like the whole world stopped and there was only you.”

“In the glow of the fridge that I was illegally pillaging?”

“Yes.”

“You felt devotion?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Not about this. It hit me like a—like a cement block or a freight train or whatever people say. I thought, there’s a girl I would follow into battle.”

“But you were so mean.”

“The feeling scared me. And it still scares me. I thought maybe I could shake it off, or maybe it was a phase, but it’s just a fact, actually. Instant devotion that I’m powerless to change.”

“Weirdo.”

He laughs. “I know. You don’t have to feel the same way about me, but you shouldn’t think, you know, that you don’t inspire that feeling. It’s the farthest-ever thing from true.”

I don’t know how to answer him with words, so I turn to kiss him. I tell him with my lips on his that he is a wonder on this earth.

When I wake in the morning, Tatum is gone.

There is a note. *At work. Tickets are for tonight.*

For a moment, I feel simply happy. Nothing else. I'm just a girl who's fallen for a boy who's fallen for her, a girl with an actual date that night, going to see a band she likes.

50

Riding behind Tatum on the scooter is very different from when I rode behind him before.

Through the canvas of his jacket, I feel the muscles of his waist shift as he leans into a turn. I'm conscious of my knees touching his legs and the heft of his shoulder as I look over it onto the road.

The Wooden Cage show is on the main street of Oak Bluffs. We lock our helmets to the scooter and stroll down the block, which is busy with tourists on this summer evening. The movie theater is showing *Jaws*. Tatum tells me they screen it every year.

People walk with ice cream cones. Some teenagers are standing in front of a pizza place, just hanging around like teenagers do pretty much everywhere in the world. A couple of them say hi to Tatum, and he nods, but we don't stop.

The place we're going is a bar. I put my hand on his arm. "I don't have an ID. Did you think I had a fake ID?"

He shakes his head. "Don't worry. I've known the guy who works the door for years. He coaches the high school soccer team. And the woman behind the bar was a chaperone for away games."

"You played soccer?"

"Uh-huh. Did you think I lived under a rock?"

"I thought you lived in the castle. And followed the castle suggestions."

"There's never been a suggestion that you shouldn't play soccer," says Tatum, laughing. "Anyway. They won't serve us alcohol, but when there's a good band, they kinda look the other way and let the local kids in."

“Why don’t you talk to your old friends from high school?” I blurt.

“I talk to them. We literally just said hello back there.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t.”

“You used to play soccer, you used to have a girlfriend. There are pictures on your wall. But you don’t seem to see anyone anymore.”

“You know I’m antisocial.”

“I don’t think you are, actually.”

“You’ve changed your mind?”

“I saw you with Holland and her friends. You didn’t hang back, you talked to all of them. You weren’t even shy.”

He half laughs and reaches for my hand. “I’m not shy.”

“So why didn’t you want to see those girls again?”

“I’m just not that into them.”

“You said ‘absolutely not.’ ”

He gives my hand a squeeze. “I have big opinions. We’re not always going to agree. We might never, ever agree.”

That’s true. We walk in silence for a moment. “But, Tatum,” I say, persisting, “you must know a ton of people on this island. Meer said you do. Why don’t you see any of them on purpose? At all?”

He stops and looks down at me. We’re under a streetlight. People walk by us, talking and laughing. “Can I kiss you?” he asks.

“You don’t have to ask.”

He bends down and touches his lips to mine, very gently. Then he says, so low that only I could possibly hear it, “June doesn’t want me to.”

“June? This is about June?”

“She has a good reason. And I literally owe her my life. I’m so sorry, Matilda, but can we leave it at that for now?”

“How come?”

“Because I’m asking you to. Please. Can we just go hear this band, and have this night, you and me, without worrying about anything else? Just tonight?”

I nod.

He kisses me again and then pulls me through the door into the venue.

It's crowded. We hang our jackets on hooks. The room is hot.

The opening band is already playing.

Like the big-city kid I am, I drag Tatum through the crowd till we're near the front, and then we are lost in the music. It thrums through the floorboards and into our veins. Wooden Cage comes on and they're larger than life, beautiful and sweaty, their voices hoarser and looser than they are on the albums.

The hot skin of Tatum's arm brushes mine as we dance and jump and sway and shout with the crowd.

He laces his fingers in mine.

When the show is over, we go out into the cold air. We've forgotten our jackets and have to run back inside for them.

The street is quiet now.

I catch Tatum at the back of his neck and pull him down to me, standing on tiptoe so my lips can meet his. The world disappears and it doesn't matter what he's not telling me, because

his kiss is so full of possibility and
devotion and affection
and curiosity.

It's sure and electric, like

slaughtering everyone on a boss level when you're really in a flow, and
like

eating a peach pie someone made for you because they know you love it,
and like

swimming in a turbulent ocean but knowing it could never hurt you.

Tatum has an early pickup to do in the taxi-van tomorrow, six a.m., so I kiss him good night, pressed up against the wall in the living room at Hidden Beach. I know I should let him go, should let him sleep, but I feel like there is

no way I can tear myself away from him.

It's not up to me.

We just have to be here,
smashed as closely together as we possibly can,
his breath on my neck,
in my ear.

The stubble on his face against my cheek, his
saltwater hair
under my hands.

Finally, we hear June unlocking the door to Bone Tower, probably heading through to the kitchen to start her insomniac baking. At the sound of her key in the lock, Tatum pulls away.

He's on his way up to the top of Chalk Tower and I'm heading up the stairs in Parchment before June goes into the living room.

I lie on my bed beneath my indigo sheets, but I can't sleep. My mind is running.

What will it be like if Kingsley comes home to see the rug gone from the pool house and the buried bird bodies under the tree?

He will find
the wreckage of the hutch we tried to build.

His partner sleeping all day and making bread at night.

Tatum isolated from his old friends and working a job he hates and
soothing his anger in the sea;

Brock trying to cheer everyone with steaks and bags of potato chips;

Meer searching for his dad's inner life in the burned wreckage of
Beechwood Island.

What will he say when he finds me,

lost and
embattled and
waiting?

Will he gather us all in his arms and restore order? Will he see how badly he was missed and promise not to leave again? Will he find us worthy of devotion and obligation, of healing and redemption?

Or will he think we're disappointing and inadequate, especially in comparison with his own genius? Will he leave again, or rant, or scold?

I want answers to the questions Tatum will not answer.

I pull on sweatpants and sneakers. I grab my flashlight.

Passing through the living room, I can see June working in the brightly lit kitchen. She's kneading dough on a large marble board.

I tiptoe into the mudroom by going outside and around, coming in through the screen door. She could hear me while I get the keys, but I *have* to go to Bone Tower when she's not in it. She hasn't left the property in more than two weeks, so when she's baking is the only time I can be sure she's not there.

There's a thump of dough on her marble board. A clatter that sounds like ceramic bowls.

The hiss of the teapot. The pop of the fridge door opening.

I take the keys from the *Spoils of War* box and check on June by peeking through the windowed door that leads from the mudroom to the kitchen. She's eating a bowl of granola and reading a book. Dough is rising in a large bowl next to her.

In the living room, I'm hardly breathing. There's no music, no podcast, no sound to distract her from the sound of my key in the tower lock, so I wait for June to start moving again.

After what seems like hours, I hear the clank of dishes and she begins running water in the sink. I try the keys with shaking hands.

The fifth key turns in the lock.

I hustle through and close the door behind me, draw a deep breath and turn on my flashlight.

On the ground floor of Bone Tower are storage rooms full of Kingsley's paintings. There must be at least fifty in each room. They stand in enormous wooden racks.

The second floor houses two rooms that must be June's workshops. One has a sewing machine and bolts of fabric, rolls of indigo yarn. There are a number of looms, and the walls are hung with complicated weavings. The other room is more of a laboratory. Herbs are drying in the windows and growing in pots. Several hot plates are plugged in. A thousand brown tincture bottles.

Third floor, instead of two rooms and a bathroom like on the others, there is only a single door. This door is locked and bolted, but I try my keys. Eventually, one turns and I shoot the bolt.

It's Kingsley's studio, and it occupies two stories. A spiral staircase goes from the third floor to the fourth. Tall windows look out to the black of the sea. It smells of paint and turpentine, and beneath that, something earthier. Sweat.

The floor is covered by a canvas tarp. In the beam of my flashlight, I make out a large easel at the far end of the room. The walls near me are lined with canvases—some painted, some raw, some large and others small.

I take a risk and switch on a lamp that stands near the door.

I am surrounded by near-finished paintings.

One of them is of me.

52

The canvas is about four feet tall and it leans against the wall. Its title is written on masking tape attached to the thin top edge: *Melinoe, Bringer of Madness*.

Meh-lih-no-eh. That's what Kingsley called me in my dream. When I dreamed he'd come home to Hidden Beach.

In Melinoe, Bringer of Madness

I sleep with my hair spread out across my pillow. Larger than life.

I lie on a bed of indigo-dyed linens atop an ancient-looking ironwork four-poster.

I wear my UC Irvine sweatshirt.

Underneath my bed are

goblins and gargoyles, the creatures I saw in Kingsley's sketchbook.

They are fearsome small beasties,

a thousand of them, crushed together beneath the bed frame,

crawling on each other and clambering,

not threatening, but

impatient for me to rouse and command them

to bring their lunacy

into the waking world.

I lean against the wall to keep myself upright.

I am the bringer of madness.

Whose madness? Kingsley's? June's?

Meer's?

My own?

Did June take a photograph of me and send it to Kingsley in Italy?

No. If that were true, the painting wouldn't be here. It would be with *him*, abroad.

That means Kingsley painted this picture here. Or, if I go back to my earlier theory, someone else painted them, pretending to be Kingsley.

Whoever made this art, that person had to be here at Hidden Beach. The artist saw me sleeping in my Irvine sweatshirt.

My dream. The dream I had when I first arrived, of Kingsley, coming to my room and calling me Melinoe.

That wasn't a dream at all. He was really there, and that's why he painted me in the sweatshirt. I saw him. He painted me as the bringer of madness.

So if Kingsley was in my room, then Kingsley is the person who sketched the goblins that are under my bed in the painting. Those are in the

sketchbook I found, which means it is his sketchbook, for sure.

That means Kingsley tried working with one of Meer's Sharpies. And he drew the piranha plant. And the way he would have known to draw those things is that one of the boys told him the story of *Luigi's Haunted Mansion*.

He has been emailing me that he's delayed in Italy, that he's sorry he can't be here, that he's coming home soon—but Kingsley Cello has been here at Hidden Beach, all along.

53

Shaking, I walk farther into the studio.

On the easel is a large painting in progress. It's based on drawings I've seen.

MIrren, Gat, and Johnny stand with their backs to the ocean,
faces grave, like children in an old-fashioned portrait.

They wear swimsuits.

Only Johnny has been painted in. The other two are just pencil outlines.

Johnny's blond hair glints in the sun. His eyes glimmer with mischief.
And he is

covered in

dark gray ash.

It coats his shoulders and arms, his chest, his legs.

His face and some of his hair.

The wind is up and

bits of ash

blow off his body.

His feet and ankles are in the water, and Kingsley has painted them
strong and healthy-looking,

washed clean

of the dark coating of death,
as if the sea might
bring Johnny back to life.

Pointing at the painting are several freestanding lamps, clearly meant to illuminate the work on darker days. There is a wooden table that holds jars of brushes, coffee cans of putty scrapers and sponges on sticks, tubes of paint, and so on. Next to the easel is a smaller table with palettes dense with color, paper towels, teacups.

A desk seems mostly used for eating. Several Oreo packets, boxes of saltines, a bowl of rotting fruit. The floor covering is paint-spattered and littered with rectangles of paper covered with bright colors. They look like experiments, maybe, or color mixes. There's a fabric backdrop and an area where a model might sit on an old yellow stool or lie on a cracked leather couch.

I stand for a moment, drinking it in. Kingsley's world. The place he makes his work, spends his days. Before me are the answers to so many of the questions I've had. My father likes Oreos. He's messy but organized. He sketches before he paints.

He came to my room to see me. But why in the middle of the night? Why is he hiding from me in this tower?

I climb the spiral staircase.

At the top is a single big room with a bathroom off of it. The smell of sweat is stronger here. The room isn't air-conditioned, and the casement windows have metal locks added onto them. You would need a key to get them open.

There are clothes on the floor. And tissues. Trays of old food.

Clearly, the room is meant to be an office space. Large-scale art books are crammed into the many built-in bookshelves. A desk, a chair, all that sort of thing. But the couch has been opened out into a bed.

On the bed, next to an IV stand that drips fluid into his arm, lies my father.

He looks like he did when I saw him in my bedroom—a big man who is somehow wasted. His beard is unkempt and there is paint in it, a bright

green threading through the brown and gray. His hair looks dirty. His hands are covered with paint.

At once, I understand: This is where June spends her days.

This is why Meer won't go to college or leave home for any other reason.

This is why Tatum has stopped seeing his friends and why no visitors enter the castle.

The IV. The stink. The grease and sweat. The dirty hands.

I have found my father at long last. And something is very, very wrong with him.

54

"Dad," I say, not wanting to frighten him. "It's me. Matilda."

He doesn't move.

I move closer and shift off my flashlight. The only light now comes from the open bathroom door. "Dad, can you hear me?"

His breathing is slow and wheezy.

I touch his shoulder.

His eyes open.

"Take the cord out," he says, his voice a burble in his throat.

"What?"

"The cord." He flaps one hand vaguely at the IV line, which leads under his shirt. "I don't want it. Take it out!"

"I don't know how," I say. "I'm scared I'll hurt you."

"She doesn't let me have scissors. I want a box cutter. A knife. To cut the line."

"Maybe you need the IV," I say. "Maybe it's keeping you alive."

He shakes his head. "It's water. It's just water."

"Hydration?"

He nods. "I won't drink what she gives me. She's a witch. She puts herbs in the water. Tries to give me tea."

“June?”

He tosses his head back and forth on the pillow. “I fear her now. She wants me to paint. She brings me canvases and supplies. She keeps me in this tower. And I paint for her, because what else can I do? I cannot do anything but paint. The brushes call me. They are bewitched. She’d keep me here forever if she could.”

“Why won’t you drink what she brings?”

“She drugs me to keep me weak. Brock brings me cookies. Packaged foods. Potato chips that can’t be tampered with.” He shakes the IV line again. “You must do this for me. Do something for me.”

“What?”

“Bring me scissors.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I have to cut this cord. It goes to a port in my skin. I can’t see it well.” Kingsley sits up and pats the nightstand until he finds his glasses. He puts them on. “It’s very dark.”

I turn on the lamp, and when I do, he looks at me intently. For a long time. “Matilda,” he whispers.

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t sure you were real. I saw you.” He gestures at the window. “I can see you on the beach.”

“I’m staying here. I’ve been waiting for you. I thought you were in Italy. You said you were. Do you remember that? Saying you were in Italy?”

“I’ve been here a long time.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a year. I used to go out. But now she keeps me inside, keeps me on this cord every night. The door won’t open.”

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Kingsley says. He reaches for the sketchbook on his bedside table, a new-looking one of the same type I found in the Oyster Office. He fumbles with it, flipping pages, until he finds the thing he wants. He tears it out with a soft ripping sound and folds it in quarters. “Take this,” he says. “Bring it to my son.”

I put it in the pocket of my sweatpants. "I will."

Kingsley presses his head against the back of the foldout couch. "I need Meer to understand." Then his eyes grow foggy and he grabs for my hand. "Did you bring this madness? The tangle in my brain? The way my thoughts won't string together, did you bring it? Or was it here before you? I saw the fire from my tower, Melinoe," he says. "I saw the smoke. I heard the helicopters on their way."

"Yes," I tell him. "There was a fire on Beechwood Island. It happened before I came here."

"I ran away from my father's castle, and I built my own. I built a life I had only imagined. I brought it into existence, with my woman and our child. Now she's a witch and he holds me down and you've brought the madness. Peter Pevensie's castle went up in flames."

I don't understand, but I nod.

"They tried to make me see the doctors," continues Kingsley. "But I don't want them. I don't want their pills to interfere with what I see. If I do not see, I cannot paint, so I don't let them near me."

"Dad," I tell him, "I didn't bring madness. I'm just Matilda. Isadora Klein's daughter. *Your* daughter."

He thrashes his head back and forth. "Bring me scissors, Matilda!" he bellows, digging his nails into my hand. "Bring them to me and unlock my door. Help me escape from this witch." His breath is sour. He is spitting as he talks.

I wrench my hand from his. Reeling, I run down the stairs, through the studio, and into the stairwell. I am halfway to the ground floor when I stop and return.

Wincing, I press the studio door shut.

I turn the key in the lock and shoot the bolt. I race downstairs again, leaving my father imprisoned in his tower.

Part Seven

Truth

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My backpack, a change of clothes, my toothbrush, and my ID.

I can leave the rest of my things behind—the duffel, most of my clothes, makeup. I didn't have much here anyway.

The ring of keys unlocks the office. I shove my phone, the chargers, and my computer into my backpack.

From the mudroom, I grab someone's raincoat. Before I can stop to regret, before I can think about leaving my brother, before I can think about giving up Tatum, I am out the door and into the rain.

Running, my mind racing. I have to get away from here.

My father is in the throes of dementia,

he's a prisoner,

he scared me.

He recognized me,

he painted me.

He sees me.

He's not the person I imagined.

I run down the driveway, figuring to cross South Road and go to the Robertson estate, where Holland and her friends are. The rain is bucketing. The hood of the raincoat falls off and water runs into my collar, soaking the back of my shirt.

"Matilda!" Tatum's voice carries down the drive.

I stop for a second to see where he is. I can barely make him out through the dark. He's running without a flashlight. He's following me, but I don't want to talk to him. I have to leave Hidden Beach, break free of my own delusions and fantasies, understand what's real. I want to escape Tatum's betrayal; Meer's betrayal; June's and Brock's, too.

I start running again.

"Wait!" Tatum calls. "Please stop. What happened? Where are you going?"

I glance back but keep moving. He's closer now. His pajama pants are ripped at the knees. He must have fallen down. His sneakers are untied.

“Leave me alone!” I cry, stumbling forward.

“Matilda, stop. Talk to me. What’s wrong?” Tatum’s breath is heaving as he catches up with me.

He reaches for my arm and I shake him off, but I turn to face him. “You know what’s wrong.”

“I don’t. Honestly.”

“Kingsley is upstairs. Locked up.”

Anguish crosses his face. “You went into the tower.”

“I should have gone a long time ago. Have you been up there?”

He nods, his lips pressed together and eyes cast down.

“Something’s dangerously wrong with him,” I say.

“I know,” says Tatum. “I know.”

“How could you not tell?” The rage explodes out of me. The rain is so strong, my shoes are soaked, and my legs, too. “How could you lie to me all this time? When you knew how badly I wanted to see him? When I was waiting and waiting.” I shake my head, piecing things together. “I mean, you *all* knew. Right? You’ve all known all this time.”

That’s why Tatum wanted to get me to leave Hidden Beach. So I wouldn’t find my father, in the castle tower.

“Yeah,” Tatum answers, his voice strangled.

I start walking.

“Can you let me explain?” he says, grabbing my hand. I pull it away and keep moving. “I’ve hated lying to you,” he goes on. “Please, please don’t leave.”

Every molecule inside me wants to bolt right now, but I don’t want to be a person who leaves. Like my mother. Like my father.

I stop.

“I didn’t want you here,” Tatum says. “Of course I didn’t. Because we were all hiding this terrible secret, and Meer was a fool to bring you. But he wanted you. He said he needed a resource, a person, so he’s not alone with all this. He knows I want to leave. And Brock won’t stay forever. Meer thought you’d be a comfort, a new perspective, someone who could be in the house and help us figure out what to do. I said we couldn’t possibly tell

you and we didn't know how things might combust if Meer brought you here, but he did it anyway."

I shake my head. "You didn't just lie about Kingsley. You lied about everything. Why you don't have friends who come over, why you're not going to college. Who you *are*. You lied about who you are."

"I didn't."

"You did."

"Matilda." His voice goes soft. "What I said about following you into battle was true. About you being a supernova of a person. I couldn't stop looking at you. I still can't. I want to listen to you talk, understand the way your mind works. I told you about June and the sedative because I couldn't stand seeing someone so smart and full of life be sucked into this living purgatory we've all been in, this non-life where we do nothing but stay in service to the secret, where we've given up our friends and our futures because our king has ceased to govern us."

I am shivering in the rain, despite my jacket. Tatum's shirt is soaked. But I let him go on.

"Every time you'd tell us the story behind a video game, it was like I was actually playing it through. And I'd think how smart you were, to solve those puzzles. To persevere when they were tricky. You have this book full of wild ideas, all the weapons and maps. This violent, explosive imagination. Like your father. Like the *best parts* of your father. And the more I knew you, the more I felt that you didn't deserve us all lying to you about him. But it had gone on so long already.

"And you were questioning June, you were pointing out things about how we live that I never noticed. Her rules were just givens. Since I came to live here, I accepted them all. And you interrogated her. So I'd watch you and I'd think, this person knows who she is and what she values. I was already head over heels, but the night you sang with me, the Wooden Cage song, it was like something cracked apart in my chest. Like your voice reached into me and broke me open. I never felt like that before."

Those are nice words, but I don't care about them now. "Why is Kingsley locked up?"

Tatum runs his fingers through the wet strands of his hair. "He hates doctors, and Western medicine. So does June. So when he started to show

signs of dementia, he made us all promise not to bring in anyone.”

“What signs?”

“He’d stop talking in the middle of a thought, just trail off. He got lost a few times, ended up on other people’s property. Sometimes he’d forget where he was, or what day it was. Then he cut his credit cards in half. And canceled his health insurance. June has an allowance, a certain amount that he pays automatically into her bank account each month, but Kingsley used to pay for everything. Anything she wanted or needed, she charged on his cards. And then he just took them away. People with dementia sometimes get paranoid about financial stuff. It’s pretty common. He told her in front of us that she didn’t deserve his money, but it also means June has no way to pay for treatment if she does change her mind and wants to bring him to the doctor.

“At first, Kingsley took her tinctures and followed her nutritional advice. And it really is true that some dementia can be helped by curing vitamin deficiencies. We decided to hide the car keys and the scooter keys and all that. So then he was safer, pretty much stuck on the property.

“But he started night walking. He’d go into rages, throwing things off the dresser or emptying the closet, searching for things that were never even there. June got scared to sleep in the same room with him. So we set him up in the studio. And once he was up there, he started saying June was a witch. She brings him food every day, does massage, tries to keep him active, brings him supplies. Some days he’ll eat and accept her care, but other times he thinks she’s poisoning him and screams at her to get out.

“Then he stopped drinking anything June gave him, even when she filled a new paper cup from the sink in his bathroom. Even when he watched her do it. The dehydration was making him sick. So in the end, June figured out how to get hold of an IV, and she asked me to watch videos on how to set him up with it. She wasn’t strong enough to handle him if he fought her.

“I didn’t know if it was right or wrong,” Tatum goes on. “But I did it. Brock and Meer helped. We managed to get the IV port attached to his chest, and after the struggle he got kind of meek about it. He was willing to be hydrated that way, with sterile fluids, even though it keeps him tied down at night. But he won’t let June change the needle on the port, or the fluid bag. Meer does that. You remember how late he was, that night we

went to Beechwood Island? Kingsley gave him a hard time that night. Meer and Brock were up there for more than an hour.”

“That’s why Meer isn’t going to college,” I say. “Or anywhere else.”

“It’s why I’m not going, either,” says Tatum. “Even though I’m desperate to leave. The longer it goes on, the more strung out June gets. She’s with him most of every day, trapped with a demented person.”

“Meer wanted me to know, and to help somehow. So why didn’t he tell me?”

“He got scared you’d hate him for it. And I didn’t feel *I* could tell you when Meer had decided not to, or at least not to tell you yet. And I was scared you’d hate me, too. Because it’s a hateful situation.”

“And all this is why June sedated me,” I say, realizing. “And why you thought it was necessary. Because Kingsley escaped. Right? She wanted to knock me out until he was under control. He came to see me one night. In my bedroom. We even talked to each other, but I thought it was a dream.”

“That was before we added the bolt on the door and took away the knife he had hidden,” says Tatum. “He was cutting through his IV tube, then using the knife to jiggle the lock open in the middle of the night.”

I look up into Tatum’s beautiful, tortured face. “Can you hear yourself?” I ask. “ ‘Before we added the bolt on the door’?”

“It’s for *his* good,” says Tatum. “He doesn’t want doctors. He’s a danger to himself and others.”

“And he’s still painting,” I say. “Right? He is.”

“He wants to paint,” says Tatum. “No one’s going to take that away from him unless we have to.”

“Don’t lie!” I snarl. “You know everything he paints is worth huge amounts of money. Money that Meer and June will get when Kingsley dies. Don’t pretend you’re letting a sick old man keep his favorite hobby. He’s a prisoner, spinning straw into gold for you. Every day you keep him up there is a day they’re adding to their fortune. *Prince of Denmark* sold for eight million, Gabe said. Eight million. So what about you, Tatum? Are you in his will, too?”

“No,” he says. “I mean, I don’t think so.”

“I’m sure it’s occurred to you that you might be. You’ve lived with him half your life.”

“*You* might be, too,” he says. “Isn’t that partly why you came? Rich father, get a piece of that? I saw you fight for that painting you think he promised you.”

We stare at each other in silence for a minute. “I came because my father invited me and I wanted to meet him,” I say. “And now I’m leaving.”

“Matilda, please.”

“Don’t follow me.”

“Will you come back?” Tatum asks. “Please come back.”

I do not answer. I am running.

56

Holland comes to her door right away. “I had to leave Hidden Beach,” I say. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. Could I come in?”

Even though it’s three a.m., Holland is wide awake and dressed in a button-up shirt and a pair of track pants. The grand foyer of her place is littered with flip-flops and sweatshirts and tote bags scattered across the floor and piled on the leather entryway bench. She leads me through a living room with multiple seating areas. The TV is on, and Amma is sacked out on a couch.

I’m dripping water on the rugs and babbling about my father, an IV, a sketchbook, a fight with Tatum, a painting.

“Wait,” says Holland. “Stop talking, because you’re not okay right now. I’m gonna listen, but first let’s warm you up and get you dry clothes.”

I nod and she walks me through a brightly lit kitchen. The counters are cluttered with boxes of breakfast cereal, bags of chips and cookies, bowls of apples and oranges, juice boxes, and bottles of liquor. We head down a hall and Holland points me into a bathroom with shiny tile and a stall shower. She hands me a set of plush towels and promises to lend me some things to wear.

I stand under the hot water until my skin turns red. I cry until I am fully cried out. Then I scrub my hair with shampoo and my skin with vanilla-scented soap until I've removed as much of the Sharpie as I can. Finally, the stink of Kingsley's unwashed body and the smell of paint thinner rinse down the drain.

I put on the clothes Holland has left on the bathroom counter—some underwear with the tags still on, a tank top, a pair of loose cotton pants, slides that I think have like a seven-hundred-dollar price tag, and a green cashmere sweater so fine it's almost see-through.

Dressed, I check my phone.

There are no messages from Tatum. I ignore everything else.

In the kitchen, Holland makes coffee using the kind of fancy machine that takes pods. She heats up a frozen streusel cake in the oven and offers me a bowl of raspberries, but I only want the hot, crumbly cake.

"You wanna tell me what's going on now?" she says as we settle on stools at the kitchen counter. "You don't have to. You could just crash here or we can watch a movie. Talk about sex and college and, I don't know, *Portlandia* or whatever."

"It's about my dad," I say, finally.

"You know I'm here for all the Kingsley Cello content."

I tell her everything. The whole story of how I learned that I was Kingsley's daughter, how I came to Hidden Beach, how I loved my brother instantly and totally. I try to explain how I've adapted to many parts of June and Kingsley's way of life, and how beautiful it seems sometimes, and how rigid and restrictive it seems at others. I tell her that June sedated me. And that Tatum wanted me to leave, but we found each other, and now I think I've lost him. And that I thought Meer was faking Kingsley's paintings, but it turned out that Cello is locked in the castle. He painted me and begged me to rescue him, demented and desperate and frightening.

Am I going to take action to get Kingsley medical help that he actually doesn't want? Does he really need it, or is there nothing doctors can do anyhow?

I half expect Holland to want to run over and see Kingsley right away, get access to the paintings and the great man, but she is calm and rational. She asks questions and makes sure she understands the whole situation. Am

I going to call social services and report that he is locked in the tower? Or do I want to let June handle her own very messed-up situation as if it's none of my business? Do I want to salvage things with Tatum, or do I want nothing to do with him? And what about my brother?

I don't have any answers, but she encourages me to talk until the sun starts brightening the sky.

When I'm finally talked out and wondering if she has somewhere for me to sleep, she brews two more cups of coffee. "I have some intel for you," Holland says. "I didn't tell you before, because Meer was all tangled up in his own problems, and I was all tangled up in mine, frankly. I felt like he should be the one to say it all, but obviously he hasn't."

"Meer? You've met him once."

"Yeah, that's not true."

"You've lost me."

"I should start at the beginning. Okay?"

Okay.

57

"Back in the middle of the twentieth century," says Holland, "a man named Jonathan Sinclair married a woman, Marybeth Bridger. This would be my great-grandparents on my mom's side. Jonathan Sinclair came from money, went to Harvard Law, and became an expert in copyright. Marybeth's family was equally well set up, and she invested in real estate."

In time, Holland tells me, Marybeth gave birth to three sons.

Harris was the eldest.

Dean the middle.

And the youngest, Kincaid.

The three boys were strong and healthy. When they were young, they were close. But Jonathan set his children against one another. They were in competition for his approval, for his resources, for his fortune. "It was a bunch of elite New England notions of excellence that basically made

Kincaid's life a living hell," says Holland. "And I understand it, because even though I conform in a lot of the ways my family cares about, being queer is a huge way I don't conform, and so—whatever. Sometimes I think these people are completely terrible and sometimes I totally love them."

"Kingsley tells this Grimm story on this podcast I listened to," I say. "It was his favorite as a kid. It's about three brothers who are pitted against each other by their father."

Holland grips my wrist. "That's totally him and his brothers."

"Yeah," I say, "except that even though one of the three brothers wins the contest, he doesn't act like the winner. Instead, they all three share the fortune he inherits. They live together until the end of their days and are buried in the same grave."

"That's the opposite of what really happened to them," says Holland.

When the Sinclair brothers grew to be young men, they were brilliantly educated and entitled. They had straight teeth and strong shoulders. They rowed crew and had pretty women on their arms. They worked hard in school and in sports.

They were told they deserved the best because of that hard work. They believed in democracy and equal rights, and it never occurred to them that the society they lived in might be unjust.

But Kincaid, the youngest, felt the pain of the competition between them. He was the baby of the family and had, for a short while, been unconditionally beloved by all. But as he grew, he lost his father's favor. And then his mother's.

He was an artist, not a scholar. Never much of an athlete. His brothers always bested him at the tasks his parents valued. None of them counted painting as work.

Kincaid was just a kid. He was searching for himself. He didn't want to emulate his father. And to his father, that was a disappointment.

The eldest brother, Harris, became everything the family wanted him to be. The second brother, Dean, *appeared* to become everything the family wanted him to be. And Kincaid left the family. He disappeared into the art scenes of Bologna and Florence. He learned Italian. He indulged his whims, broke his mother's heart, and wasted his education, if you heard Jonathan tell it. But Kincaid would probably say that he questioned what he'd been

taught, and made some huge mistakes, and searched for some deeper meaning in this beautiful chance at life we are all given.

In other words, Kincaid shed his
Sinclair skin.
He burned it, like a
donkey skin,
to escape from his past self.
He ripped it off with sharp claws, like a
Narnian dragon skin,
to reveal the person inside.
He shucked it, like the
human skin of a selkie,
so that he could go into the sea as the
seal he was always meant to be.

The Sinclair parents formally disowned him. And disinherited him. They mourned him almost as if he had died.

“Kincaid returned from Italy having reinvented himself as Kingsley Cello,” says Holland. “And your family is our family.”

“If Kingsley is a Sinclair, then Meer is a Sinclair.”

“Yes.”

“And so am I.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Those kids who died were my—what?”

“Cousins once removed,” says Holland. “Removed one generation.”

She takes a glucose monitor out of a bowl on the counter and checks her sugar as she explains the rest.

Kingsley Cello became an exciting new voice in the art scene. He never spoke to his parents again but remained in very occasional touch with his brothers and their wives. In fact, his older brother Harris funded Kingsley’s first show in New York. He was the anonymous sponsor.

Kingsley became famous, painting his imprisonment and escape from the metaphorical kingdom of the Sinclair family over and over, a thousand

different ways. He fathered two children in his forties, at a time when his older brothers were on the verge of becoming grandfathers. And though he claimed to hate everything about his family of origin, Cello built his alternate kingdom on the same island where Dean spent his summers. Hidden Beach was so close to Beechwood Island that Kingsley could see Harris's home from his tower studio.

Perhaps he loved his brothers, still. Or perhaps he knew that proximity to the family he'd escaped would fuel his greatest works of art.

The main contact between Kingsley Cello and Harris Sinclair was through Harris's wife, Tipper. A peacemaker, Tipper bought paintings from Kingsley and now and then gave him updates on his brother. She also kept up with Dean after Harris renounced him. When Tipper died last year, contact between the three brothers ceased entirely, until the house on Beechwood Island caught fire.

"He wrote Harris a note," I tell Holland. "At least, I think he did. But he never sent it. It was a Narnia thing. They must have had games where Harris was Peter, Dean was someone else, and Kingsley was Eustace."

"What did it say?" she asks.

Oh, Peter Pevensie of Narnia,

I have heard your news. I think of you all the time.

—Eustace Scrubb

58

A bit more than a year ago, Holland explains, when Kingsley first began showing signs of dementia, Tipper Sinclair had a talk with Meer. It happened because she stopped by Hidden Beach. She had an appointment with Kingsley for him to show her a couple new paintings for a family acquisition.

But Kingsley wasn't home. June and Brock had taken the car to a crafts market for the morning. Tatum was at school. So only Meer was there to answer the door.

They called Kingsley's phone to find out where he'd gone, but he didn't answer. They went up to the studio, but he wasn't there. Meer hadn't seen his father since breakfast.

What followed was a long hunt for Kingsley, all over the property. Finally, they took Tipper's car slowly along South Road, calling his name.

They found him at the gas station, sitting on a bench with a couple attendants, drinking an orange soda. The workers had convinced him to stay when they saw him wandering down the road. They were trying to get him to call someone to pick him up. He had his phone with him, but he wouldn't make the call. He said he was fine.

Tipper and Meer took Kingsley back to Hidden Beach. Together, they settled him upstairs in the studio, where he began to paint.

Once they were alone again, Tipper took Meer for a long walk on the beach and told him his father had been born Kincaid Sinclair. She explained the history of the brothers and that she was Meer's aunt. Tipper said Kingsley had asked her never to reveal his parentage or their family connection to June or Meer. In fact, Kingsley kept his family of origin secret from everyone.

Tipper told Meer she thought Kingsley was ill. And that Meer needed to know about his extended family if his father was really sinking into dementia. She told Meer about Holland, Johnny, Cadence, and Mirren, all his cousins once removed, all close to his own age. Plus some little cousins as well. And Meer told Tipper about the half sister he'd never met, Matilda Klein.

A couple months later, Tipper Sinclair died. And Kingsley began showing so many signs of dementia they could not be ignored. He had incidents of rage. Paranoia about money.

With Meer's future as a caretaker locked down as long as his father was in this state,

with Kingsley more and more determined not to see a single doctor,

with June so overwhelmed she was no longer taking responsibility for anything but Kingsley,

with Tatum dying to leave on graduation but unwilling to abandon his adoptive family,

Meer needed help.

He was isolated. And frightened about what was happening to his father.

He couldn't keep on with things the way they were.

So he found his cousins on social media. Holland and Mirren responded to his messages, while Cadence never did. Mirren told Meer not to press it, saying Cadence lived in her world of fairy tales. Johnny wrote back saying good luck, dude, but he didn't want to unearth the family skeletons.

To Holland and Mirren, Meer explained the whole family history he'd learned from Tipper. The plan was to find each other on the Vineyard in July, after Holland finished a first-half-of-summer rowing intensive and once Mirren was settled on Beechwood.

"You rented the house to be near Meer?" I ask.

"And you. And of course I hoped to know Kingsley, as well. I got really obsessed with him."

"Did you know about the dementia?"

"No. Meer just said he was having a tough time with some stuff at home, and he wanted to know his extended family. Maybe we could like, claim our kinship and heal some of the rifts the older generation had created. He had tried to reach you a bunch of different ways," says Holland. "On social media, mostly, and trying different email addresses, but I think he also sent a letter to your high school? Like a paper letter."

"I never saw any of it."

"You're a poor communicator." She grins. "I'm not surprised you don't check DMs. Anyway, Meer figured you were ignoring him and got the idea you were more likely to come visit if he wrote to you as Kingsley, and if he offered you a painting."

Realization washes over me in a bitter wave. "Meer emailed me pretending to be Kingsley."

My father didn't want to get to know me. He never planned to give me *Lost*.

Meer was lying about all that. To get me here, so he wasn't alone. To make me feel wanted.

Holland nods. "I knew you were coming to the island, because Meer texted me. That's why I recognized you in the airport. I'd looked at your social media, and I'd literally just shown the *Persephone* painting to Winnie

when you popped up all pukey from the bathroom stall. Bonkers. But I couldn't tell you that we were related, because Meer had a whole thing planned after he got to know you."

"But by the time I got to the island, the plan had already derailed," I say, understanding. "Because Mirren couldn't ever meet us. And you were in mourning. And Meer, too, in his way," I say, thinking of our trip to Beechwood. "Then Meer blew you off. I remember, you were talking about a cousin who left you hanging."

"Yeah, exactly. When Meer didn't show up for our plans or answer any texts, finally I just said eff it and came over. I couldn't let the summer go by and never meet him. But then you were the only one home. I was kind of dropping hints when I told you about my family, but it was clear you didn't have any idea we were connected, and I didn't want to risk upsetting Meer by telling you."

"Meer was scared we'd reject him for keeping Kingsley in the tower," I say. "When he invited us, Kingsley was sick, and probably living up there, but it was only right before you and I got to the island that they started locking him in."

"So Meer avoided me," says Holland, "because he knew I was expecting him to tell me what was going on."

"Wait," I say, thinking. "Kingsley gave me a piece of paper to give to Meer. Like a letter with drawings on it."

"Let's see it."

"I shoved it in my pocket. God, it feels like a million years ago."

"Your clothes are in the dryer." Holland opens a door that leads to a laundry room. We pull my warm clothes out of the machine and I dig into the front pocket of my pants.

The folded piece of the sketchbook is now heavily creased and disintegrated around the edges, but it's still in one piece. I'm not sure I should open it, since it's meant for Meer, but Holland has no compunctions. She pulls it from my fingers and unfolds it onto the kitchen counter.

It is a drawing of Meer in profile.

He is fat and spiky-haired, sunshiny, maybe only three years old.

Like so many Kingsley subjects,
he is laughing, head tilted back.
The writing goes around the picture, filling in the negative space.
It reads:

My boy, you are to inherit
my home, this castle.
You are to inherit
the money I have invested and the money in my bank accounts.
You are to inherit
my life's work and the stewardship of it.
It was all arranged months and months ago, when
the witch first revealed her true self, but since then
you have proved yourself her accomplice,
betrayer of your own father,
a witchling.
I love you but you do not deserve it.
You will inherit but you do not deserve it.
I never thought I would become a father disappointed in his son.
My own father was disappointed in me, always, always.
But
that is what I have become
and I see now
that is how I will die.

Holland and I stare at the note, speechless. "What a major wanker," she says finally. "He's a hateful person."

"He's wounded," I say, taking my father's side. "He feels betrayed by his own son. And by his partner, too."

She shakes her head. "I don't know how such a colossal jerk could have painted those paintings that are so full of soul," she says. "How can he be so awesome and so rotten at the same time?"

"I'm not sure he's rotten," I say, slowly.

"Then what is he?"

"I think he's trapped, when all he's ever dreamed of is escape."

Holland gives me a room to sleep in, and when I open my eyes again, it's night. I have missed the entire day.

No one's in the kitchen or the living room, so I text Holland my thanks, take an apple from a bowl in the kitchen, and head back to Hidden Beach.

Nothing at all is clear but this:

I came to this island to find my father. Now that he is found, I can't rest until I know he's really seen me.

Matilda Avalon Klein:

the strategist,

the gamer,

the storyteller,

the person who talks baby talk to dogs,

who makes eggs for people even when she feels terrible,

who will clean up a poultry massacre.

Matilda Avalon Klein,

who is insecure and lost, but

who is also forceful and determined.

Matilda Avalon Klein, who wants to build fantastical worlds for people to play in; who is likely to sing if someone plays the guitar.

The kid he never got to know.

I don't want him to remember only Melinoe, a character in his imagination.

As I'm walking up the driveway to Hidden Beach, Holland texts back. Babycakes, we are just out by the pool. Do you want me to come with? I'm family now. Maybe I can help?

I tell her no thanks, but her offer feels like a hug.

In the dark, my phone pings. It's Tatum.

I am so sorry. Please can we talk?

I don't reply, but he keeps texting.

Meer explained a lot today.

About Kingsley being Kincaid Sinclair. And Meer and you being cousins with Holland.

June is very upset. She didn't know any of it.

Meer thinks you went to Holland's but he texted her and got no answer.

We're all worried.

There is a pause. He doesn't seem to be typing. I am thinking about what to reply, when another message comes in.

Matilda

Supernova of a girl

The most interesting person I have ever met, with the most unusual mind

My thoughts come back to you over and over

I'm filled with regret

I want to fix things, change things, figure out how to make amends

I don't know the answers, at all

Maybe I could figure them out by talking to you?

I wish you would come back

I hope these texts aren't too many

I am so, so sorry

I will stop texting now.

I stop walking. I read everything over and over.

And I soften. Because I want Tatum, and I love how he sees me.

I don't yet know what his favorite ice cream is or

if he ever had braces or

what he named his stuffed harbor seal.

I don't know the happy stories about his childhood,

or the embarrassing ones,

or what he has nightmares about.

I'm very very upset. He's still part of this terrible conspiracy. But I can't deny his pull on me.

I text him back.

We can talk later.

The castle is quiet. Few lights are on.

Through the kitchen window, I can see Tatum washing dishes. My heart lurches in my chest, but I don't go to him.

I am here for my father.

I enter the living room quietly through a sliding door. With a low click, I unlock Kingsley's tower with the keys that are in my pocket.

If June is up there somewhere, I'll deal with it. Confront her, I don't know what.

But I'm lucky, and the ground-floor rooms are empty.

On the second floor, I step into June's studio full of yarn.

I steal a pair of scissors.

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"Dad," I whisper. "It's me. Matilda."

The heat in the upstairs room of the studio is intense, with the windows locked shut. It smells like before, of paint thinner, sweat, and unwashed hair. The IV bag glows blue in the triangle of light from the bathroom, its cord coming down to the port in Kingsley's chest.

My father lies still in the foldout bed. He's on top of his blankets and wears a button-down shirt and shorts. His legs are thin and pale, his toenails bumpy.

He doesn't open his eyes until I touch his shoulder. Then, sharply, like he was never asleep, he becomes fury and decrepitude, genius and malice.

"Witchling. You return."

"No, Dad. It's me, Matilda."

“Were you always a witch, or did she make you one, I wonder?”

“I’ve come to help you. Are you okay? Can you stand up?”

“Has she educated you on her spell work and tinctures?” he asks. “She sends her other witchlings to wrangle me, to force me. They confine me to this bed, doing her bidding. And now she sends you, for what fresh horror?”

“That’s not why I am here.”

He sits up suddenly. “Princess,” he says grandly. “Why have you journeyed to Hidden Beach and climbed to the top of my tower? Do you have a plan for rescue, though I have no golden hair to let down? Have you a horse outside?” He started out sounding kind and almost playful, but now he’s mocking me. “Do you fancy yourself a warrior? Do you wield a sword, and can you slay the others in the castle?”

“No, Dad. I hoped we could talk. Don’t you want to know me?”

“Daughter of Persephone. Did you want to visit the underworld from which your mother escaped? And do you fancy me Hades, lord of that underworld? Have you come for vengeance or to claim your spot on my throne? The underworld is different from hell, you know. There are many pleasures to be had here, but we do not leave. Mine may not be a throne you want at all. Here, we cannot touch the world of the living but through paint. The paintings are missives to the living from this half-life.”

“Dad!” I say sharply. “It’s just Matilda. Come to try and help. That’s all.”

“Matilda Klein. You want money.”

“No,” I say. “No money.”

“Everyone always wants money. The orphan boy, the actor, and my son. All of them. June wants my passwords and my signature, but I don’t let her have them. And the guests before, the friends from long ago, they wanted it, too. They used it while they were here, until I forced them out. None of them ever loved the man I am. Some of them might have loved the paintings. Those inspire devotion, on occasion. But what they loved was the life my money could buy. Isadora never asked for money. She was angry and proud. Has she sent you for it now?”

“No, no. Meer asked me here.”

“Money is useless when your grandchildren die. In the fire. June showed me the newspaper. But I saw the smoke from my window and I knew there

was a tragedy, already.” He shakes his head. “I painted them, his three living girls. Years ago when they were young. The eldest girl is the Cinderella.”

“I’ve seen that picture.”

“Tipper didn’t like it. Wouldn’t buy it. But she forgave me because it’s me and my brothers,” he says, “in equal measure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t ask me for explanations of paintings. Tell me, how are the birds?”

I don’t follow him. “What birds?”

“Meer came upstairs. He brought me permanent markers, in a rainbow of colors. He was lit up like the child he used to be, proud of his present. I indulged him. And when he left, I could hear he forgot to bolt the door. Some part of him forgets on purpose, you see? Because he’s guilty. And he loves me. So the door was open and the witch had fallen asleep on her watch. She grows tired and her strength fails her. It was day, and I was loose from my tube, so I ran downstairs and into the light.

“We are meant to be in the world, Matilda. We are meant to breathe the outside air. When I had the shining sun on my skin, I felt lucky and whole again. But I found I was not the only creature the witch imprisons. There were chicks, kept against their will, the same way she keeps me caged. I opened the pool house door so they could escape and then I ran to the sea, only to be found by the selkie boy, the orphan. He was kind, but he’s a jailor nonetheless. He put me back upstairs and I didn’t resist him, didn’t lash out at him, because I love him like I love Meer. And I couldn’t go far without my phone. It wasn’t a true escape. So I am asking you, do the birds embrace their freedom? Do they celebrate my name? Do they think I am a fool for letting the selkie boy lead me back?”

“No one could think you’re a fool, Dad.”

He looks me in the eye now, suddenly alert and clear-headed. “Cut me free, Matilda,” he says. “Cut this line and we can go downstairs. I’ll show you some paintings. I want to hear your stories. What a beautiful daughter you’ve grown up to be. I’ve had a wonderful time painting you.”

“I’d like that.”

I take the scissors from my back pocket.

I cut through the tubing that connects the IV to the port in Kingsley's chest.

I help my father stand. He towers over me and is unsteady on his feet at first, but then he pulls himself up tall.

He walks slowly but confidently into the bathroom, shuts the door, and stays there for a few minutes.

When he comes out, his hair is combed. He wears a clean shirt and a pair of chinos. And a pair of shoes.

His heads for the spiral staircase. "Come along, Matilda," my father says. "We will have a good talk."

61

The moment I reach the studio floor, Kingsley grabs my hands and yanks them behind my back.

"Dad, what?" I struggle against him.

"I'm leaving," he says. "When the house is asleep."

"I did what you asked," I say. "If we talk, we can figure things out—"

"Silly child," he says, his hands rough on my wrist and his beard scratchy against the back of my ear. He shoves one hand into my front pocket and pulls out the ring of house keys.

"Dad, stop. We haven't talked—"

He speaks loudly, his breath hot on my ear. "You want something, lost baby, like everyone wants something from me. No different from the rest. Connection, recognition. I know. But you're not going to get it. And I do not owe it to you."

I try to take the scissors from my back pocket again, but Kingsley understands what I'm up to, grabs them, and holds them to my throat. "You want me to be proud of my little girl after all these years?" he says cruelly. "Then let me walk out."

Suddenly Glum is in the studio, barking at Kingsley. She can tell something is wrong.

“Puddleglum, away!” Kingsley growls.

She keeps barking, advancing on him. I struggle to free my wrists.

“Glum, it’s me,” he says, still holding the scissors by my jaw. “You know me. Bad dog. Sit.”

She barks some more, huge and heroic, and I stomp hard on Kingsley’s foot, like I learned in the self-defense component of high school gym class.

With a grunt of pain and then a swift movement, Kingsley releases me and drops the scissors on the floor. He lunges at the dog, slapping her across the face with the heavy ring of keys. She yelps in pain as it hits her in the mouth and he takes advantage of the moment, running for the studio door, slamming it behind him.

I chase after—only to hear the bolt slide into place.

“Don’t leave me in here!” I call. “Stop!”

Glum is at my heels now, barking again. I try the handle, but it doesn’t budge.

“You *do* owe me!” I yell, pounding on the door. “And you already do care. You’ve been painting me. Come back!”

He doesn’t return.

I stop to look at Glum’s dear, wounded face. She gazes at me with sad brown eyes, silencing her bark to let me stroke her ears. She has a cut on her mouth and an open gash near her eye where the keys hit her face, but I’m pretty sure she’s all right. I scratch the wiry fur of her neck and return to banging on the door.

I was so naïve. My father didn’t want to talk to me. He wanted to use me, and all my feelings, as a means for his escape. People see him as evolved, as free, as wise and unconventional, but he’s constrained by his old wounds. Self-obsessed. He’s written that hateful note to Meer now that the dementia’s taken hold because that kind of cruelty is what he knows. Parental rejection.

I’m angry at you,

you never wanted me,

I’m afraid of you,

you’re weak,

you’re a limited person, trapped in your messed-up family cycle.

You care about no one but yourself, you're the center, always.

And also, you care too much, you feel more than other people do.

I might be like that, too.

You're a genius. You know how to make art from pain.

It's all running through me, but I don't say any of it, because Kingsley's not even there to listen.

Banging on the door, with Glum barking again, I call for Tatum. For Brock. For Meer.

No answer. The stupid castle is so big, no one can hear anything.

I flip on the lights in the studio and pace the room. I'm surrounded by all the evidence of Kingsley's inner life I could ever want to see but unable to absorb any of it, because I have to get out. My father isn't going to be safe outside, on his own. And who knows what he might do.

I text the boys, but their electronics are shut up in the office and I think only Tatum is awake. In any case, they don't answer.

I phone Holland, but it goes to voicemail.

Should I call the police?

I look up Gabe. I don't know his last name, but I search "Gabriel lawyer Martha's Vineyard" and come up with an office number. I call, but the office is closed. No surprise—it's the middle of the night.

I kick the door, making it rattle. Over and over and over.

June stands in the hallway. She's fully dressed in a gray sweater and indigo-dyed pants. Her face is drawn with concern, and her hair is in two childish braids. She looks surprised to see me. She expected Kingsley. "Why are you here?"

There is no time for a long explanation. "He took the keys and ran out," I say.

She doesn't ask more questions, just books it down the stairs. "He's a danger to himself," she says as we run. Glum follows. "He gets lost. He doesn't know where he is. And he's angry. Like a toddler. Knocks things over when he doesn't understand."

“He hit the dog,” I say as I follow her downstairs. “He pinned my arms behind my back and put scissors to my neck.”

“He gets violent. That happens with dementia.”

“But you shouldn’t have him shut up,” I say. “He’s been a prisoner.”

“See it how you want.”

“You kept him captive. No wonder he’s so angry.”

“He’s a danger,” she repeats. “You saw it yourself.”

“Were you ever going to tell me where he was?”

“No, Matilda,” she says. “I was not.”

The living room is empty. So is the dining room.

Tatum comes from the kitchen. A wave of complicated emotion floods my body, and when he sees me next to June, his eyes grow large. “What’s happening?”

We explain. Tatum says he’ll go wake Brock.

“Would Kingsley go see Meer?” I ask.

June and I race up Chalk Tower, looking in every room. When we wake him, Meer staggers from his bed in bare feet, asking what the ruckus is about.

Quickly, he’s dressed and we all run downstairs. We search the pantry, the mudroom, the dining room, the closets, even, but we don’t find Kingsley.

We agree to split up and search the property. Tatum and I will look on the beach. Brock will go alone to the outbuildings. Meer and June say they’ll head to the garage (in case Kingsley took a scooter or the car) and then down the driveway.

I follow Tatum down the cliffside staircase in the dark, the sound of the waves in our ears.

On the sand, I look left and right. No sign of Kingsley.

We can’t distinguish any footprints. We look at the crannies in the cliffs. Tatum shines a flashlight.

I run partway into the sea and Tatum follows me. Waves crash into us, our clothes soaking. I scan the horizon for my father, staggering in the

turbulent water. “Would he have gone into the ocean?”

“If he didn’t want to be here, he might. That’s why the windows in his studio are locked.”

“But he wouldn’t,” I say. “He wanted— He’s been painting. He’s scared of witches. He won’t drink anything June gives him.”

“He’s confused,” says Tatum. “He feels different ways, different times.”

“Would he have gone into a house down the beach?” I ask. “Is there anyone he’d go see?”

“I don’t think so. He hasn’t wanted to see anyone for a long time.”

“We should go back up,” I say, stumbling toward the sand. “He’s not here.”

Tatum follows me, picking up his flip-flops as I shove my feet back into Holland’s expensive slides.

“Wait.” He catches my hand as I’m heading toward the staircase. “Matilda, wait.”

I turn to him.

“You can’t save your father,” says Tatum, softly. “What we’ve done, keeping him in the tower, there’s a way of thinking where it might be right, and also, I know you think it’s terribly wrong. But either way, there’s no saving him. He doesn’t want doctors and he wouldn’t get better, even if he saw a thousand doctors. I hate saying that, but it’s true. There’s only one path ahead of him. Do you see?”

I do.

I see it.

He is lost already.

“I wanted some time with him,” I say, pitifully. “With him the way he used to be. The way I think he used to be.”

Tatum doesn’t answer, but he wraps me in his arms.

This boy. This boy I didn’t know six weeks ago, this boy I abandoned and yelled at in the rain, this boy who could very easily be furious at me right now for leaving him and shaming him, this boy is trying to mend my heart.

I hold on to him. The wind is so strong it nearly knocks us over, but we keep upright.

At the top of the cliff, we search the picnic table area, then go to the garage.

Everything is quiet. We don't see anyone. We head down the driveway, shining the flashlight into the brush and trees on either side.

While we walk toward the road, I tell Tatum about finding the sketchbook with the drawing of the piranha plant. He says he told Kingsley about the plant himself. "He gets agitated at night, when he has to connect to the port for hydration. He doesn't like the feeling of being tied down. But he also doesn't like being bullied or bossed around, so usually one of us at a time goes in and tries to get it done, with a soft touch, you know? Someone else waits outside the studio door to come help if he gets mean. Anyway, one thing I do that usually works well is tell him stories. Just, like, what we did that day, or some island gossip I heard in the taxi van, but I also told him the whole long story of Luigi in the garden level."

"Like a bedtime story."

"Um-hm."

By this time we've reached South Road. I can't see Kingsley anywhere.

We call his name, like we have a hundred times already, but there's nothing in response but the sound of crickets. Somewhere behind us, we can hear June yelling his name as well.

I honestly don't know what should happen if we find him. Is it best to try to bring him back to the tower? Or can I convince June to handle his dementia differently, to get him professional help? Should we send him to assisted living, or would that be cruel, since he won't want to go?

"Let's turn back," says Tatum. "I think he's more likely to be on the property than on the road."

"We should call the police," I say. "They can help search for him, maybe with dogs or whatever. At least more people looking."

"Don't," says Tatum as we head back up the driveway, still searching with our flashlights. "June never wants police."

"It doesn't matter what June wants if Kingsley's not safe. Or if he could hurt someone."

“But *he* wouldn’t want police,” says Tatum. “Over and over, when he first got sick, he told us that he never wanted anyone to see him weakened. Never. He didn’t want visitors. He didn’t want to go anywhere and he was suspicious of everyone.”

“Even Gabe?”

“As of about six months ago, yes. He stopped talking to Gabe. I promise you, Matilda. Kingsley would never want his dementia in the news, never want it known on the island. He hates authority figures and regulatory institutions. We should find him on our own if we possibly can.”

“And if we can’t?”

Tatum sighs. “If we can’t, like if we know he’s gone off the property or he takes a vehicle, we’ll call the police. Okay?”

“Okay.”

When we reach the top of the driveway, we can hear voices on the pool deck, so we head in that direction. When we’re near, Meer comes running toward us. His face is a mask of horror. He throws his arms around me, and I realize he is crying. He’s much taller than I am, but he buries his face in my shoulder and holds on tight.

“What happened?” I whisper. “Meer, my brother. What happened?”

He cannot answer.

Tatum is off, running up the steps to the pool deck. I can see Brock and June standing there, their silhouettes against the starlit sky.

“What happened?” I ask again.

“Go away!” barks June. “Matilda, you should leave, now.”

“Where am I supposed to go?” I ask. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Wherever you went before,” she snaps. “Just go. Meer, make her go.”

“No, Mom,” says Meer, still sobbing into my neck. “Stop saying that.”

Up on the deck, Tatum puts his hand over his face and staggers back a few steps.

June grabs Tatum’s arm urgently. “Make her leave. She’s been in our business too long. She let him out.” She points at me and stamps her foot. “It’s Matilda’s fault. Not mine. Not ours. None of you boys. It’s her fault, and what happens next is not her concern.”

“Shhhh,” says Brock, kindly. “Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

Meer lets out an anguished moan. “What is it?” I ask him again.

“He wanted out. All the time, he wanted out,” Meer whispers. “He used to beg me but I wouldn’t let him. But I could have set him free, almost any day. I thought about it, just like you did.”

I remember Kingsley saying Meer didn’t always shoot the bolt. “Did you find him?” I whisper back. “Did he get hurt?”

Meer’s answer is muffled. His face is pressed in my hair. “It’s not your fault. Nothing is. You did what I wanted to do.”

“What happened?”

“June found him.” Meer lifts his head and wipes his eyes. “We found him but he’s dead.”

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I hold my brother’s hand and we walk together slowly up the steps to the pool deck.

Kingsley is face down in the swimming pool. His arms drift out from his sides. His shoes are still on. His gray hair floats around his head, stringy. His shirt is wet and transparent.

He is drowned.

Our father,

who painted me on a raft at the mercy of a raging ocean,

he has found

a watery grave

in his own backyard.

He’ll never again wield that paintbrush, using it to create worlds, plot escapes, wreak vengeance, and right wrongs. Never. Never.

I will not get to know him, not even the demented shell of a person who has been living in that tower. To know him was the thing I wanted most in the world, but I’ll never know him any better than I do at this moment.

Kingsley will never explain to me who I am.

He lost track of who he was, himself.

June is speaking quietly to Meer, sitting on the edge of the pool, cross-legged. Staring at the body. She is wet from the waist down, her indigo trousers clinging to her legs. The lower half of her long braids is wet. Her eyes are blank as she talks to her son, never looking at Meer but fixing her eyes on Kingsley with intense concentration, as if looking at a work of art she's trying to understand.

Brock is also wet from the waist down. He takes me and Tatum to sit on the edge of the deck, our backs to the other two. "Tell us what happened," I say. "If you can."

"Of course," he says. "A hundred percent."

But he doesn't, exactly.

"I was over by the picnic table, searching, you know? And I didn't know where you all were, and I was calling for Kingsley in a friendly way, telling him I was worried about him and I wanted to keep him safe. Then I heard June make a noise. Not a scream, but like something was wrong."

"We must have been down at the end of the driveway then," says Tatum.

"So I ran to where the noise was and I found June in the pool. The leaves were all around her, and Kingsley was there, face down like you saw him. June saw me and she said, 'I can't roll him over, I can't roll him over.' Because she was in above her waist and he's so much bigger than she is. She couldn't manage it. I jumped into the pool and waded out to them as fast as I could. I was going to flip Kingsley—but it was too late. I heaved a couple times and I could tell he was just a weight, nowhere near conscious. So I . . ." Brock stops talking and rubs his forehead with a shaking hand. "I tipped his head to one side, and his mouth was wide open and full of water. I felt for a pulse on his neck. And there was absolutely nothing. He had to have been face down in the water for a bunch of minutes before I got to him. He was. Just. Gone." He straightens his back and shakes his head as if to clear it. "I'm so— This is so severely rotten."

"Should we try to move him?" I whisper.

"I don't think so," says Brock. "There's nothing we can do for him now." Then he adds, his voice so low it's almost inaudible: "She gave him a sedative."

“What? When?”

“What kind?” asks Tatum.

Suddenly June is standing over us, still dripping water. “Don’t talk about me,” she snaps at Brock. “Don’t talk about it.”

“We all love Kingsley,” says Brock. “They need to know what happened so we can figure out what to do next.”

“We should call the police,” I say again.

“I said, don’t,” says June, authoritative. “You in particular, Matilda.” She wipes a strand of hair back from her face. She’s lit by a single dim light that shines on the pool deck. “Don’t call anyone. Do *not*. None of you.”

“Okay,” says Brock.

“I’m thinking,” says June. “I’m going to decide how we handle this. There are a lot of options, and I am considering them. I don’t want to hear anything from you, because this is *my* partner here. Kingsley Cello, the artist. Everything else and *everyone* else is secondary.”

We are silent.

The sight of Kingsley in the water is almost unbearable.

I reach for Meer’s hand as we stand around the pool in a semicircle. He is trembling.

June doesn’t say anything for a long time, so we don’t say anything. We are waiting for her decision.

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Half an hour later, Brock, Tatum, and I meet back in the kitchen, all in dry clothes. Meer stayed outside with his mom, who remained at the edge of the pool.

Tatum is rooting around in the fridge. He brings out some packets to mix with chamomile tea and honey.

Brock shakes his head at me. “It’s not a crisis now,” he says. “I like this about you, Matilda, but you always want to act. You want to crash through with weapons, solve puzzles, get to another level, whatever.”

“I don’t see why we’re waiting for June to decide how to handle this,” I say. “We’re always doing things her way. It’s time to stop waiting.”

“It’s terrible,” puts in Tatum, reaching out to touch my hand. “But Brock is right. This whole summer has been a sustained, massive crisis. Tonight is actually the end of it. We can take time to think.”

“Okay,” I say, my fingers interlacing with Tatum’s.

“Don’t tell me you two are a *thing* now, in the middle of this horror show,” says Brock, his eyes on our hands.

“Maybe,” I say.

“Yes,” says Tatum, firmly.

“Okay, fine. Yay. Took you long enough. I love you both. But let me explain the thing I didn’t want to say in front of June. She didn’t go with Meer to the garage,” explains Brock as he puts the kettle on the stove. “While I was searching by the vegetable garden and you two were at the beach, she went back through the house and found Kingsley in Oyster Office. He had the keys, so he went there to look for his phone to take with him. But of course he couldn’t find it.”

“It’s not there,” Tatum explains to me. “June confiscated his phone back in the spring, even though we told her we didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“We thought Kingsley *should* have his phone if he got out,” says Brock, “because then we could track him. But June thought he was less likely to leave if he couldn’t take a phone with him. Anyway, she was right that he got stalled, taking apart the office looking for it. When she found him in there, though, he got violent with her. He pushed her up against the wall, apparently, and was yelling at her and calling her a witch, but she managed to inject him with this—well, you’ve had it,” Brock says to me.

“The sedative.”

Brock pours boiling water into three mugs. Tatum squeezes tinctures from eyedroppers into each cup, then adds a squeeze of lemon and a big spoonful of honey. “So then what?” asks Tatum.

“The drug works pretty fast—it could like, tranquilize a horse, I think—but as soon as June jabbed him, Kingsley pushed her to the floor and ran out the front door,” says Brock. “June thought he’d gone down the driveway, but he actually doubled back toward the pool house. I don’t know

why. Maybe he was thinking he wouldn't be found in there. Or maybe he was going to go past it into the woods."

"He asked me about the poultry," I say. "He's the one who opened the door and let them out. So maybe he was going back to check."

"In any case, the sedative hit him and he passed out as he stumbled into the pool. We think."

"We have to call the police," I repeat. "We should have done it already."

"June doesn't want us to," says Tatum.

"She's never wanted anyone involved," adds Brock.

"June hasn't been thinking right for a long time," I argue. "She shouldn't be stabbing nonconsenting people with sedatives or keeping Kingsley locked in a tower or keeping the three of you here to help her, even."

"We've been choosing to stay," says Tatum, gently.

I pull out my phone and call the police.

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June screams at me when she finds out.

This is *her* partner.

This is *her* child's father.

Kingsley is a private man, I'm an interloper, none of this is my business.

I'm an entitled nobody upstart, wedging my way into her home, into her family, unsettling everyone.

Kingsley's death is my fault, I put him at risk, I was messing with a situation I know nothing about.

I tell her he's my father. I tell her we need help right now. I tell her she can be as mad at me as she wants. I never meant any harm and he shouldn't have been locked up. You can hate institutions all you want, but sometimes you need them.

Her demeanor changes when the police arrive. They come slowly up the driveway with their red lights flashing soundlessly. Three blue-and-white cars cluster on the stone driveway in front of the garage, blocking the Mercedes in. The officers trudge past the castle, barely looking at the buildings, intent on the location of the body.

June speaks to them on the pool house deck without a hint of the fury from a couple minutes ago. She appears mournful and weak, appealing to their authority to help her in her time of need. Her hair has loosened from its braids. She looks tiny and afraid, but she stands up tall.

I am angry at her, just like she's angry at me.

She lied to me and locked my father up and didn't get him medical help he needed. She didn't let me meet him, when she knew he was painting me. It was written in that oil paint that he wanted to see me—and she kept us apart. I have a thousand grudges, a thousand furious things to say to her, a thousand suspicions.

Maybe June pushed Kingsley into the pool.

She might have sedated him, then led him stumbling and dim-witted to the edge and pushed him in.

She might have stood there, watching as he flailed.

She might have gotten in and made sure his face was well submerged and his pulse was fully stopped.

Or maybe she chased him, trying to stop him and save him, until they stood by the pool arguing, his reflexes growing slower and his thoughts fogging. Until, debilitated as he was, he tried to choke her, or twist her arm, throw her down, and in self-defense she pushed him in, able to overpower him with the chemical help of the tranquilizer.

Planned or unplanned, murder or self-defense, it could have happened either way.

Or she could be as innocent as salt and sand.

None of us will ever know. Clearly, the police are not starting an investigation. Two of them know June from the crafts market. They are taking care of a longtime neighbor and community member, a damsel in distress, a widow who needs their help, a grieving queen.

I don't say anything. Because Meer has lost his father. And I have lost mine. Nothing will change that.

In the dark, standing on the lawn and tapping things into their phones and writing things into their notebooks, the officers ask us questions.

We tell them what we know: Kingsley became violent. June gave him a sedative. He ran outside and passed out in the pool.

He was dead when she found him.

I hear her ask them to keep it out of the papers how he died.

The ambulance arrives.

They take my father's body away.

Kingsley Cello escaped the golden shackles of the Sinclair family. He made a life's work of that escape, and in his final moments, he escaped again.

June accepts a ride to the funeral home near the center of the island.

As the sun rises, the rest of us return to the castle.

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Part Eight

Now and Forever

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I sleep in my clothes next to Tatum, in my bed in the Iron Room.

We cry together, and our tears are guilty (for different reasons) and full of loss (for different reasons).

Our hands knit together. Our sock feet touch.

The daylight breaks through the curtains and we fade in and out of sleep. Each time I come into consciousness, the loss of Kingsley floods me, the horror of his body in the water, the terrible things he said to me. When I shut my eyes, the paintings he made of me swim in my vision.

Brock knocks on the door at midday. We stumble around, brushing teeth and changing clothes. Tatum wakes Meer when he goes back to his room and when everyone is ready, the four of us take the Mercedes and Glum to the North Road Café.

Meer sits in the back with me. When we're halfway there, he takes off his seat belt and scooches over to lean his head on my shoulder. "I'm sorry I'm such a ginormous liar."

"S'okay," I tell him.

"I brought you here under false pretenses."

I reach my hand up to his face. "That was a rotten thing to do," I say. "But I'm glad to have you as my brother. To know you."

"I just wanted to meet you so bad," he says. "And I tried a bunch of normal stuff and then it turned out the one stupid-idiot-awful thing I tried was the thing that worked. And I kept telling myself that things generally turn out fine. Like if I just didn't tell you any stuff that might upset you, somehow it would still end up okay."

"You were in a very weird situation."

"I was," says Meer. "We all were."

"I love you."

"I love *you*, Pookie."

"*Pookie?* Since when am I *Pookie?*"

"Since now."

"Okay, fine, if it has to happen."

“Yah, it does,” says Meer. “You know I like cute names for things.”

I pat his hair. “I think after breakfast burritos we’ll feel a little tiny bit better. Like a microscopic bit. But it’ll be something. Okay?”

“Okay, Pookie,” says my brother. “We have a plan.”

We’re at the North Road Café. I know I have to do something with the letter Kingsley wrote to Meer. The whole car ride, it’s like a grenade in my backpack.

I excuse myself to the bathroom and take it out.

I love you but you do not deserve it, Kingsley wrote.

I couldn’t see it before. I was so caught up in my own ideas about our father, my own need to be validated by him. I saw only Kingsley’s feeling of betrayal, his imprisonment.

But Holland had a point. The drawing of little Meer is beautiful, but Kingsley’s words are hateful.

Meer should never read them.

A Kingsley Cello sketch is worth something like six thousand dollars, and maybe Meer would want to see it no matter how cruel the words are.

But Kingsley is dead.

And Meer feels terrible already.

This is my chance to disrupt the cycle of parental rejection, the tiny bit that I can. Our father’s hateful words won’t hurt my brother.

In that dank restroom covered with graffiti and with an empty plastic bottle of cheap hand soap balanced precariously on the small, stained sink, I rip the paper into a thousand pieces and flush it down the toilet.

66

We order burritos and super-large coffee drinks. We wait for the food in bone-tired silence, staring at a bulletin board that lists island events and babysitting services, yoga offerings and pony rides. When our order comes up, we carry everything to a picnic table on the lawn.

The day is bright. Tourists and summer people clutter the café porch and parking lot.

It feels like we live in a different world than they do. Like we're moving more slowly, weighed down by sadness, conscious that this strange summer is coming to an end for all of us.

We douse the burritos in hot sauce. Our hands become sticky. Our napkins get used up.

None of the boys brought a phone. They're so used to being without. But I have mine in the pocket of my backpack and there's still a bit of charge.

I pull it out and read about Kingsley's death in several different news outlets. There's lots of coverage, but all the articles seem based on the same press release, maybe issued by Gabe's office or Kingsley's gallery. There is no mention of him in relation to the Sinclair family, and no mention of his real childhood.

I'm surprised that no journalist has tried to dig up the truth about Kingsley. But Meer shrugs. "He had people he paid to keep his address scrubbed off the internet, his details out of archives or whatever. I think he burned his birth certificate. His biography is in his paintings, that's what he always said."

The obituaries don't say how he died, either. They do say that Kingsley is survived by his longtime partner, June Sugawara, and by their son, Vermeer Sugawara. There is no mention of Tatum, no mention of Brock. No mention of me.

Articles say that the value of Kingsley Cello paintings is expected to skyrocket. Instagram floods with posts featuring *Persephone Escapes the Underworld* and several other well-known paintings. *RIP the greatest artist of the twenty-first century. His art = my heart.* And so on.

I close the apps I've been looking at and lean against Tatum, who is intent on his burrito. "It feels like the rest of the world knows our business," I say. "But at the same time, they don't know anything at all."

"That's how it always is with famous people," says Brock.

The four of us say the things people probably always say when someone dies. "I can't believe he's gone." "What do we do now?" "He was just here. I saw him yesterday." "I wish I'd had longer with him."

None of it is adequate, but we say it all anyway.

Brock tells a story about how Kingsley made a painting of the woman who owns this one fish market in Menemsha. When he tried to give her the painting of her surrounded by dead fish with open eyes, she told him he was a weirdo and not to shop there anymore.

Tatum remembers Kingsley coming to “band night” at the high school, and since June wasn’t there to push high-nutrient food choices, Kingsley filled his pockets with Oreos from the refreshments table. He ate them quietly throughout the show, putting an entire one in his mouth at a time and talking to no one.

Meer tells about a time when he was four and Kingsley had been away for nearly a month. He came back with an enormous stuffed elephant, squishy and bigger than Meer himself. “More like a beanbag than an actual elephant,” Meer explains. “I named it Laxative, which was a word I’d just learned that I thought sounded cool.”

“You did *not* have an elephant named Laxative,” I say.

“I did. She was Lax for short. It’s a cool word,” says Meer.

“That’s true,” says Tatum. “I’ve met Laxative.”

“Then where is he now?” asks Brock.

“It was a girl elephant,” says Meer. “And she’s dead.”

“What?” I ask.

“I poked a pencil into her, just to see what would happen, and all these little plasticky beads came out and went all over the floor. My mom sewed her up, but I kept poking at the place where the threads were and the beads were always all over and finally Laxative had to say goodbye.”

“Oh, that’s a sad ending,” I say.

“But she was a really good present,” says Meer. “Our dad didn’t give presents all that often, but when he did, he gave really good ones.”

“Except to the fish market lady who didn’t want her million-dollar painting,” says Brock.

Of course there is nothing I can tell *them* about Kingsley. He and I had all of twenty minutes together. But I love hearing their stories. Now the boys won’t avoid talking about him. Their secret is out in the open, so I can maybe learn a little more of who my father really was.

Even though he is gone.

Gone.

Horrible and wonderful.

My phone pings and I open my texts. It's Holland, checking in.

I promise I'll fill her in on everything soon. Then I glance at the other messages that have built up: My mother has sent several short expressions of fondness, plus a photograph of her in what seems like a new dress, which I heart. There's a link from the housing office at UC Irvine, telling me my dormitory and room number. Then there's a series of texts from Saar, increasingly concerned at my lack of response. A *lot* of texts, actually.

Send update when you can. More tie-dye? Photo of castle? Info on you and your dad?

Breaking news: I found out college shopping is a thing. Desiree in the makeup trailer told me you will need extra-long sheets or something?

And a mini-fridge.

Let's figure that out.

We wrapped the season of mother-effing Highly Classified! Yahoo. Going up the coast with Serena for a couple days. Then back.

Please confirm not dead.

And when coming home?

I need to finish Something Rotten. Am stuck on Polonius level. Haaaalp meeeeeeee.

Matilda! Hello?

Now I am SERIOUSLY WORRIED. Please text back. I even actually called you like it's 1962, but it went to voicemail.

The last one reads: On my way. Sorry if that's weird.

It's from last night.

I text Saar back now: I didn't mean to worry you. My father died.

The phone rings immediately.

“Oh my god, Matilda,” says Saar in his nasal, gangstery voice. “I am so sorry. I had no idea. Are you okay?”

“Not really.”

“This is the tiniest freaking airport,” he says. “I’m literally walking off the plane, like across a parking lot. Is it called a tarmac? That thing. I’ve never walked on a tarmac before.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m off the tarmac and I’m in—it’s a garden, actually. An airport garden. I need to find the rental car area.”

“Where?”

“The Vineyard. I told you I was coming.”

“You’re here?”

“You got me worried,” he says. “Did you not see all my anxiety texts?”

“Only just now.”

“So I thought, she’s dead! Matilda is fully dead. Or she’s joined a cult or she decided to hitchhike and unspeakable things happened. You can use my Uber account. You know that, right? Don’t hitchhike. Did I give you my Uber account?”

“No.”

“Well, you should have it. Because when you’re at college, you need a safe way to get home from like a bad frat party or whatever.”

“Thank you. I will use that for all my bad frat party needs.”

“It’s nothing. But listen, I probably overreacted by coming here, I get that. But on the other hand, I couldn’t just assume you were all right. People go missing and bad stuff happens all the time. You know? Like those girls who were in the sway of that creep at Sarah Lawrence College! And that hospital chaplain who got kidnapped by her mental health patient.”

“Saar.”

“Okay, but I didn’t know, so I came to try and help,” he explains. “If you need help.”

I can feel his anxiety vibrating through the phone. “I can take care of myself,” I tell him. “You don’t need to feel obligated to me. But thanks for being so nice.”

“You’re usually the one storming the castle or leading the slaughter,” Saar says. “I do know that. I didn’t mean to make it sound like you weren’t capable. I just—I came to see if you need *backup*. Backup is what I mean, not help. Your location didn’t move, you know? Not ever.”

“You were checking my location?”

“I asked you if I could, that time you did that overnight visit at UC Irvine. Look at it from my angle. The kid I’m responsible for goes across the country for a short visit and never comes back! If she’s sharing her location with me, of course I’m gonna check it sometimes. And you never seemed to go anywhere on the island. Every time I looked, you were in the same place—on that one property.”

“We were just unplugged,” I say. “There are rules.”

“You didn’t answer me, and your mom had barely heard from you. And then UC Irvine actually called me because you never filled out the form to pick your classes.” He changes the subject. “Oh good. I found the rental car area. Then yesterday I texted—well, I know it was a lot, ’cause I was determined to check in. But also, I saw your location was finally moving. So either you were alive or the cult leader was taking your phone somewhere.”

“You knew I was alive, Saar. Don’t be dramatic.”

“I was worried, Matilda! I didn’t want to be prying into your business, but at the same time, I was like, how’s she gonna obliterate the boss level if she has no backup? And I thought, I’m never gonna forgive myself if she’s not okay and I didn’t go. *Classified* is on hiatus until September, so I just got on a plane, and now— Oh wait. Hold on.” He takes a second to talk to the rental car people and get a set of keys. Then he comes back: “I’m getting in the car. Can I come to where you are?”

I tell him where to go and Saar plugs the North Road Café address into his phone. Then he asks me about Kingsley, and Hidden Beach, everything. By the time we’re done with all the explanations, he is pulling into the parking lot.

“Who’s this guy?” asks Tatum as Saar parks his Range Rover.

“My mom’s old boyfriend that I live with.”

“Is he your stepdad?”

“No.”

“But kinda?” asks Meer.

“I didn’t know you had someone like that,” says Brock. “A dad-type person.”

I am about to say that I’ve only lived with Saar for a couple years, and there’s nothing legal or formal about our relationship; he’s basically a roommate. But then I see Saar’s familiar, wiry self, climbing out of his Range Rover, and I feel hugely happy to see him.

Saar Adler read and reread my college application essays.

He has a room for me in his house, rent-free.

It’s Saar who buys the groceries I like and texts me when he’s staying over at Serena’s so I don’t worry he got in a car accident. It’s Saar who bought me a college sweatshirt and who plans to take me shopping for a mini-fridge and extra-long sheets for my dorm room. It’s Saar who brought me to celebrate Hanukkah with his parents.

He has come three thousand miles because he’s worried.

He will be driving me to college. I’ll go home to him at Thanksgiving.

“I didn’t know I had a dad-type person, either,” I tell the boys. “But it turns out I do.”

68

At the hotel bar, I drink a lemonade and watch as Saar eats a shrimp cocktail and a mixed green salad. The woman who takes his drink order (seltzer with lime) tells him *Highly Classified* is her favorite show. He tells her it’s his favorite show, too, and she laughs.

I try to explain to him what it has been like here.

How badly I wanted to meet my father.

How I got sick on the way to the island and came in weakened and unsure of my welcome, and

how I loved Meer the moment he told me he was my brother, and then came

to love Brock, and then finally

to love Tatum, in a different, all-consuming way.

I don't know that I can articulate the pull of the invisible web that connects me to

Beechwood Island;

to the castle and its rooms of paintings, musical instruments, herbal remedies, and weavings;

to the sad history of Tatum's parents and their accident,

to Kingsley's dementia, his imprisonment;

to my mother's image escaping the underworld,

to my own image on those canvases.

My father is gone.

He will never, ever come for me.

He never even meant to know me, and yet his paintings of me

may well live on in museums

for years after I am dead.

Centuries from now, some kid will likely walk into some big cold space full of tourists and art students and see

me

kneeling on a raft, lost and embattled with a violent ocean, or

sleeping in a college sweatshirt above a horde of malevolent creatures.

The ideas spill over one another. I can't say exactly what I mean.

When we get to Hidden Beach, I'm relieved that June is nowhere to be seen. The house feels empty. The sliding doors are all open, so the air flows through the rooms.

Upstairs, Saar and I pack my things. I didn't bring much and I haven't bought anything, but Meer said I could keep his indigo Shirley's Hardware T-shirt.

Down in the breakfast room, Saar stares at *Cliffside Gothic*, Kingsley's painting of Harris, Tipper, and their daughters, for a long time. "The three girls, that's Kingsley and his brothers, yeah?" he says, finally.

"Technically they're Harris's daughters," I say, understanding. "But yeah. I guess both things can be true. Kingsley was the one who was never good enough."

“And like Cinderella, he left home and made a new life in a castle.”

69

We find Meer and Brock sitting at the dining room table. Meer is sobbing, his head down on his arms, his hair loose around his shoulders. There’s a roll of toilet paper and a lot of snotty crumples of it all over the table. I go and wrap my arms around him.

“He can’t stop crying,” says Brock.

“I can maybe stop now, I think,” says Meer, raising his head. “I feel dumb.”

“It’s not dumb,” says Brock. “I just have negative coping skills when people are crying. My parents were big on repression.”

“You got me toilet paper,” says Meer, sniffing. His cheeks are bright pink. “That was the right thing to do. And you didn’t leave.”

“Where’s June?” I ask.

“She went to sleep,” says Brock, walking toward the kitchen. “You people want ice water?”

“That another right thing,” says Meer, following him. “Yes, please, ice water.”

I show Saar the fridge with its pretty jars of nuts and seeds; the crisper drawer full of nutritional powders. It’s strange but nice, having Saar in the castle. He’s bearing witness to this life I have been living.

While I show Saar the rows of tincture bottles in the pantry, Meer begins writing on his left forearm in Sharpie. *Kingsley. Kingsley. Kingsley.* He writes it over and over, like he can’t etch it hard enough into his skin.

As the rest of us make small talk, Meer writes until he runs out of space. Then he writes across his palm and down the backs of his fingers.

I go over to him and hold out my left arm, palm up.

He writes large, in beautiful letters, *Kingsley.*

I offer him my right arm and he writes, *I am the sister of Meer Sugawara. Now and forever.*

It's the best. I love him so much. I take the Sharpie and write on his right forearm, *I am the brother of Matilda Klein. Now and forever.*

"You, too, Brock," I say.

Brock stretches one arm across the table. I pause, unsure what to write but wanting to do something to voice our connection, even if it's only in Sharpie that's not really permanent and possibly toxic. Finally, I write, *I am Paul-David Brock, not Sammy. I am a friend to Matilda Klein. Now and forever.*

"You don't have to write a whole essay for me not to forget you," he says. "I have your cell number."

We leave the two of them writing on each other as I walk Saar to see the vegetable garden and the pool house. I tell him more about Holland, and the story of Glum and the poultry massacre. It feels good for him to know what happened. I tell him about how Meer and I are connected to the Sinclair family. How my father ate Oreos while he painted. How Tatum found a home for Cotton, the surviving duckling.

Saar wants to see the ocean, so I take him down the winding staircase, the same way Meer walked me on the first day. At the foot of the cliffs, we take off our shoes.

Tatum is in the water. We can see him, sitting on his boogie board, staring out at the sea. The muscles of his back ripple as the waves beneath him shift. There's Sharpie across his skin, Meer's writing:

Rest in Peace, Kingsley Cello. Artist. Father. Visionary.

I call his name.

Tatum turns.

He rides the next wave in.

Saar forces him into a very Los Angeles man hug and comes away with a damp shirt.

While Tatum showers and Saar does stuff on his phone, I go upstairs in Bone Tower.

I have one last look at Kingsley's studio before I leave. There is so much I could learn about my father, if I stayed. But June is fully angry with me and I never am going to be his daughter the way I hoped I would. All we got were two short conversations, and these paintings.

Still, he did see me. In a way.
I am not just a girl in a college sweatshirt.
Beneath my surface there is darkness and strength.
Maybe madness. But maybe magic.

70

We have loaded my bags and the painting called *Lost* into Saar's Range Rover. I don't have any paperwork on it, but I take it anyway. Because Meer says I should have it.

I hug Brock and Meer goodbye. The plan is for them to stay with June for a while. When Kingsley's will has been read and Gabe has sorted out the financials, Meer will have some money. Gabe has told him he will.

Then Meer and Brock will come to Los Angeles.

Brock will look for work as an actor. Meer will figure out something.

Tatum's hair is still wet as he comes out of the castle with his guitar case in one hand and a bag over his shoulder. He's coming with me and Saar.

He says his goodbyes.

The afternoon light shines down on my three boys. All us four are aching with grief. All four of us are set free from Hidden Beach.

I love them.

Then Tatum, Saar, Glum, and I head down the overgrown driveway. Glum sticks her head out the car window like every dog, ever. She grins wide as her ears flap in the wind.

We turn right on South Road. We head down-island and toward the future.

Part Nine

Later On

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Despite his escape from the kingdom of his youth and his
 exodus from the tyrannical traditions of the beautiful Sinclair family,
 Kingsley Cello, born Kincaid Sinclair,
 willed his castle and all his assets to his
 firstborn son, Meer Sugawara.

Like his father, Jonathan, had done with Harris.

Like monarchs have done across a thousand cultures for so many
 centuries.

To Tatum and Brock, he willed nothing at all. And to me, the same.

June's monthly allowance was set to continue after Kingsley's death, and
 Gabe helped Meer set up a much larger annuity for her that will last the rest
 of her life. With that money, she has rented a small house in Oak Bluffs,
 walking distance to town. She took a job with a bakery that sells bread in
 the farmers markets. She began seeing people again, rebuilding her
 community.

Once his mother was settled, Meer put the castle up for sale. Gabe had
 the art moved into storage and navigated sales through Kingsley's gallery.
 Brock organized a cleaning team. He and Meer peeled the labels and
 suggestions off the cupboards. They donated Kingsley's books and art
 supplies, June's unwanted sewing machine, old raincoats and sweaters from
 the mudroom.

Brock says his year at Hidden Beach healed him. He found people who
 didn't care that he had ever been Sammy, and he stopped thinking of
 himself as a has-been. He says he reached *all the way sober*, the kind where
 he doesn't think about starting up again anymore, which lots of people
 aren't lucky enough to get to. He burned the donkey skin he used to live
 inside.

Now he's got a regular job as the voice of a teen superhero in a cartoon.
 He does a lot of auditions and books parts now and then in TV shows and
 movies. He takes yoga and is learning to surf.

He lives with Meer in a skylit loft apartment, right on Venice Beach. It's
 not so far from Saar's bungalow, so it's easy for us to be together when I'm

home on college breaks, since I still live with Saar when school isn't in session. Odd as that domestic arrangement may seem, he is now my dad-type person.

Meer has become surprisingly interested in investments, in the sale of various Cello paintings, and in the charities he supports—arts education and solutions for food insecurity in particular. He has opinions about cryptocurrency. It's as if the energy he spent collecting purple rocks and drawing on his skin is now channeled into making good use of his famous-dad inheritance.

He also apprentices with a tattoo artist who has a shop on Abbot Kinney. And he has a cute boyfriend, a senior at Occidental who studies poetry and surfs on the weekend and rides a bike everywhere in the LA traffic.

Last spring, Meer helped arrange a retrospective of Kingsley's work at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The museum borrowed *Lost* from me, *Selkie Child* from Tatum, and *Sammy* from Holland's mother. They also sourced paintings from a number of big collections, so *Persephone Escapes the Underworld* was on loan from St. Louis.

The display of her image in this celebrated exhibition was enough to get my mother to fly in from Mexico City. It was the first time I had seen Isadora in person since she left.

I was nervous. And still angry.

But it was good to see her—to feel her soft skin against my face when we hugged, to see the way she lights up a room, and to meet her boyfriend for the second time.

I don't feel like she's my family anymore.

I mean, she is. We will always have our blood tie. But blood ties are just what you make of them.

We didn't talk about anything important.

She didn't say she was sorry.

I didn't try to make her, since it's pretty much against her philosophy.

I think you can decide to be obligated to someone. You can decide they are worth the commitment and the devotion. And when that's what you've decided, you step up for them. You offer backup. The commitment doesn't

have to last forever, but if you act like it matters enough to last, it has a chance of lasting.

My mother doesn't really do any of that. She is too caught up in her own sparkle, too enamored of her own next adventure. She went back to Mexico City after the show. I have no idea how long she'll stay there. Maybe only till a new guy comes along. She isn't going to change.

Holland wasn't able to come for the opening of the exhibition. She was busy studying at Brown University and generally winning without trying, which is how things go for her. But she and Winnie have finally realized they're in love with each other, and since Winnie is in LA taking acting classes and trying to break into Hollywood, Holland will be out here for the summer so they can give the relationship a try. She's also coming to see *us*—me and Meer. She and I text all the time, keeping up the new family ties we've created when the previous generation severed them. I'm conscious of the drops of Sinclair blood that tie us all together, but that's not enough to make a family. It takes some effort.

Money keeps coming in as Gabe continues to sell Kingsley's paintings. And Meer doesn't want or need all his inheritance, so he set up trusts for me and for Tatum. It's enough to pay for school, and for much more after that. So much, I hardly know how to even think about it.

He offered the same to Brock, but Brock refused it. He says living rent-free in Meer's apartment is more than enough. So Meer gave him three paintings for a birthday present, did all the paperwork, and wouldn't take them back.

Down in Irvine, Tatum and I rent rooms in a large house full of other students. I'm near the end of my junior year, learning 3D computer modeling and video game design, but also taking World Mythology, Modern Jewish History, and a class about bees. Tatum spent the first two years at a community college and now he's getting a certificate in herbalism at a school half an hour away.

We can walk from our place to the ocean.

He does it every day. He comes home with the scent of the sea on his skin.

In my sketchbook, and for my thesis next year, I'm building a game.

It's called Chandelier. You begin

adrift

on a raft in a storm.

Soon you come to

a seemingly abandoned castle that is

half filled with water.

You begin to make your way through.

Some levels are only damp, with water leaking from their ceilings in a drizzle.

In others, the water is deep enough to swim in.

Still other rooms require you to navigate in your

seal body,

which makes you submersible without breathing for long periods of time.

(Fighting in seal form should be harder than—and different from—fighting in human form. I haven't quite figured that part out yet.)

At some point in every level,

a chandelier comes to life.

Some remain on the ceiling,

stretching their green glass tentacles to squeeze the life from you, or

becoming threads of a weaving that threatens to wrap you up

like a fly in a spider's web.

One detaches to become a

dragon.

Once defeated, the dragon sheds its skin to reveal a

frightened little boy inside.

Another chandelier becomes a

cluster of aggressive wolfhounds who can be tamed by saying their names.

One turns to black ash and nearly suffocates you.

But you fight your way out.

My advisor wants to know what the goal is. She's suggested there could be a prisoner the player is trying to rescue—a father, a true love, a brother, a friend. A witch or a stepmother, even.

But I don't think I'm making that kind of game. I think it's a journey of transformation for the player. You go from lost and adrift to an ending on the top floor of the castle. Once you're there, you can look out and situate yourself in the world.

You go from weak to powerful, finishing the story armed with skills and weapons and knowledge.

She says I need to keep working on it, so I will.

73

In the evenings, Tatum and I cook dinner and eat with our roommates, or we go get burgers down the block. Sometimes we go out to hear a band, or Tatum plays guitar while I do my homework. Sometimes we walk to the place that has the gelato we like, or we go to a party, or there's something on campus to do—a lecture, or a play, or a football game.

It's a regular college life. A lucky one.

Someday soon, we'll graduate. We'll need jobs. Something or other may pull us apart.

But this love is an everyday magic. I share it with a person who sees the bringer of madness

and the ordinary girl

and the storyteller

and the questioner

and the gamer in me.

There are no rules masquerading as suggestions.

There is probably too much internet.

There are many obligations, big and small.

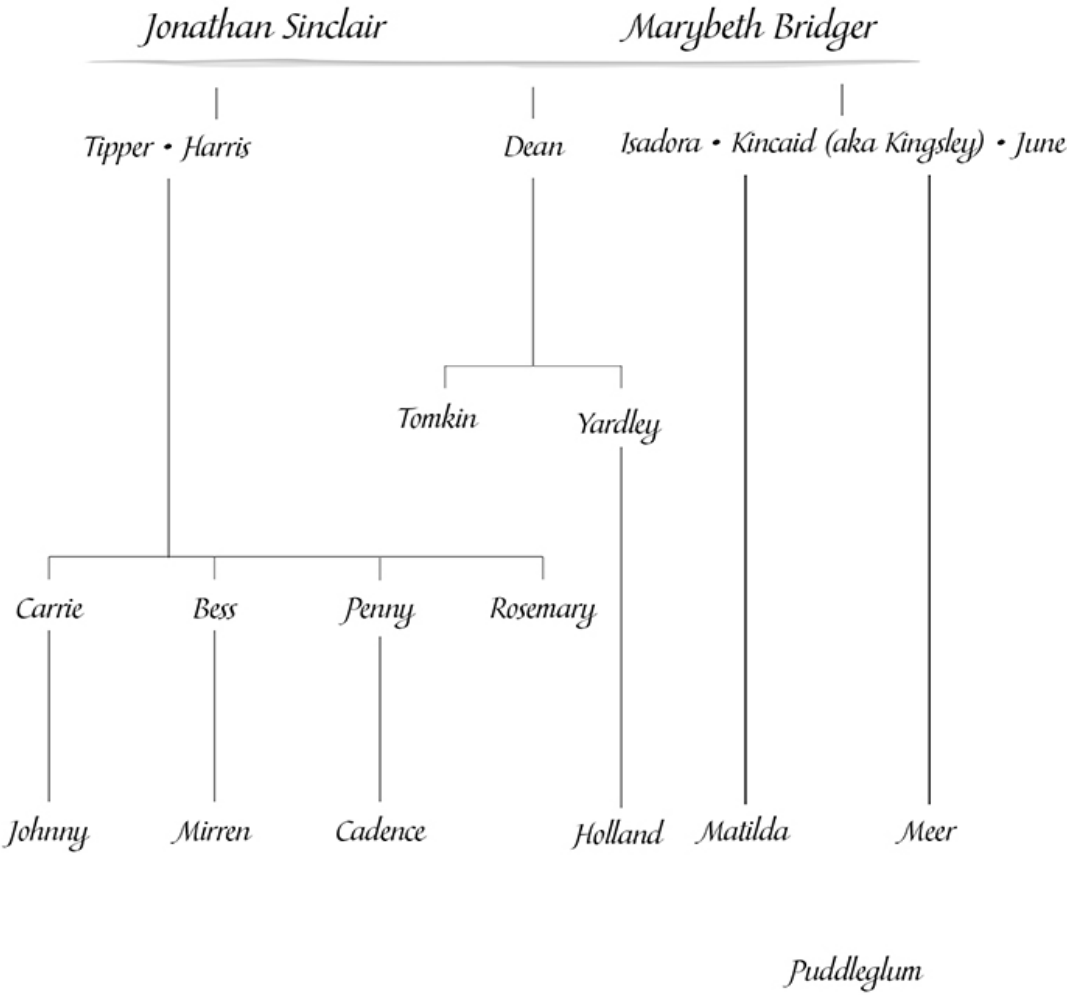
There is no castle.

There is no family institution, no beautiful Sinclairs with their tragedies and their private island and their secrets.

The ocean here is a different ocean than at Hidden Beach.

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Family Tree



Author's Note

I am a referential writer. Most of my books owe enormous debts of gratitude to literary works, films, and (in this case) games that have influenced me.

In the novel, you'll see references to Greek mythology, *The Odyssey* by Homer, and *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. You'll recognize two specific fairy tales: "The Three Brothers" (collected by the Brothers Grimm) and "Cinderella," which has thousands of versions from around the world—and which I referenced in a different way in *Family of Liars*.

The games *Killer Odyssey* and *Something Rotten* are imaginary, but I owe much to the descriptions of story games in Gabrielle Zevin's wonderful novel *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* and to the creators of all the real games mentioned in the text. I was also inspired by Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*, Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle*, Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Video game historians will note that *Luigi's Haunted Mansion*, which was available in 2012 for Matilda to play, is conflated with *Luigi's Haunted Mansion 3*, because that's the one I've played.

The Martha's Vineyard in this book is also fictionalized. Many of the locations mentioned were invented for the story. Others exist but are renamed and adapted for storytelling purposes. My imagination was also sparked by the Vineyard summer home of famed architect Araldo Cossutta, which I was lucky enough to visit. Thanks to Yvonne MacPherson and Nicole Kim for making that happen.

This book is set in 2012, the same year as summer fifteen in *We Were Liars*. Holland Terhune might well use both she/her and they/them pronouns nowadays, but in that year (although gender-neutral pronouns have existed in one form or another for a very, very long time), *they/them* as a gender-neutral or nonbinary choice was just beginning to be used in common conversation, and Holland comes from an establishment family with narrow ideas. That's the reason for my pronoun choice in the novel.

As always, I owe many thanks. In particular, to my editor Beverly Horowitz at Random House for her unfailing faith, her laser-sharp commentary, and her refusal to let me rest until this book was stronger than I thought I could make it; to my literary agent Elizabeth Kaplan for her endless support; to my lawyer Jonathan Erhlich for jacking up everything good and eliminating everything bad in my contracts; to my team of brilliant book enthusiasts at Random House and Anonymous Content, including (but not limited to) John Adamo, Barbara Marcus, Jillian Vandall, Sarah Lawrenson, Ari Lewin, Wendy Loggia, Kassie Evasheski, Ali Lefkowitz and Robyn Meisinger. Thanks to Julie Plec, Carina Adly Mackenzie, and the teams of writers, directors, cinematographers, designers, producers, actors, and crew at My So-Called Company, Universal Studios, and Amazon Prime Video. Their wonderful television adaptation of *We Were Liars* encouraged me to think there might be another story that would expand the world of the Sinclair family beyond Beechwood Island.

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About the Author

E. Lockhart is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *We Were Liars* and *Family of Liars*. *We Were Liars* is also a TV series on Prime Video. Lockhart invented a superhero for DC Comics: *Whistle: A New Gotham City Hero*. Her other books include *Again Again*, *Genuine Fraud* and *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks*. She has been a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the National Book Award, and an honoree for the Printz Award. She has a PhD in English literature from Columbia University.

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