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The Same River Twice

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The Same River Twice

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a portion of a novel written during my time at the University of Arkansas.

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The car had been in the marsh twelve years to the day, set like a sentinel thirty feet from the road. It was a Trailblazer, the cheap kind kids bought off neighbors with money made bagging groceries and selling fishing lures. Once red, now colorless and nearly rusted through. The reeds had grown back tall enough that you didn't have to look at it if you didn't want to—a compelling argument years ago when the town had not wanted to pay to have it hauled out of the wetland.

Black marks still scarred the bend in the road where Declan had jerked the steering wheel, too hard as the car skidded out of control and ripped through the guard rail. They hadn't let anyone get near it the next morning, not even Margot or Declan's family, because the marsh liked to steal shoes and suck down legs, and because the two frazzled cops didn't want to clog up any more of the town's only major roadway than necessary. So Margot had just driven past it again and again, tried to push past the miasma of her hangover and tell herself there was an explanation for the apparent vanishing of her best friend.

Now she took barely remembered back roads to avoid it. The rental car wound between lakes and over small, river bridges, vibrating on the washboard dirt.

She bit the head off a gummy worm. She liked the way the gelatin squished between her fingers and the rubbery steering wheel. She wasn't supposed to have sugar—it opened sores in her mouth and on her tongue, opened a headache in her left temple—but she liked the heightened pulse that chased away thoughts of nicotine.

Chewing, she looked out at the tops of the pines. It was the end of June, overcast and muggy, and a dozen years had not changed Cheneaux. She could avoid the marsh but she couldn't avoid the rest of the town; the creek caught with shoes and plastic bags; the baseball field missing half a sign like something had cleaved it down the middle; the abandoned water bottling factory clogged with green

The tips of Margot's fingers were numb on the wheel. What if the trees recognized her, what if they drained her like a sieve until she left—all the things Jane had not considered when starting this idiotic project. Then again, she hadn't offered these fears for Jane's consideration, and all the teenaged dramas enacted by her and others seemed so small when viewed through the lens of her new, Chicago life.

But when she drove down her old street, the empty house that still bore her last name on the mailbox did not feel small.

Margot flipped through radio stations, feeling sticky and stretched, too big for her skin. She wanted to pull over and jump naked into someone's backyard pool, wanted the world to move past her backwards. Well, what she really wanted was to turn around, get on a plane back to Chicago and tell Jane sorry, but no. She couldn't do it.

The car vibrated. The dirt road leading to the motel sloped so steeply in places Margot worried the little rental car might slide right off into the woods—a dark tangle of bushy pines and dense, thorny undergrowth. Once, as kids, she and Declan had wandered off the path through the woods that connected their houses and Margot had spotted a shine under a pile of rotting leaves. Declan reached for it, arms coming away streaked in red, and they both screamed with the shock of blood. For a second they both thought he was dying, about to bleed out or be swallowed by a mouth hiding under the leaves.

But the cuts were shallow. It was an old, wood slat fence topped with barbed wire. Back at Declan's place, in between reprimands and iodine, his brother Andy told them there'd been farms on this land a long time ago, before the name Cheneaux was even on a map. Margot saw all the thoughts in Declan's head, because they were her thoughts too: there had been a time before them, and there would be a time after them.

It had been during Declan's magic phase, when everything they did together required weird hats and stick wands and a commitment to made-up words. Even though Margot had witnessed the

entire ordeal, the next day at school Declan showed her the line of fresh, neon Band Aids and told her he'd been wounded in an epic battle for their souls against the local legend, scourge of the forest, the Hunter's Ghost. They'd only been friends for a few months, strategically sat next to each other on the first day of first grade in the hopes that sour little Margot would calm Declan down, and whimsical Declan would liven Margot up. This had backfired beautifully, and by the end of the month they were separated in the classroom. It wasn't long after that they discovered the trail through the woods between his little corner of the trailer park and her backyard.

Something was in front of the car. She stamped on the brake and gummy worms spilled out onto the passenger seat. Her jaw clenched, and the world rolled away from itself like a pulled-up sticker and she swore loudly at nothing. Blue veins swam under hands gripping the steering wheel. Ears buzzed.

Her vertigo episodes had slowed to a halt soon after leaving Cheneaux. Figured one would hit her the moment she returned, like the town was mad at her for ever leaving. She'd forgotten how strange it felt—descending on her out of nowhere, like a slap. Sometimes they faded in minutes but sometimes they lived in her all day, pulling her body to one side like the world had tilted twenty degrees, just for her. She wasn't sure if it felt more intense because she hadn't felt it in so long, or if it had always felt like the ground was trying to swallow her.

She opened her eyes in time to see the back end of a turtle disappear into the underbrush. She pulled away slowly, counting breaths and staring down the road, watching for the tricks of vertigo, and memory, and blurred, dark things.

The Timberwood Motel was low ceilinged and moldy bricked, sandwiched between the backdraft of Michigan-15 traffic and the wilds of state-owned land. Margot was the only current occupant. She stood at the window of room number five, blinds thrown open to tempt the remains of the sun.

The Trailblazer sat just a second away from each thought—if she wasn't careful, it would catch up with her. Or she'd find herself driving back to that curve in the road, just to stand there and wait for something to happen.

She requested a *no smoking* room hoping it would compel her to follow the rules, but it wasn't going to work. Of course it wasn't going to work. She'd brought a pack with her, stupidly, her "emergency pack." She thought about mashing them up and flushing them, or burning them in the empty parking lot, stacked up like a little pyre. Instead, she shoved them behind the Bible in the drawer of the bedside table.

With the lamp on anyone could see in through the big window, but she didn't draw the blinds, just watched headlights blip as cars went by. The trees darkened as the sun set, shadows so inky black her mouth watered. She chewed another gummy worm.

She tried to ground herself on the facts: she was only here to conduct interviews. She had no reason to visit her old house. Her parents were long gone—Mom to Ohio, Dad to Florida. She had no reason to go near the car in the marsh because Declan was gone as well, and all the information she needed about him she could get from others. It did not matter who she saw or what they said, because she would only be here for three days. Chicago would be waiting for her to return—a little too big, and a little too messy, but far enough away.

She took a few, steady breaths. The vertigo had faded but not disappeared. It kept her unbalanced, one hand grounded on the furniture at all times. She lay down on the green Tartan carpet and stretched her neck all the way to the right, red ponytail laying over her throat like a warm little animal. She closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see the underside of the bed. As a kid she would leap from her covers in the morning to avoid the bed's shadow on the carpet, and the arms and teeth that might be hiding there.

Neck twisted, head swimming, the vertigo pressed her into the floor. She waited for her inner-ear to correct itself, keeping her eyes closed because anything—*anything*—could be under the bed

beside her, and she didn't want to know. If she let it, her mind would put Declan there—lying on his front, peering out at her like they were kids playing hide-and-seek, curly-haired and forever eighteen. But when she opened her eyes there was only dust.

Margot had made two mistakes: telling Jane she was from Cheneaux, Michigan, and agreeing to do an episode on Cheneaux, Michigan. She didn't care all that much about the Podcast, or the work they did there. It was just a job, and she wasn't going to pretend that *My Hometown* was anything special, despite her boss's obsessive enthusiasm.

It was an article that had started the whole thing, something Jane had found on one of those listicle sites, with the top ten lists and chatty titles. This one was "The 13 Creepiest Towns You've Never Heard of."

"This is where you're from, right?" Jane pointed a purple nail at number eight. Margot skimmed, eyes catching on things like *disappearances*, and *ghost sightings*, and *Blood Road*.

"It's really not as interesting as it sounds."

"Well, has anyone done a story on it?"

Cheneaux sat in the middle of the thick forests of the lower peninsula of Michigan, hours from anything significant, far from the beaches-and-fudge tourism circuit. The town was primarily churches and bars, with a block of half-abandoned brick storefronts, a few dozen marshy lakes, and miles and miles of mostly un-traversable woods.

Margot pretended to think about it. She didn't like the way Jane's back had gone straight, head tilted with preliminary plans.

"It's possible. If it's on this list, it might have been done already? Might be overdone, even?"

But Jane started googling.

They danced around it for a week, a current of *no, no, no, please, no* beneath every minute Margot spent in the office, trying to find other projects, trying to convince Jane that this grocery store in Illinois was probably haunted.

But Jane was already drafting the episode from what little information she could find on the internet. They would start with the Hunter's Ghost, then Blood Road, then the disappearance of Emmett Kacy...

"What's this?"

Margot pointed at a new note on Jane's list of "plot points." *Start with new O'Neill discovery?* Her vision tunneled.

Jane squinted at the screen before slipping on her glasses.

"Oh," Jane said, and told her what she already knew: a boy had disappeared after a car accident years ago, no body ever found. What she hadn't known: they were reopening the case.

"We could start with that as a hook, then go back and give some of the weirder stuff for atmosphere. Maybe return later if they find anything new?"

Margot felt microwaved, sitting in their clean, over-bright Chicago office talking about Declan O'Neill. It felt unnatural, incompatible. She cleared her throat.

"Why are they reopening the case?"

"Some of his stuff showed up buried near where he disappeared, I think. It's not entirely clear. That's definitely an interview priority."

And in an instant that little current of dread shifted into something else, something soft and too fragile for words, and she found herself sitting on a landing strip in Flint wondering how the hell she'd volunteered to visit the place she'd spent so long avoiding.

In 1919, the body of a hunter was found in the woods. There were old-timey pictures of him in Jane's notes, and Margot scrolled quickly past one particular picture on her phone. The afterimage still burned from the last time she looked.

Kids had told stories about the Hunter's Ghost at school, how he would get you if you were alone in the woods, how if you repeated one phrase or another he would appear behind you in the dark. It didn't really matter what he would do to you when he got there. The point was the fear. She'd tried it once with Declan in her parents' bathroom, because it had the biggest mirror. Nothing had happened, of course, except Declan insisting he saw a shadow, and Margot being so scared she made him stay the night, both of them in sleeping bags on her bedroom floor.

She skimmed through one hundred years of sightings on her phone, stopping and reading at random. She sat at the far end of the Boat Bar, Ashton Lake just visible through the sliding glass door that led to an empty deck. Now that she was here she wasn't sure what was worse, sitting alone in her motel room avoiding the bible drawer, or sitting alone at the Boat Bar, avoiding pairs of vaguely familiar eyes.

She took a drink and watched the massive, biting flies that emerged every summer surround the lights on the deck. One sighting, 1973, happened just outside. Two fisherman sat in a pontoon in the shadow of the bar and watched a strange shape appear across the lake. It stood upright in a rowboat, too far away for details. According to one of them, it had morphed into two shapes; according to the other it had just faded into the fog.

It was her ninth episode of *My Hometown*. It had taken her at least three to accept that her cynicism was immovable. As much as she enjoyed a good ghost story, none of the little tales that found their way to her editing desk inspired more than an internal eye-roll.

She swirled her gin and tonic. Half the bar stretched out over the water, held up on mossy wood beams that swayed in a heavy wind. Margot had been here just once before, a month or so before

she'd fled that summer after graduation. She shouldn't have been allowed in, but she'd been friends with Jack, and being friends with Jack always had its perks. Everyone knew him, or knew of him, because of his dealing and because his house parties were so far down a muddy, potholed road, the cops usually didn't bother breaking them up.

The bar had not changed, still felt like huddling in the cold bowels of a ship, teak walls and a misty smell like fish and rotting carrots. She had shared a calculus class with the bartender but couldn't fix him with a name, avoided his eyes in case he recognized her. She shrugged off her jacket, feeling prickly and restless, took a drink. Scrolling back up, she looked through the pictures again, mouth going sharp with the first stages of nausea. The last one was a close-up of the forest floor, a few paces from the body, the spot where they'd found the hunter's heart.

A hand landed on her shoulder. She turned around and was swallowed in a hug, a name out of her mouth before she had fully realized whose warm, fleshy arms were wrapped around her, whose shriek was reverberating in her ear.

“Lena.”

For a second Margot thought the vertigo was back—but it was just the fact of Lena in front of her again, like a misaligned bone snapped back into place.

“Mo!” she shouted, and Margot shrank away from the volume of her voice.

Lena stepped back and looked her up and down, smiling hugely, teeth dazzling in the light from the string of Christmas lights tacked up above the bar. Margot pulled at the front of her button-down, wishing she had changed and brushed out her air-travel hair. Lena wore a ‘Bride 2 Be’ sash that covered the deep V of her sweater. She was curvier than she'd been in high school, softened by time and children. She had let go of the once bleached blond hair, now faded to honey brown. Eye contact with Lena had always felt like a commitment, like she was leaning into a conversation and expected to be met halfway. Margot got to her feet.

“Bride?” She pointed at the sash. Her smile insisted on showing Lena all of her teeth.

Lena blinked, a hand wandering to the sash like it was in danger.

“You never RSVPed,” she said, and took hold of Margot’s forearms like they might start dancing. “Rob and I are getting remarried. We didn’t think you could come. It’s tomorrow.”

Her smile was too sweet. There was no save-the-date in any of Margot’s inboxes, real or digital. Margot shrugged, smiled, apologized, waved the awkwardness away. Then she scanned the bar like she was looking for someone, like she had a more interesting conversation waiting in the wings. She had to fight off the compulsion to start spinning lies, find a way to make Lena believe there was a glamorous reason she was sitting alone in their small town bar. Or maybe she should have just put on bubblegum lipgloss and Doc Martens—made some small step back towards the girl Lena had known. She felt *tougher* than that girl, like a piece of leather, like her body had long ago caved into something durable and mean. Lena gripped her arms tighter.

“So how’s Chicago?”

“Oh, y’know. Windy.”

A group of women sat watching them from the other side of the bar, all in white sashes and fluffy pink headbands. Margot pointed. “You’ve got a fan club.”

Lena laughed. “It’s my bachelorette party.”

“At the Boat Bar?”

She didn’t answer, just pulled at Margot’s elbow and demanded she come sit with them. Margot drained her glass and followed, kind of wishing she actually had just misplaced an RSVP, fully wishing she was already drunk. The round table was wedged in a corner, in front of big windows overlooking the black lake. They approached their reflections in the glass, Margot a monochrome stain trailing behind Lena.

She edged her way around the table to an empty chair as Lena rattled off the names of a table of sparkly, half-lit women with beautiful hair. She took a seat beside the only two that she knew. Fawn, tall and heavy-set, looked almost exactly the same as the last time she’d seen her—a party at

Jack's house that Margot hadn't realized would be her last. On Fawn's other side as always was Amy, now sporting straight black bangs and much better make-up than her high-school self.

Both looked shocked as Margot sat down, and Amy turned to Fawn like she needed a confirmation that what she was seeing was real. Margot rubbed her palms over her pencil skirt and smiled.

"Hey."

Amy looked even more shocked, opened her mouth to say something.

"How are you?" Fawn cut her off and gave Margot a half-hug. Her voice was overly polite, like they didn't really know each other. This was on purpose, the only form of punishment Fawn would ever be comfortable dishing out. Guilt tightened in Margot's chest.

Fawn let go of her and Amy sighed.

"Hi, Margot."

She leaned back in her seat as Lena introduced Margot to the rest of the table as 'her oldest friend.'

One of the others, a woman with a pretty, heart-shaped face held out a pale hand for Margot to shake.

"You're so cute, Willa, nobody shakes hands anymore," Lena said, and took a sip of her drink to give Willa a chance to blush and the others a chance to giggle. Willa shook it off.

"I remember you," she said, sending Margot a dazzling smile. "You guys were on the tennis team together, right?"

Lena had been on the tennis team. Margot had sat on the bleachers with Jack and laughed about the embarrassing sincerity of it all—of high school, of team sports, of Lena. But Lena cut in before Margot could speak.

"Margot's in town for the wedding," she said. "Sorry I didn't invite you out tonight, Mo. I didn't think you'd be here so early!"

“Oh. Actually, I’m here for a story,” she said.

Lena shifted in her seat.

“A story?” Amy said, trying not to look interested. “You work for a podcast now, right?”

Margot had a hard time looking her in the eye. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Amy, if she had been at that last party at Jack’s or if she’d been on the long commute to or from Mount Pleasant, already taking classes and working two grocery store jobs in an effort to keep her family afloat.

Margot nodded. “We investigate weird or supernatural mysteries around the country.”

A few of the women nodded and made polite hums of recognition.

“Mm, that’s so cool,” Lena said, ending the conversation with a long sip of her beer. Margot shook off a familiar embarrassment and pointed at the can when she realized it was not, in fact, beer. It was Vernors.

“You’re not drinking?”

Lena smiled, red and tight. “Well, it’s kinda a secret until the wedding’s over, so don’t tell anybody, Mo, but,” she looked around the table, stretching out the moment. “I’m pregnant.”

“It’s *so* exciting,” Fawn said, rubbing a hand over Lena’s back, more familiar than it used to be. “I promise, these are gonna be the best years of your life.”

Amy made a face at that, but Lena ignored her.

“You don’t think four is too many?” Lena said, sweet and coy. She looked at Margot, waiting for her to say the wrong thing.

And it all came back to her now, a hundred moments just like this one, a feeling like she was stumbling along to a song she thought she knew, Lena ready to change the words just to trip her up, Amy and Fawn always at the sidelines, only rarely finding themselves on the wrong end of these little challenges. Margot folded up her arms and leaned away from the table, mouth stinging from the alcohol and sugar.

One of the others jumped in—Sara, or maybe Bonnie, Lena had rattled off their names so quickly. “Of course not, your kids are *so* beautiful.”

Lena’s first announcement had come as a surprise to everyone, especially Rob. It was online, just the two words in all-caps, five exclamation points to prop them up. Even a month later, when the Trailblazer took up permanent residence in the marsh and Margot expected everyone’s attention to shift to their missing friend, their sympathies lingered on Lena. She had a talent for grabbing attention and holding it, for making you feel like you were a better person for caring about her. Yes, Declan was missing, but she was still pregnant at barely eighteen.

Margot had hated her for it, for ignoring what was happening so she could play house with Rob, who, despite proposing and going through the motions of the good guy doing the right thing, was so transparent in his lack of desire for this sudden family it made Margot’s stomach hurt. At the wedding that July, apparently only the first attempted marriage to Rob, Margot sat next to Lena’s drunk, teary grandma. *I had such hopes for that girl*, she said, hanging onto Margot’s elbow for support. *They’re all gone now.*

“That’s so great.” The attempt was too quiet, too flat. Lena frowned.

“Isn’t it?” Amy said.

A mosquito bit the back of Margot’s neck and she slapped it away.

The conversation shifted around town to the churches, the schools, the trailer park, their jobs at the salon, the school, the Coney Island. A round of drinks appeared courtesy of the middle-aged men at the bar, who winked and tipped invisible hats when Lena smiled at them. When they were finished Lena ordered more.

Margot sipped at a drink she didn’t particularly want, head buzzing as she tried to keep up. She needed something to do with her hands and her mouth. Her fingers wanted a cigarette, mouth wanted a gummy worm. A sore on her tongue reopened and blood sharpened at the back of her throat. The eyes of the women around her were starting to feel like a cold sweat. They did not ask

her anything more about herself, or about that summer after graduation, and she realized after drink number four that to them it was ancient history. Their coldness was not a leftover grudge, but the distance of a stranger.

They had veered back towards the subject of children, proudly dreading the end of the school year and the empty days of summer. Amy had a four-year-old daughter, and Fawn had twin boys, born only last Christmas. Margot knew this, the internet had made sure she knew it, but it was different seeing them again in real life and knowing they had achieved all of these expected milestones. And that Margot had not been present for any of it.

Sara-or-Bonnie, also a mother of two, asked her if she had any kids and Margot laughed.

Something was growing in the pit of her stomach. Every time she laughed too loud, replied to a question too late, kept silent for too long, it grew another dark leaf. She opened her phone for a distraction and the picture of the hunter's solitary heart in the dirt sprang up like it had been waiting. She clicked the phone off quickly, but too late—Fawn had seen it. She blinked quickly, eyebrows raised.

"I'm gonna get a drink," Margot mumbled.

She tugged her jacket tight around her chest and contemplated escape. She should not have come here, should have expected the biggest bar in town to be full of familiar faces. But she just ordered and leaned against the bar to wait.

The place had slowly filled. The men who kept sending them drinks eyed her from down the bar. A woman somewhere coughed out a smoker's laugh. A dog with a home-made service animal vest lay under a table.

And at a booth by the door sat a strange combination of people. A young woman, straight nose peeking out from the shadow of her profile, beachy blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun, and a middle-aged couple, graying and flanneled, hands clasped tightly on the table top.

Margot grabbed her drink and tried not to stare.

“Is that Hannah Kacy?” she said, sitting back down at their table.

Lena looked over at the door and rolled her eyes. “Yep.”

Some of the others spun around to look too, but Lena flapped at them to stop.

“What’s she doing with the Heines?” Margot said.

The three of them were deep in conversation over beers, a dim light swaying slightly over their heads.

“Dunno,” Lena said. “Maybe an interview?”

“A what?”

“Hannah’s working at the *The Citizen* now. I think she took over from her uncle or something—y’know how the Kacys are.” Lena shrugged and adjusted her sash. “Whatever. It’s not like anyone reads the fucking newspaper.” The others giggled.

“Kind of surprised she hasn’t been around to your place, though,” Fawn said to Lena. “Figured she’d wanna talk to Rob about that stuff they found in the marsh.”

Margot abruptly forgot about Hannah, a swoop in her stomach. She took a drink, regretting it when it was suddenly difficult to focus on Fawn’s face. Lena ignored Fawn, taking a sip of Vernors and determinately listening to something Willa was saying at the other side of the table.

“What about Rob?” Margot said.

Fawn waited for Lena to tune in. Amy jumped in when she didn’t.

“The landscaping place Rob works for is the one who dug it all up,” she said.

The woman on Lena’s other side, the one with white-blond hair and a thin face, perked up.

“Weren’t you friends with that guy, Lena? Christy O’Neill’s little brother?”

Lena cleared her throat. “Not really.”

Fawn and Amy both looked away.

Margot tried to catch Lena’s attention but leaned farther than she meant to, veering into Fawn’s space. Fawn scooted her chair back to get out of her way.

“Sorry, does Rob know anything more than that?” Margot said, planting her elbows on the table. “There’s not much information online.”

Lena glanced around at everyone’s reactions to Margot’s sudden intensity.

Despite the fog of alcohol Margot could still track Lena’s expression—irritable at the turn in the conversation, reluctantly pleased to be the bearer of information.

She sighed.

“So, Rob and them are working on draining that whole area for whoever owns the land, but before they could get the car out they had to dig up some of the muck, and he said they had to call the cops because they dug up some suspicious stuff. Like, a bunch of wires and pieces of the car.”

Pieces of the car. It was the weirdest part of the whole ordeal—one of the things Margot had obsessed over that summer, had drawn diagrams of, talked to old Deputy Westfall about until the Sheriff yelled at her to get the hell out of his police station. It was clear the Trailblazer had veered off the road, smashed through the barrier, settled in the marsh. It was clear that, for whatever reason, Declan was no longer inside it. What was not clear was why a chunk of the car was missing as well. The door had been shut when they found it, but inside wires hung from where the steering wheel and part of the dashboard had been ripped away, the driver’s seat open to mangled foam padding, upholstery and half the seat gone. There was no blood, nothing of Declan left behind.

Margot had found three short articles about the local PD reopening the case. Two had given only the barest of details and spelled Declan’s name wrong, but the most recent included a list of what the landscape crew had found—the missing front seat, the steering wheel, the bits of dashboard.

“Is that why you’re in town? Is that what your story’s about?” Amy said, cautiously, and Margot realized she’d been staring blankly at the smudged table top.

“Hang on,” Lena said to Margot, and something of her straight-backed, bride-2-be facade fell away. “You’re doing a story on him?”

“I’m not sure what the story will really be about yet,” Margot said. Her face was heating up at the unimpressed look on Lena’s face. “It’s kind of up to the producer. I’m just here for research and interviews. And the interviews are all planned beforehand, so I don’t really have a hand in those decisions...” She was losing track of her words, not even sure what she was trying to prove, what image of herself she was trying to convey.

Lena shook her head like she couldn’t believe what Margot was saying. “So what, you’re gonna interview Christy? His parents? Me?”

The others exchanged glances. The lights pulsed around them and the dark thing in Margot’s stomach sprouted further, took hold of her throat. Lena had always been like this, waiting until the perfect moment to pull all eyes back on her. She didn’t even need to say his name—it already sounded like she owned him, owned everything that had happened.

“Well, you weren’t really friends with him, so probably not.”

Lena ignored this. “You’re seriously gonna go talk to his parents? That’s like, literally exploitation.”

“That’s journalism.” Margot attempted a shrug that made her feel like a character from a bad movie, some big-city asshole here to shut down the family farm, here to exploit the O’Neills for a story.

“Journalism?” Lena smiled. “Isn’t your podcast about like werewolves and Bigfoot and shit?”

Margot sat back in her chair, not looking at anyone. She chewed on her thumbnail and let the silence at the table grow uncomfortable. The Christmas lights spun above the bar.

“Welp,” Lena looked at her phone. “It’s getting kinda late. Think we should wrap it up? Sorry you had to hang out with a bunch of moms, Mo. You probably think we’re so boring.”

Fawn laughed nervously. Margot shouldn’t have left her barstool, shouldn’t have left the Timberwood, shouldn’t have left Chicago.

Lena stood. She slung her purse over her shoulder and dug around for her wallet.

“I’m gonna go cash out, I’ll just be a sec.”

“Hang on, Lena,” Margot jumped up and edged around the table. She caught up with her at the bar. “Hey, I’ve got it, don’t worry about it,” she said, waving her credit card at the bartender like it would erase the look that had settled over Lena’s face. The card was overdrawn but whatever. She would deal with that later.

But Lena glared at the card, then at her.

“Please don’t,” she said, her jaw set.

“What, why? It’s your bachelorette party, I don’t mind—”

“I don’t care what you mind. You can’t just roll in her after so long and start bothering people and throwing money around. You left and got a fancy job, we get it.”

Margot tapped the card against her leg. She wanted to redo the last minute, the last hour, wondered how much of her shitty judgment she could blame on the alcohol and how much of it just came naturally.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I don’t care what you meant. You should go. You look tired.”

Lena smiled brilliantly at the bartender and handed over her card, clicking stained heels on the floor.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Lena said to no one in particular, and headed back to the round table.

Margot burned, fingers numb, feeling like something small and slimy, more comfortable at the bottom of the lake than up here in the light.

She sat at the bar and crossed her legs, tried to correct her slouch, tamped down the stupid clutch of emotion in her throat. She drank water and returned to Jane’s notes on her phone, though she couldn’t read more than a few words about the dead hunter at a time. She just turned over odd phrases in her head, unable to string them together. *Ripped in half longways. Other organs found five paces away.*

The door chimed and she looked up in time to see Lena lead the way out. Amy didn't look her way, but Fawn waved with a cautious smile. She waved back, swaying on the stool.

The water wasn't helping. The room spun. People left, others appeared. The middle-aged men from the bar left. A crowd of new guys appeared, louder than the radio and too young to recognize her. She hoped she looked sleek and intriguing. She knew she looked gaunt and tired.

It was nearing midnight and she needed to leave before she did something stupid, before she went for a swim, or went home with one of the loud guys, or lay under the blinking stoplight in town in the way she'd found so wonderfully depressing when she was sixteen.

She cashed out silently and left, throat burning, mood souring. She forgot what the rental car looked like and spent a few minutes running a hand over the rows of hoods until she remembered it was parked right outside the door.

The key scraped against the lock a few times before sliding in.

"Are you seriously gonna drive right now?"

Tall and blonde, Hannah Kacy stood like a mirage on the other side of the car. It took a second for Margot to remember what she was doing.

"No?"

"Bullshit," Hannah said.

Margot had a half-formed plan to sleep off the worst of it in the backseat and drive home when she could see straight, but she didn't know how to explain this. Her tongue was too big for her mouth—she had to make an effort to keep it reeled in.

"Listen, do you need a ride anywhere?" Hannah said to the sidewalk.

"What, with you?"

She sounded both drunker and meaner than she meant to, and Hannah just looked at her.

"I've got a car. But thanks," Margot said, pressing a finger into the cold glass of the drivers window to demonstrate.

“Yeah, you’re not driving like this. I’m taking you home. Or wherever.”

The last time Margot saw Hannah Kacy was at the little gathering Declan’s parents had held in support of the search efforts. They’d stood at the front doors of the Baptist church, head to toe in black, and pretended it didn’t feel exactly like Andy’s funeral had felt, when they’d buried Declan’s brother just a few months earlier.

Hannah pushed around Mr. O’Neill in his chair, so helpful, and Margot wanted to pull her hair, pluck out her eyes, erase her from the Earth. She’d hoped that Hannah would cry at some point, that she’d break down in loud, dumb tears that Margot could point to as proof of their flimsy relationship. But she hadn’t cried. She’d been stoic and strong, the perfect grieving girlfriend. Margot would have looked better in Hannah’s place, beautiful and tragic, mascara in tracks down her face.

She’d stupidly brought Jack with her, who kept laughing awkwardly and had tried to sell Klonopin to Declan’s older sister. Lena hadn’t shown up at all, reportedly too busy with wedding preparations and still insisting that Declan would turn up any day now.

“Are you coming?” Hannah said. Margot abandoned the rental car and followed her to the far edge of the lot, where a muddy, white car stood alone.

The streetlights didn’t even reach this far. Margot looked around the empty darkness.

“Never thought I’d see you here. Thought you would have gotten out by now.”

Hannah said nothing.

Margot giggled and got into the backseat. You were supposed to sit in the backseat if you didn’t trust the driver, were supposed to give your hands full access to a soft neck and the back of a head.

They pulled onto the road. The radio was on with the volume turned all the way down, like Hannah had forgotten about it.

Margot drifted, disappearing into the hum of the car, the rustle of jackets against seats, the cold air from the vent in the ceiling. She tensed when headlights passed on the other side of the road, forgetting each time where she was and where she was going.

“Where am I taking you?” Hannah’s voice sounded too far away.

“Mmm. Timberwood,” Margot said into the window. Her breath fogged up the glass.

“Not your house?”

“Nobody there anymore.”

After a moment came Hannah’s “Oh.”

“Foreclosed.”

A quieter “Oh.”

Actually, she should not have sat behind Hannah. It felt like a confessional, too intimate without the complication of their faces. She shouldn’t have said that word either—*foreclosed*—it rattled around and she had to shake her head to get rid of it. She wanted to kick the back of Hannah’s seat for everything she’d hidden under that little, pitying, better-than-you *oh*.

A half moon flickered between the tops of the pines. It tasted bumpy and acidic. She badly wanted to lick its shine off the window, if only to piss off Hannah. She shook her head again, and pieces of the evening came back to her.

“Why were you talking to the Heines?”

The car slowed to a stop at an intersection. Hannah’s hands lit up red on the steering wheel.

“None of your business.”

“Oh, come on,” Margot nudged the driver’s seat with her foot and heard Hannah huff. “Is it confidential? Is it for a super secret article?”

Hannah’s hands shifted on the wheel.

“I heard you’re at *The Citizen* now,” Margot said. “Really hit the big leagues, there.”

“What is your problem?” Hannah said. “I’m doing you a favor.”

“You basically kidnapped me.”

“I basically saved you from a DUI.”

Margot snorted and folded her arms around herself, hating the words coming out of her mouth, hating this bitter thing that had lingered between them. They'd barely ever spoken in high school, and Margot had pointedly ignored her during the few months she'd been hanging around with Declan. It wasn't until after he was gone that they'd spent any time with one another, apparently the only two people in town determined to find out what had happened. They tripped over one another at every turn, Margot hostile and suspicious, and Hannah—infuriatingly—giving Margot no more attention than she would an irritating and vaguely blameworthy fly.

The light turned green and Hannah turned left instead of continuing straight. Margot sat up.

“Hey, don't go this way,” she said. The road curved. Metal railings appeared between their car and the marsh. “Hannah.”

Hannah didn't say anything. Margot pulled her feet up onto the seat with her. Maybe if she didn't take up any space, none of them would see her—the car, the town, Hannah, Declan.

The roof of the trailblazer was just visible over the tops of the reeds, a twisted, trapped sheet of metal, white under the moon. For a second, Declan sat on the roof like he used to when it still belonged to his brother, when it was too late for Margot to come inside but they wanted to talk longer so they hung out in the driveway, Declan looking up at the stars from the roof, Margot circling the car and fidgeting as he talked endlessly about other worlds in books and in space, about the past and the future.

They were past it in seconds. Margot felt kind of stupid for how much she had built it up in her head, like if she saw it again it might grab her and sink her into the marsh. She rubbed hands over cold ankles, tried not to shiver.

In Chicago, abandoned cars were towed, at least where Margot lived. In Cheneaux they lingered, in marshes, in front yards, pulled onto the sides of back roads and forgotten. They were part of the landscape, and though more fuss had been made over the Trailblazer, it was fundamentally no

different than the abandoned truck out in the field on Saddle Lake road, or the car parts people dumped on an old lot at the edge of town that no one seemed to know who owned.

Was Hannah used to driving past it? Did she even think about it anymore? She was tapping her fingers on the wheel, irritated, probably regretting her odd moment of charity.

“You still hate me, don’t you,” Margot said, even the alcohol unable to kill the strain of smugness in her voice. She couldn’t help it—whichever one of them was hated more was the winner, and she could feel the scales tipping in her direction.

Hannah fidgeted in her seat, let out a heavy breath.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The jet of air from the ceiling vent was frigid. Margot felt very small suddenly, knees pressed up to her chest like a child. Her pencil skirt, her job, her apartment, her many plants, her revolving door of half-relationships—it was all just dress-up.

She should have slept in the parking lot. Better yet, should have gone home with one of the loud guys, or one of the middle-aged men, or the goddam bartender, anyone but Hannah Kacy.

Silence curdled between them, Hannah settling into it, Margot wanting to lean forward and scream into her smug, un-pierced ear. She undid her seatbelt and lay down across the back seat, alcohol compounding the remnants of vertigo. Lights striped across the ceiling.

Hannah pulled into the Timberwood’s empty lot, the feel of the road shifting from pavement to rocky gravel. They stopped and Margot sat up and fell into the door, grasped for the handle.

“Wait,” Hannah said, with such purpose that Margot startled and looked outside like there might be something breaking down the door to room number five. But all was dark and quiet. The solitary light in the parking lot flickered and buzzed with mosquitos. The car’s interior lights went off and Hannah’s face, craned around the seat to look at her, was entirely in shadow.

“What?”

Hannah didn't say anything, just stared at her in the dark, and fear clutched at Margot from nowhere, the cold stream of air a sudden breath down her spine. Hannah's eyes were too big, and Margot wanted to slap her for her silence, for her words, for everything she'd ever done.

"Are you gonna say something, or what?"

Hannah turned back around and sighed. "Goodnight, Margot."

"Thanks for the ride," she mumbled, and pushed the door open.

She marched toward room five, the cold breeze a little too sobering. Tires crunched on the gravel behind her. She shoved in the key card too quickly, had to find the right combination of angle and curse words for the thing to beep and turn green.

The bible drawer was open before she knew what she was doing, a lit cigarette swimming around between her fingers. She stood in front of the window and smoked one after another, itching for another few shots, a good sprint through the dark, a blow to the back of the head, anything to spend a few minutes away from herself.

When he was nine, Declan found a gun in the woods. He didn't know anything about guns—the ones on TV were small and black and fit in your hand—but this one was the other kind, long and awkwardly shaped, like his grandpa's hunting rifle that used to lean against the back door. Grandma had sold it after Grandpa had gotten sick. That one had been old, but this one had green growing on the wood part of it, stuck half out of the dirt.

Declan and Margot had come to one of the flat areas of the woods, a small clearing of wet dirt and sprouts of grass. The trees weren't as high here, were leafy with branches that twisted and tangled together. Good climbing trees, actually, though Margot didn't usually like climbing.

"What is it?" Margot said, crashing through the underbrush to see him looking down at the dirt.

Usually Declan was excited about the things they found in the woods, like the pink mitten, the wet high school yearbook from 1997, the peppermint still in its wrapping, the Lions baseball cap, the computer mouse, and even about the dozen plastic bottles. Usually he grabbed for these things without thinking, hands moving independently from the rest of him, but he still had Band Aids up his arms from the last time he'd done this and got his arms caught in the old razor wire fence, so this time he hesitated.

Something about the gun felt like he shouldn't touch it, like it was in a glass case in a museum, off limits. But he didn't know how to explain this to Margot.

"Nothing," he said. "Come on."

He led them away from the gun and along another off-shoot of the path. Margot said nothing about the gun. It had taken two years for Declan to learn that this did not necessarily mean she hadn't seen it. She wasn't like him, she didn't broadcast her every observation and question. He'd thought at first that her silences meant she didn't actually like him very much, that she was just hanging around him while she waited for someone better to talk to her, maybe Dean Finley, or the

girls who wore matching plastic butterflies in their hair and followed Dean Finley around. But that hadn't happened, and Margot didn't seem interested in being friends with anyone but Declan.

Declan didn't remember this new path. It was too narrow for them to walk side-by-side, so he led the way and told Margot about a book he was reading about some kids that get sucked into a fantasy world with only the contents of their picnic basket for protection. Margot never said much in response to his chatter, but as he explained how a kitchen knife had transformed into a sword, his feet crunching through the crispy-dead leaves, he realized that there was no crunching behind him. He spun around, but there she was, a foot behind him and eyes wide in surprise.

"Nothing," he said, answering her question before she said it.

The path widened as they reached a clearing, and she hopped a few feet ahead to walk beside him. It was getting hot, the July sun high overhead, baking their bare arms and legs.

When they'd first become friends, they'd played a lot of pretend in the woods, acting out the adventures of noble robbers, student witches, and elf archers. But they were in fourth grade now, nearly ten, and he could sense Margot's enthusiasm for those sorts of games waning. He didn't want to tell her that sometimes he felt like they hadn't really been games at all, they'd been more like a peek into another life, one he'd rather be living. Even now as their make believe games seemed to be ending, he felt the same, like on the back side of every tree was a door or a question or a pair of eyes.

"Um," Margot started. "I'm sorry about your grandpa."

Declan could tell she'd been psyching herself up to say this for a while, perhaps the whole day. She hadn't been at the funeral, had kept her distance from the entire ordeal. For a while he'd thought this was maybe selfish of her, but the moment he started crying in the middle of church—big, messy tears with hiccups and bubbles of snot—he was thankful she wasn't there.

"Oh. It's alright," Declan said. He didn't know what else to say. He'd never known a dead person before.

It was the first funeral he'd ever been to. Declan didn't think much about the future, but he knew as he followed his family out of the cemetery—his parents silent, Christy crying quietly, Andy glum and edgy with his hands shoved in his pockets—that when he thought about this day later on, it would feel like a big X on the map of his life.

For one, until the exact moment they lowered the box into the ground he'd been under the impression that a burial was some kind of *planting*. For as long as he'd understood what a funeral was, he'd pictured the exact process of planting a tree, down to the shape of the hole, and the water poured on top afterwards, and the expectation that something would grow out of the mound of dirt. The reality of burial felt so alien he was convinced for a moment that he'd staggered into some other dimension.

And then there was what he heard in the church reception hall before the funeral started. For Declan, his grandpa's death had gone from *he's fine*, to *he's sick*, to *he's dead*, and he hadn't given much thought to the specifics.

"So sad," an old lady had said. "Just so needless." He recognized her from around the park, and he didn't really like her because she always seemed to be talking about what other people should be doing with their time, but now he tuned into what she was saying.

"Well, he didn't have insurance," another lady said—his dad's cousin who he recognized because of her orange hair and round body. "He didn't have any options."

"Surely there was something he could have done," the old lady said.

The cousin swallowed heavily and turned away. "I guess not."

Declan asked Andy what it all meant later, after they'd gotten into their rickety bunk beds and turned off the light. The ladder clanked as Andy's foot disappeared over the side of the top bunk. Declan had wanted the top bunk because he thought it would feel like sleeping in a tree, but being five years older, Andy had claimed first pick.

“How did Grandpa die?” Declan said, quietly. He knew it was cancer, because that’s what everyone had said, but it didn’t seem like that was the whole story anymore.

Andy sighed from the top bunk. He hadn’t spoken much since the funeral. None of them had, but while everyone’s else’s silence felt tired and sad, Andy’s had an edge.

“Grandpa used to build furniture,” he said, his voice carrying down softly. Their room was next to Mom and Dad’s, and if they made too much noise Dad would rap sharply on the wall.

“Remember the shop in town? You’re probably too young to remember.”

“Yeah, I do,” Declan said. It was just vague impressions—gray carpet of a show room, the saw dust of a workshop, the strangely soft curve of a sanded-down chair leg—but he remembered. Even if he hadn’t, he would have claimed to just to prove Andy wrong.

“Well, he worked there for like thirty years, but then the second they got a robot to do some of his job, they let him go. I dunno what he was doing since then, but I guess he didn’t have insurance, so when he started feeling sick a couple years ago, he didn’t do anything about it and he just kept telling Dad and Grandma he’d wait until he was sixty-five when social security kicked in. Which was only like six months ago, because when he finally went they were like, *oh, you’ve got cancer, sorry there’s nothing we can do, you shoulda got it checked out years ago, what’s wrong with you*, like it was his fucking fault.”

Usually when Andy swore it was funny and exciting, but this time it wasn’t either, it was like he wanted to spit in someone’s face.

“It’s just so fucking unfair,” he said, even quieter, like he was talking to the ceiling more than he was talking to Declan. “Like, is that how Mom and Dad are gonna die? Is that how Grandma’s gonna die? Mrs. Rocheleau, y’know, Mom’s friend? She’s got cancer too. So does Mrs. Lutz at school. Everyone just keeps crying about all of it and saying *that’s life*, but really this whole town is a black hole and no one cares.”

Declan lay on the bottom bunk and felt the world rearrange itself around him, a great cosmic shift, because he’d always thought of unfairness as what happened when Dean Finley got picked

first for soccer just because he was loud and funny and not because he was any good at soccer, but this wasn't the kind of unfairness that Andy was talking about.

"Um. My grandpa died, too," Margot said, and Declan blinked back to the woods and the heat of the sun on his face. "Last year. He lived in Florida, though, so I didn't really know him."

"I'm sorry," he said, automatically, and she nodded, and the conversation was over.

It was much easier to talk to Margot about things like magical worlds and knives becoming swords than it was to talk about things like family and funerals.

Declan kept to the trail, Margot bobbing along beside him until they came to a field. The path turned into two tire tracks, like from a four-wheeler or a golf cart. The grass on either side of them was knee-high and pale green. To one side of the field was a slope, and down the slope was a tangle of dark bushes with a few pale leaves and a smattering of red berries on top. As they approached, Declan saw a gap in the bushes, just big enough to crawl into. He stopped and pointed to the little tunnel.

"Wanna go in there?"

Margot blinked at it and tapped her foot a bunch, which meant she was scared. But after a moment she said, "Okay."

They weren't supposed to leave the path—it was way too easy to get lost out here, as Declan's dad constantly reminded him, but he couldn't help but get excited when they stumbled upon something cool. Usually his excitement infected Margot, too, like it had when they found a pile of unplayable CDs, or the plastic viewfinder with all the images bleached out from the sun, or the strange tree, splintered down the middle like it had been struck with a giant axe. But she wasn't excited right now, she was scared, and he hesitated next to the twisted bushes, wondering if he should turn back, or try to motivate her, or make fun of her for being scared.

"What?" she said, jutting her chin out with fake bravery.

So he crouched down and crawled into the tunnel. He heard her shuffle after him. It was darker inside than he'd expected, the thin branches tangled together so tightly they didn't let much light through. The gap grew tighter and he worried for a moment that it would end and they would have to back out awkwardly, but it quickly widened again, and then again large enough to form a little cave.

The top opened almost enough to see the sky, just a thin layer of branches overhead. It was bright enough to see everything, to see what lay in the middle of the clearing—

“Whoa,” Margot said, crawling next to him. They both crouched on their knees, the top branches still a few inches above their heads. They kept as far to the side as they could, branches poking into their backs.

In the center of the clearing was a small pile of bones. They were thin and dirty, and stacked on top of each other like whatever they'd once belonged to had crawled in here and hunkered down to die. The skull sat on top, weird and oblong, two long teeth still attached to the end of the jaw.

For a moment Declan was sure if he looked at the bones for long enough, concentrated hard enough, some kind of meaning would emerge, language unfolding from them directly into his mind. But he blinked the idea away and was left feeling cold at the sight of these fragile little things that used to prop up an animal.

“Can we leave?” Margot said, very quietly.

On the other side of the clearing was another gap in the branches, another tunnel, and Declan imagined edging around the bones and following it deeper and deeper. But this time it was Margot's fear that was infecting him, and his skin suddenly felt prickly with heightened awareness. He jumped a bit when he shifted and something touched his leg. It was just a branch.

“Let's go,” he whispered.

Margot turned and crawled as fast as she could out the way they'd come. Declan followed, trying to keep up, and trying to ignore the feeling that the branches around them were actually bones, and those bones were reaching out and grabbing at his retreating feet.

The last time Margot saw Declan was in the parking lot of the Dollar General, five hours after their high school graduation. She hid in the passenger seat of Jack's truck and watched Declan exit the sliding doors with a heavy plastic shopping bag and head for his car. He was not walking like he normally walked. She could recognize Declan anywhere, could pull the shape of him out of a crowd, and he'd never moved like that before. He was even more jittery than he'd been at graduation earlier, his steps nervous and off-kilter. His face was partially hidden by sunglasses but she could tell his eyes were wide and darting around the half-empty parking lot.

She had her hand on the door handle before she realized that she had no idea what to say to him, didn't particularly want to discover what would come out of her mouth if she placed herself in his path. Their parting words at graduation rang in her ears—she had no idea what to make of them. He'd pulled her aside after the long, hot ceremony, both of them still in their stupid white and red gowns, his hair growing curlier in the heat. They weren't really talking at that point. She wasn't entirely sure if he was aware of that, but the fact was very clear in her head—he was with Hannah, and she was with Jack, and they weren't talking. But there was something about his face and the way he said her name when he called her away from where her parents stood ignoring each other on the cracked sidewalk, something that compelled her to listen to him, and something that compelled her to leave him standing lost in the shade of the oak.

There was a party at Jack's that night, and he was inside the Dollar General stocking up on snacks and pop. He had already procured the rest, had driven down south the previous weekend specially and filled up his padlocked tackle-box. Everyone knew what a party at Jack's would be like.

Declan climbed into the red Trailblazer, Andy's old car, the car Margot had hung her feet out the passenger side window of on cool nights when Declan had driven them to and from work the previous summer, and pulled out onto M-15. When Jack reappeared, she did not ask him if he'd seen Declan, but she examined his face, tried to catch any evidence of an unexpected encounter.

She didn't expect to see Declan at the party—not with the way he'd been acting earlier—but she was still unmoored by his absence, and spent the night consuming whatever Jack put in her hands. She clung to walls, fell through doorways, legs shaking and head spinning with vertigo or vodka or E, she couldn't tell the difference, and didn't really care as long as it kept a wall between her and the swirling mess of things she didn't want to think about.

She wandered from room to room, dragging a nail over the marble in her pocket.

“Hold out your hand,” Declan had said under the oak tree earlier that afternoon. She was taller than usual, in heels and on the uneven ground, and without a foot of height separating them the angle of his face was almost unfamiliar. She rolled her eyes and held out her hand. He dropped the marble onto her palm and squinted at her through the sunlight like any of it—the marble, the words, the look on his face—would prove something to her.

The marble was clear glass with a little yellow wisp hanging in the middle. She took it out of her pocket and held it at the party, dropped it in her drink, swirled it around in her mouth. She laughed and cried with Lena about the end of high school, she made a fool of herself at one game after another, she sat on the back deck and looked out at the lake and tried to keep pieces of herself from drifting away. That was what she felt like—a pile of broken things she couldn't keep together.

She hadn't told anyone about the divorce. It seemed so pathetic in comparison to everything else—Lena's pregnancy and impending marriage to Rob, Andy's death that seemed to have trapped Declan in a strange new world that Margot was shut out of, and all the things they said on the news every night, the plummeting economy, the housing crisis, the bailouts, the protests on TV. They'd started calling it the Great Recession.

She hadn't told anyone about her college plans, either, not even Declan. A year ago she planned to follow him to the community college in Midland, take whatever classes he took, figure out her life later. But now Declan was taking a gap year to help out his family, and Margot was sitting on an acceptance from one of the “real schools” her dad made her apply to. She knew what a gap year

meant. Declan's brother and sister had both taken a gap year, and now Christy was six months pregnant by a construction worker who wanted nothing to do with her, and Andy was in the ground, and Margot felt like a box closing over her head, felt wrong all the way down to her bones.

Back inside, the music was just noise and thumping walls. She touched the enormous glass windows to feel them shudder. She wandered, lost track of Jack, Lena, Amy, Fawn, lost her hold on gravity, words, her body, everything except the stupid marble. It stayed cold no matter how long she held it in her palm. No one asked about it, but also—no one had a face, they were just the shapes of people. They spoke to her but she didn't listen, couldn't pay attention. They had a bonfire and told ghost stories like they always did, swam and smoked like they always did, disappeared into empty rooms and the dark woods with one another like they always did, opened Jack's tackle-box like they always did. They acted like nothing was changing, but all Margot could think was that they were leaving childhood just as the world was coming to an end.

And then Declan was there, after all, like a mirage in the doorway as Margot leaned heavily against the wall with her marble and her solo cup, one of Jack's little pills making everything bleed like watercolors. He wasn't really there—when she examined her memories later she was sure of it. No one else remembered seeing him standing there. He wore Andy's old, red raincoat, though it wasn't raining, and he spoke hurriedly to Jack, though he and Jack never talked anymore and Jack didn't remember seeing him either. He wasn't really there.

In the morning she woke up on the floor of one of the empty white rooms upstairs. There were a few rooms like this, rooms that Jack's mom had never gotten around to decorating. Jack always talked about "doing something cool" with the empty spaces, but like the rest of Jack's many plans, this never manifested.

The room faced the lake and the woods, the window weirdly cloudy, as though with fingerprints, though no one ever came up here. Jack's house was very modern, all sleek wood and wall-length glass windows. It was nothing like the other houses on Blood Road—dilapidated ranches, shacks,

and old farmhouses slowly being reclaimed by the marsh and the woods. The Tanaka-Ward residence looked like it had come out of a magazine. When she stayed over, Margot threw open the heavy gray curtains from all the massive windows. At night the trees looked like they were watching them, leaning in to listen.

Margot lay on her front on the floor of the white room, wearing damp jeans and someone else's sweater. She felt like she was drying out from the inside, couldn't do anything but roll over and curl up to face the window, head spinning with hangover and vertigo. The marble was still cradled in her hand, sticky with the dried remnants of whatever drink she'd last fished it out of. She held it up to her eye and looked towards the bright window. The world blurred. She dropped it and rolled it around on the carpet.

Margot had never taken anything as seriously as she had taken marble collecting with Declan the summer they were nine. They had a hundred of them at least, hidden in a milk jug they kept buried under the transmission tower that straddled the path between their houses.

There were rules to marble collecting, and they had followed them religiously. Marbles could never be bought new. Marbles could never be accepted as gifts (from other people. Gifts from one another did not count). Marbles could only be viewed once they'd laid down the old beach towel that Declan provided, so as not to lose any of them in the uncut grass. Each time they brought them out it was necessary that they separate them by color, then separate them further by their favorites.

They'd never talked about why they were doing it. Margot wasn't sure there was a reason at all. She'd asked Declan at the end of the school year what he wanted to do that summer and he'd said, "marbles." So they collected marbles.

She was sure the yellow wisp was from their collection. Like all of their marbles it was chipped, cloudy and just *old* in some undefinable way, but she was also sure because she remembered it. It was much shinier than the others, and when they spilled them all out on the beach towel it always caught the sun first. Declan had dug out the jug for the first time in years just to give her the marble in his

attempt to convince her of...something. What that something was, she had not been able to figure out.

“Come with me,” he said in the shade of the big oak tree. His eyes were huge despite the blinding sun, pin-prick pupils staring down at her.

“I don’t know what that means.” The marble sat in her hand between them.

He chewed on his lip, eyes darting around. They stood a little ways away from the rest, partially hidden by the trees as the ceremony dispersed. Declan cracked his knuckles—an old, nervous habit she thought he had grown out of.

“I can’t really explain,” he said. “You just have to trust me. It’s important. It’s—it’s for Andy.”

His face oscillated between a nervous, goofy grin, and a more serious plea, like he wasn’t sure which look would be more convincing. But she didn’t even know what they were to each other right now, didn’t know if they were the same as they’d always been, or if they were this new, warped thing that didn’t talk and didn’t talk about not talking.

“I don’t know what that means either,” she said. Andy had been gone for months. There was nothing they could do ‘for Andy’, and though those were the words that came out of Declan’s mouth, she knew it wasn’t what he really meant. He was incapable of speaking plainly, his riddles were made of riddles, nothing could just be what it was. He didn’t even realize he was doing it, it was just how his brain worked.

She could only imagine that ‘for Andy’ meant some elaborate belated Viking funeral, or a seance, or, worst of all, something to do with the way he died. Some kind of revenge. Or experiment. But they were eighteen and she couldn’t do it anymore, she had to be done with the games, had to know what was real.

Declan was still dating Hannah fucking Kacy, and the fair part of Margot begrudgingly acknowledged that he had every right to do this, and that when you tell someone not to kiss you, you have no right to be mad at them when they go kiss someone else. The unfair part of Margot didn’t

want to look at him ever again. They'd barely spoken since the day he'd shown up at her door ready to wander around the cold like they'd been doing for weeks after Andy's death and she'd finally refused. And now they were two strangers who shared a marble collection.

For a moment all she wanted was to go back and live again in their childhood years when she followed Declan everywhere, when they would spend whole days exploring the woods and she would pretend to believe in all the things he said lived there—the trees with eyes, the rabbits that could hear their thoughts, the ghosts.

She slipped the yellow wisp into her pocket.

“Can we talk about this later?” she said. “My parents have some stupid dinner planned so I should, um.”

He was silent for a moment, then nodded, looking at the ground.

“I'll talk to you later?” she said.

He nodded again. He didn't look at her, brow furrowed in the same expression he made when they used to do math homework together, like he was trying to untangle something complicated in his head.

There were things she wanted to tell him, but she wasn't quite sure what those things were, and she didn't know what it would lead to, if she attempted to work through them out loud. She kept watching the way Declan's fingers tapped against his leg, didn't want to give them any reason to tap harder.

So she left him standing under the tree, endured an unbearable ride home with her parents, escaped to Jack's the moment she could. The next morning when she lay on the floor, deep in a hangover, and looked at the marble, she wondered where exactly Declan had invited her. Why hadn't she just asked? A few hours later Christy called her, nervously asking if Declan was with her, if she had seen him, if she had any idea where he was.

She kept the marble in her pocket for weeks, as everyone assured each other that Declan would turn up, that there was an explanation for the crash, the missing front seat, Declan's whereabouts. But he didn't turn up, and Margot's fear grew into panic and obsession, even as everyone else's turned hopeless. The cops lost what little interest they'd had to begin with, and Lena got married, and Christy had her baby, and Margot squeezed the marble and thought over and over, why hadn't she just asked?

The motel room coffee maker was older than Margot and moved so slowly she fell back to sleep before it was done. Her hangover lived more in her bones than in her head or her stomach, made her feel like if she put her feet down at the wrong angle her whole body would collapse. She dragged her way out of sleep, past the stale cigarette taste in her mouth, down a cup of burnt, sugary coffee, and into a pair of pants before she looked out the window and realized the rental car was not in the parking lot. She had an interview with a local historian and no way to get there.

She considered panicking but didn't have the energy. Instead she opened the door and sat on the shallow front step to finish the bad coffee and take deep gulps of the morning air, thick with the potential for rain. Storms in Chicago swept by like everything else in the city, barely acknowledged, taken in stride. Storms in Cheneaux were an event. She used to watch them roll in over one lake or another, sometimes waiting for the danger of lightning to force her to run back home, other times watching from Jack's screened-in porch, or from Declan's living room window.

Now the storm was just a little thing slithering over the horizon, unsure yet how dramatic it wanted to be. Even as it started to drizzle she couldn't tell if it was real.

Jane would be pissed if she missed an interview, and Margot could not form any kind of excuse out of the weak rain that was slowly soaking her socks. She would have to call him. She couldn't see a way around it. It was Lena's wedding day; anyone else whose number she had kept ahold of would be busy with it. Ride sharing apps had yet to make it to Cheneaux, and the town had never had anything remotely like a taxi service.

His number hovered on the screen in front of her, the number that had traveled from phone to phone. The number that she never called. She wanted a cigarette, or a gummy worm, but settled for the last, sugary dregs of the coffee. The phone rang.

"Hello?" It a woman's voice.

"Um. Hello?"

“Margot?” It was not just a woman’s voice, it was Lena’s voice.

“Hey, yeah. I just...is Jack there?”

“Not right now, no. Why, did you need him for something?” There was nothing in her voice to suggest she was mad about the night before, or that it was at all strange for her to be answering Jack’s phone. It was the polite, high-pitched voice she’d always used to make authority figures fall in love with her.

“Um. Well, I ended up catching a ride last night and now I’m car-less and have an interview in half an hour and I was gonna ask him for a ride.” The rain was picking up. Margot got off the step and closed the door.

“Mo, you could’ve just called me!”

“But it’s your wedding day—”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, I’ll give you a ride, no problem. You at the Timberwood?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’ll be there in like ten minutes, sound good? Good.”

Margot tried to protest, but Lena had already hung up, and she stared down at Jack’s contact picture. It was a blurry shot of his face in profile, laughing with his mouth wide open, straight black hair hanging in his eyes, skater-boy style. Why was Lena answering his phone?

Jack was the only who had not seemed to mind the downward spiral of that last summer, if anything seemed content to join her. Her parents worked out the details of their separation and her dad’s bankruptcy, Lena and Rob moved into a new trailer and ignored everyone, Amy and Fawn got ready for college, and Margot and Jack got high. They swam, avoided his rarely-seen mother, and worked on having sex in all the rooms of the house. They never went to Margot’s house, and they never talked about Declan. Margot split her life down the middle—half of her obsessively following the nonexistent tracks of Declan’s disappearance, the other half getting fucked up in the soft, imported sand in Jack’s backyard.

The last time she saw Jack was when she went over to his house the day before she left for Chicago to pick up a sweater and swimsuit she'd left on his bathroom floor. She didn't know how to tell him she was leaving, so she didn't until she was already gone. He called a week later, confused and more serious than she'd ever heard him. He'd never cared much about anything, so she didn't expect him to care much about this either. But when she'd told him—cautiously, already sensing his reaction was not what she had anticipated—that she was not coming back, he'd been quiet for a moment. “Oh,” he said, still sounding confused, like something about this did not add up. “I guess I'll see you around, then,” he said, and there was something heavy and unfamiliar in his voice.

Jack laughed off everything—his parents' screaming matches, Rob's Asian jokes, school, his past breakups, the joke that was their relationship. But he wasn't laughing now, and Margot had to wonder, as she hung up, if they'd taken the joke too far.

Lena had a mom van. This made sense, but Margot still couldn't wrap her head around it. She understood logically that Lena had three kids, but without ever having met them they seemed entirely hypothetical—until the moment they were staring at her through the backseat windows.

Margot opened the door to see an entire set of little girl clothes piled in the passenger seat like another kid had vanished and left them behind.

“Oh, let me just—” Lena grabbed them and threw them on the floor in the back to join the mess of toys, shoes, and take-out bags that lay under the kids' feet. “This is Scott, Cassie, and Bella—say hi to your Aunt Margot,” she said to the kids, smiling.

The girls, both in car seats in the middle row, smiled with all their teeth and waved, plastic bracelets jingling on small wrists. The boy, Scott, sat in the way back and did not wave or smile, just silently removed his earbuds and looked at Margot almost nervously, like he wasn't sure what to expect from her. Margot remembered him as an infant, born just a couple weeks before she had left

for college, which meant he was nearly twelve. His hair was a lighter blond than Lena's, but he had his mom's round cheeks and bright eyes.

"Are you married?" the youngest girl called.

Lena flapped at her daughter to hush.

"Thanks so much for the ride," Margot said.

"No problem! Where to?" Lena said, as they pulled out onto M-15.

Margot couldn't tell if it was awkward, or if she was just telling herself it was awkward. There was no mention of the Boat Bar, of their argument, of anything remotely negative. She found herself falling onto the familiar track of *Lena avoiding the obvious*—a song full of polite questions and giggles in the right places, now with the thuds of small feet kicking the back of her seat, and the sense of listening child ears.

"So Hannah gave you a ride home? Ugh, I'm so sorry," she said. "Can you believe she works for *The Citizen* now? After everything that family did you'd think she'd just leave."

They passed the marsh and Margot watched the top of the Trailblazer through the gloom.

"It was fine. She was just being nice."

Lena made a *psb* noise.

"Hey, Rob is the one who dug up the stuff in the marsh, right? Think I can talk to him while I'm in town? Maybe tomorrow sometime?"

"I'm sure that'll be fine. You'll have to ask him, though," she said, then pulled over because a firetruck was barreling towards them, lit up and shrieking. One of the little girls gasped excitedly as it passed and whirred into the distance.

"Well," Margot said. "A fire while it's raining."

Strangely, Lena laughed.

“Oh, there’s like a two percent chance that’s heading for an actual fire,” she said. “Most of the time they get called to revive someone. Y’know they’ve got those...those *you know what* kits and everything.”

“So, that kind of thing’s still going on, then?” Margot said, carefully. She wasn’t sure why she thought the problem would have gotten any better over the years, why overdose kits would no longer be necessary.

“Oh yeah, we see it on the news all the time, and you hear about stuff around town of course.” She shook her head. “Our tax dollars at work.”

It came out of Lena’s mouth but Margot heard Rob’s words. Rob who had not come to Andy’s funeral, who’d cracked jokes at Travis Thayer’s funeral six months earlier.

“Is Jack...” *Still dealing? Still using?* “Around? I thought I called him this morning, but you answered.”

Lena glanced at her. “Yeah, he left his phone at our place last time he was over, I keep meaning to get it back to him.”

“Tonight,” Margot said.

“What?”

“At the wedding.”

“Oh. Maybe.”

She was not acting like a person who was planning to be married in a few hours. Maybe that was just how people felt about a second marriage to the same person. Margot tried not to think too hard about what Lena answering Jack’s phone might mean. They’d never been the closest of friends, but a lot had changed.

They pulled into the Boat Bar parking lot. Lena looked up at the big wooden, anchor-shaped sign. A fog had rolled in with the rain, and the lake on the other side of the bar was blended with the trees above, impossible to spot the line of the shore.

The kicking on the back of her seat intensified, and one of the girls started whining.

Margot started to speak, but Lena made a complicated circle gesture with her hands, and Margot realized she wanted her to get out and come around to Lena's window, as though the kids would be unable to hear a conversation unless it was happening inside the car. She did, and Lena leaned as far as she could out her window without unbuckling, glancing back at the kids, who were clearly trying their best to listen in.

"About last night," she said softly, and Margot swallowed the urge to jump in and apologize before she could say anything else. "I meant what I said, I don't think you should interview the O'Neills. I mean, they've been through enough and I know for a fact they don't want people poking into their business."

Margot would have expected steel to accompany these words, but Lena still sounded cutesy, like she was talking to a child. She looked like she was talking to a child, too, her shoulders scrunched up under a big fuzzy sweater, her round face and cats eye glasses making her look more motherly than Margot thought was possible.

Lena glanced at the backseat and lowered her voice even more.

"And y'know, our Scott is, well, I wouldn't say they're *friends* exactly, but he knows Benji O'Neill from school, Christy's son? And Benji's real sweet but he's a little different. I just know that family is going to have enough to deal with in the next few years and God knows they don't need the whole country knowing about their lives."

"A little different?"

"Oh," she waved a hand vaguely. "I'm sure you'll understand if you spot him at the wedding."

She smiled abruptly. "You're coming tonight, right? Everyone's so excited to see you! Do you have something to wear? Not that you gotta go all out or anything, but y'know, it *is* a wedding."

Everyone was excited to see her? She looked down at her button-down and skirt. "I think I'm gonna need some help."

Lena left her in the parking lot with Amy's new phone number and a ringing in her ears. She wasn't sure what she'd thought would happen when she came back, and now that she was here it seemed insane to think she wouldn't run into old friends. But everything felt heavier than she'd been expecting, like something was looming over her head. The clouds, the rain, the anchor-shaped Boat Bar sign.

How did Jane do this? Maybe it was easier when the town was a stranger. Or maybe Margot was just not built for this job that she had never wanted. She swore, unlocked the rental car, and wished she had never left the safety of her editing booth.

The first floor of Rose Fenton's white colonial was a museum she had assembled herself. The museum had been there all Margot's life, next to the Methodist church on the edge of downtown, but she'd never had any reason or desire to venture inside. The house was huge, especially in comparison to the church next door, which was barely the size of the historian's garage, and weathered with age while the museum was pristine. It sat at the end of the cul-de-sac, backed up against the river and the forest that lay on the other side of it. A gray cat perched between a gauzy white curtain and a window pane, staring at Margot as she left her car and followed the manicured path to the front door.

If she'd thought to expect anything it would have been exactly as expected; lacy and moth-eaten, smelling like her grandmother's house. The word 'museum' was being used rather loosely. The exhibit in the front room looked more like a combination library and thrift store, the walls lined with books and a few glass cases full of trinkets and papers Margot didn't get a good look at as Rose led her through the house.

Rose herself was in her seventies, very prim and very loud, with lipstick a few shades too orange. Her Mary-Janes clacked on the wood floors (original, refurbished, she had explained to Margot) when she adjusted herself in the tiny vintage tea chairs. Her dainty clip-on earrings sparkled and swayed.

They sat in what Rose introduced as the Sun Room, though to Margot it looked more like a misused green house. It was raining in full force now, rippling the river that ran through Rose's backyard and plinking off the warped window panes. An overgrown garden lay on the other side of the sliding glass door.

Margot took a sip of tea that Rose had ready for her when she arrived, so strong it tasted almost metallic, like she'd dropped a handful of pennies in the pot to steep along with the leaves. She tried not to let it clank back onto the matching plate that sat too close to the audio recorder on the

narrow table between them. Sound pops were a bitch to edit out, though neither of them were currently speaking. Rose glanced at the little red recording light, but otherwise seemed at ease, and Margot swallowed a surge of anxiety. There was a reason this was Jane's job and not hers, a reason her job took place from the lonely comfort of her desk.

But they'd exchanged introductions and handshakes and sipped their tea. It was time for her to ask questions. She cleared her throat a few times and Rose blinked at her patiently.

"Well, thank you so much for meeting with me today," she said, and tried not to cringe at how awkward she sounded, but Rose just nodded. "So, to start off with, I want to jump right to the thing that really drew us to Cheneaux as a subject for this episode—the Hunter's Ghost. Both the legend and the real story behind it."

"Well," Rose sniffed and adjusted her posture. The delicate wrought iron chairs were as adorable as they were uncomfortable. "I don't know about any legends. To be honest, if I may, I was unsure about doing this interview in the first place. I listened to your program and wasn't entirely impressed with the attention paid to the...well the *supernatural*, I guess you'd say, and I just want to make it clear that as a historian I deal in truth and fact. So if it's legends you're after you're better off talking to one of the looneys in town. Believe me, there's plenty of 'em."

Margot nodded quickly and took a sip of the metallic tea to give herself time to figure out what to do. She set the cup back down very carefully.

"Understood," she said, and eyed the recorder, imagining Jane listening later and judging her lack of resolve. "In that case let's talk about the facts. Are there any solid details known about the Hunter? Or the man who has come to be known as the Hunter?"

If they used the interview, it would probably be narrated by Jane, but Margot found herself imitating Jane's 'interview voice' that she'd listened to thousands of hours of through her noise-cancelling headphones as she chopped interviews into a recognizable narrative. It was cool,

unaffected, not quite monotone, soothing enough to sleep to. Margot's version just sounded wooden.

“Yes, actually,” Rose said, and smiled sweetly, clip-ons swinging. Margot smiled back automatically, trying to keep up with the changes in atmosphere.

Rose shuffled through a pile of photo albums taking up most of the tea table, and pulled out a brown book that smelled like it had survived at least one house fire. She flipped to the back, humming tunelessly, and tapped a picture. Her manicured nail clicked against the plastic cover, half-covering the face of a black-and-white man.

“His name was Edgar Lehmbeck. He was about thirty-five when he died, though I can't find a definitive date of birth. He was a furniture maker by trade, was probably just in those woods hunting for sport or for food his family. He had seven children with his wife, Norma. He's got descendants still in town actually—Debbie Morris, who works at the library, and the Lowe family. You might have gone to school with their youngest son.”

She had. When she was eight or nine and already very familiar with the story, Brett Lowe at school had told Margot that everyone else was wrong about the Hunter, that actually you didn't have to call him to you at all, didn't have to stand in dark in front of a mirror and chant his name like you did to make other ghosts appear. This was because he could feel your mind, could sense when someone was thinking about him, and if you thought about him too much, he'd come find you and demand to be removed from your head. If you couldn't stop, he would remove your head entirely and sort through your brains himself, pick through your thoughts with his fingers. Of course the more Margot tried not to think about him the more she thought about him, would spend night after night staring at her bedroom window, every tree branch forming itself into half a man shuffling toward her.

But the Hunter had just been some guy, some furniture maker, and Margot realized that the little chants and fears she'd picked up on the playground had stayed with her for decades like a dormant

illness. There was nothing sinister about the picture of the stoic, old-fashioned-man's-man, broad and balding. He stood, unsmiling, in what looked like a woodworking shop. He wore bulky overalls and held a thin, intricate looking saw, one hand resting on a big cabinet with carved feet.

“Seven kids?” she said, watching the Lehmbeck's face like it might move.

“Yep. His wife was pregnant at the time of his death. Probably woulda had more if he'd lived, too.”

“Is this the only picture you have of him?”

Somehow two pictures of his mangled body had found their way onto the internet and into Jane's notes. There could be others.

Rose took a long sip of her tea like she was hoping Margot would give up and ask a different question. The cup clattered back onto the plate and the audio indicator spiked red.

“I have a couple more, but I'm afraid we'll have to go back inside, everything else is digital.”

Margot gathered up the recorder and they left the Sun Room, Rose's clacking shoes echoing through the kitchen and down a long hallway. The boundaries of the area meant to be seen by museum-goers became very clear as they left them behind. Pristine white paint became faded and chipped. Shining baseboards were suddenly smudged and dirty.

They entered a small, dusty office. One wall was covered in decorative plates, the other in rickety shelves full of more photo albums. Rose booted up an ancient box of a computer at a desk that overlooked the river. Margot looked out the window and watched the river swell at the edges, overtaking the grass on the banks. The rain was growing heavier and an old worry hit her like muscle memory—much longer and the dirt roads would be an undrive-able mess. Nothing was unpaved in Chicago, no washboard roads, no potholes so big you could bust a tire, no muddy tractor tracks to get trapped in.

“Now, you went to school with the youngest Kacy girl, didn't you?” Rose said from the desk.

"Yes, I did." Margot quit staring at the river and instead watched the computer struggle to handle Rose's login information. Rose waved away Margot's surprise.

"I figured you must've when you said you were from here. You look about the right age."

"Yes," Margot said, trying not to bristle at the implication of a connection between herself and Hannah.

Rose hummed again, watching colors swirl around the computer screen.

"You know much about the family?" she said, lightly.

"Not really. Hannah and I went to school together but were never close."

Margot knew what everyone knew: the Kacys owned the town. It probably wasn't even true, but when half the town's employment opportunities seemed to funnel back to them, it was a piece of local gossip that had stuck. They owned the town, and they had fired half of it during Margot's last year of high school. When the recession tore through Cheneaux like a storm, the Kacys had protected themselves and left everyone else out in the cold.

Prior to the recession, Hannah had been quiet but well-liked. She played the clarinet in band, was on the cross-country team, and though she wasn't one of popular girls, everyone still knew her name. She'd even been Homecoming Queen at one point, though Margot remembered how speechless and red-faced she'd been while accepting her plastic crown. Back then, Margot's only opinion of her was that she was a "good girl," the type to do her homework and smile when she was supposed to. The type Margot had never quite known what to say to.

After the effects of the recession caught up with the town, she had crept around school like a mouse, head down, books held protectively to her chest. The insults that followed her down the halls grew more intense, shifting from *spoiled princess* to *fucking bitch* as the recession rounded on six months and more and more Kacy employees found themselves out of work from the grocery store, the landscaping company, the massive farm, the ice-cream parlor, the car wash, and the car dealership that Margot's father had been promptly let go from after fifteen years.

Looking back, Hannah looked like every other high school girl, skinny and powerless in her ponytail and Converse sneakers, but at the time Margot, and everyone else, could only see the name Kacy and everything that meant, as though it hovered above her head. Everyone, it seemed, except Declan.

The computer finally made a waking-up noise and the screen turned white.

“Well, that Chuck Kacy seems to think he’s some sort of historian, himself,” Rose said. The white screen flickered. “Though of course all he’s interested in is his own family. If you listen to him, he’ll tell you that it was *his* ancestor, not Milton Cheneaux, who founded the town, which of course is just not true.”

She clicked a few times, shaking the mouse a little to get it to work. Margot swallowed, irrationally worried that Rose could somehow sense the schedule on her phone and know about her already-planned interview with Chuck to talk about exactly that. It was on Jane’s list, had been mentioned in the article—the disappearance of the ancestral Kacy home along with its patriarch.

“Now I’m not saying that Emmett Kacy wasn’t significant or didn’t do anything for the town, but Chuck shouldn’t be going around taking credit for anything else.”

“What did Emmett Kacy do?” Margot said, feeling that this question was expected. She glanced down to make sure the recorder was still blinking red.

“Oh, he was an entrepreneur, come up from Detroit around the same time as the town was being established. He just bought up a bunch of the land real cheap, started some of the farms that are still owned by the Kacys today. So maybe the town wouldn’t have flourished without his help, but he certainly didn’t found it.”

Margot was stuck for a moment on the word *flourished*, thinking of the sirens blaring earlier, the abandoned buildings and dead downtown.

“And he wasn’t all success here, not by any means. He tried to start a logging business but it never got off the ground. He built this over-the-top mansion out in the woods, way more than he

needed, and then just up and abandoned it when he went back to Detroit. Didn't even try to sell it or nothing. Well, Chuck will tell anyone who'll listen that the house *vanished*, but of course that's nuts. Kacy up and left that house to rot. Left a bunch of people out of work too. Guess it runs in the family."

She shook her head, still fiddling with the mouse.

"So, Kacy left the house and went back to Detroit? Are there records?"

"Well I don't have anything like that, but I'm sure Chuck would find something in the city if he tried to look. He just likes having his big ghost story. But houses, *mansions*, don't just vanish."

"Do you know where the ruins are?" Margot said.

"I don't, personally, but the house was built not too far into the woods off Deer Path road. I'm sure what's left of it is still around there, somewhere. There's pictures of it in the big white book all the way to the left, if you're interested. Sorry that this old thing can't go any faster."

"It's okay," Margot said, and scanned for the white book. She pulled it down and balanced it on the edge of the shelf. The pictures were labeled in small, neat handwriting Margot assumed belonged to Rose: *Emmett Kacy, 1848*, and *Kacy family home, 1850*, and *Kacy tree farm, 1951*.

Emmett Kacy and his family were uninteresting, nearly faceless in the way that old pictures always were. He was tall and balding, standing in front of what looked like a church with a slim woman and two unsmiling children at his side. The house, though, was as excessive as Rose had described. It was three, maybe four stories, with an enormous round window set high in its face. It looked delicate despite its size, with intricate bits of trim and lattice work dripping from it like vines.

The two Kacy children sat in the front yard on a massive stump, looking vaguely in the direction of the camera. Their feet were flung away from the stump and their faces were dull and serious, like whoever held the camera had just asked them to pretend they were having fun and weren't bored. One of them leaned up against a tall piece of wood that had not been cut off properly, like it was the back of a chair.

Of the living Kacys, Margot had only ever encountered Hannah, her snobby parents, and her older cousin, Chuck. Chuck Kacy ran some unspecified amount of the Kacy empire, including the ice cream parlor that Margot and Jack used to terrorize the summer that Lena and Amy had worked there, and the landscaping place where Rob worked after high school.

“Do you mind if I take pictures?”

“Go right ahead.”

Margot put the book back and wandered the small room while the computer made various clicks and groans as Rose tried to open folders. She examined the many plates, and peered closely at one depicting a pile of creepy children in nightcaps squashed into a single bed.

“Will you be at the Ackerman wedding this evening?” Rose said.

Her eyes were on her computer, glasses white in the reflection. Margot nodded. She didn’t need to ask how Rose knew Lena. It seemed that everyone in town knew Lena.

Rose raised her eyebrows.

“It should be lovely,” she said, words completely at odds with the look on her face.

Before Margot could figure out how to respond, Rose made a show of clicking on something.

“And, here we go.” She smiled vaguely, and gestured for Margot to come sit next to her on a low footstool. She pushed the mouse towards her and scooted her chair towards the window.

Margot set the recorder on the desk and scrolled through the images Rose had brought up in a folder labeled *Cheneaux, Lehmbek*. Some were unidentifiable, some were of various other members of the Lehmbek family, but there were two images of a living Edgar in addition to the one she’d seen out in the Sun Room—a group photo with a dozen other men, and a wedding photo of him and his wife, whose name Margot had already forgotten. And, of course, there were images of his corpse. Jane had gotten ahold of two, but there were six more in the file. Margot examined them closely, though the closer she looked, the dizzier she felt with hints of vertigo and hangover.

Rose watched the rain fill up the riverbank, hands folded in her lap.

“Mostly keep this place open on my own dime these days,” she said, unprompted. “Applied for city funding awhile back but, y’know, things are real tight and I understand that. It’s important to me though, and it’s important to the people around town.”

Margot couldn’t tell whether she was uncomfortable with silence, or if this was an attempt to change the subject away from the gory pictures. Black and white made them somehow more horrible, the blood black like tar. A picture of Lehmbbeck’s severed arm had also caught a man in the background leaning over, hand braced against a tree like he was going to be sick.

“Is there a lot of local interest in the history of the town?” Margot said, zooming in on the arm.

“Oh sure, I get emails all the time, asking about a whole range of things. The people here really care about their history.”

Margot had listened to interviews from dozens of small towns. People might tell you they cared about their history, but usually what they actually cared about was their culture, their traditions and perceived legacy. Periodically, they also cared about each other.

“Could I take pictures of these as well?” Margot said. She could ask Rose to email them to her but Jane had stressed the importance of getting everything you needed while you had the subject in person. There was no telling how minds would change or what they would decide to regret.

“Oh, go right ahead,” Rose said, nodding and examining her thick fake nails, still angled towards the window.

Margot scrolled back through the images and snapped pictures. She imagined Jane narrating the images for listeners, either at the start of the episode for a good hook, or sometime during the middle for an exciting injection of violence.

The Hunter’s head is almost completely separated from his body, she would say. It hangs by only a few ligaments, and though the rest of the body faces upwards, the head faces the ground. The left arm is detached and was found about a meter away. The right arm, still attached, is clearly broken and arranged on top of a rifle, presumably Edgar Lehmbbeck’s. The image is extremely graphic, and I can’t help but wonder how a person in 1919, a person

without a modern, heightened tolerance for violence would have felt upon seeing it. The police report has survived the ages, likely because of the strangeness of the death, and it states that the rifle had gone unfired. To me, this suggests that whoever—or whatever—killed him came on so quickly he had no time to pull the trigger.

Margot scrolled to a closeup of the heart lying in a pile of leaves and snapped a picture, angling her phone to avoid too much of a glare. Her throat was suddenly warm with nausea and she took a deep breath, looking at the ringed desk top. She reached the end of the Lehmbeck pictures and tucked her phone away.

Rose turned back to her when she cleared her throat.

“In my own research I wasn’t able to find anything beyond the brief police report. Do you have any knowledge—or even have any speculations—about the cause of Mr. Lehmbeck’s death?”

Rose arranged her hands neatly in her lap.

“Oh, sure. I’ve heard all the stories, some people will believe just about anything—that some kind of monster got him, or a ghost, or a werewolf or what have you. Someone once told me, sure as anything, that he’d been picked up by a UFO and dropped out of the sky when they were done with him. Someone else told me that it was magic, that he had some kind of spell or curse put on him. They’re all looneys.”

Margot had heard these stories too, but the police report was unhelpful when it came to details on the wounds themselves. They didn’t mention anything that looked like teeth or claw marks, though perhaps no one had been willing to examine the body too closely.

“Any theories of your own?” Margot said.

“I think it was most likely a mountain lion attack. I can’t think of what else could...do that kind of damage,” she said, delicately.

“Are there mountain lions this far south?”

Margot already knew the answer to this: no, there were not. The handful that still roamed Michigan were in the Porcupine mountains, three hundred miles and a Great Lake away.

Rose hummed and shrugged. “Suppose there must have been,” she said.

Back in the front exhibit room, the audio recorder returned to her bag, Margot made a polite show of peering down at all the glass cases while Rose explained some of the major items, Rose smiled after each historical anecdote, a bit of orange lipstick on her teeth.

The collection mostly consisted of old maps and pictures, with a glass case on one side of the room full of wooden toys, old glass milk bottles, jewelry, memorabilia from various wars, and an enormous camera. In the middle of the room stood the clear favorite: a Union soldier uniform, carefully maintained over a plastic mannequin whose face had been badly painted to resemble a human man.

There was a little bookshelf by the door under a sign that said *Gift Shop*, and Margot hovered by it, wondering if she could make some kind of monetary contribution out of politeness. A basket of what looked like homemade postcards sat on top of the shelf, but otherwise the ‘gift shop’ consisted entirely of books, their covers facing outwards. One at the bottom caught her eye. It was thin, and stapled together by hand, with a blurry photo of an empty dirt road at dusk as both the front and back cover. *Tales from Blood Road*, by David Westfall.

“Is that...?”

Rose pursed her lips. “Yes, that is the work of our own Deputy Westfall. Entirely fiction, of course. Though he does think of himself as some kind of journalist.”

Margot picked it up. Copyright date: 1999. Price: three dollars. She flipped to the back and looked at the author photo, Westfall blinking up owlishly at her, younger than when she’d known him, still too bearded and gaunt to look like a cop.

“Now,” Rose said, and Margot turned around. “I’m sure you have a lot of fans and I’m sure you do good work, but I still think you should think about doing a little more research into these things.”

She pressed another book into Margot's hands, a glossy hardcover. "This is everything I've compiled on the town's founding. This is *real* history."

Margot made herself smile. "How much for both?"

After she paid for the books and told Rose she'd be in touch with the details about the finished episode, the gray cat followed her to the door, jumped back into the window to watch as she left.

She was halfway down M-15 before she realized that, despite all her nervous scrolling through her notes, she had completely forgotten to ask about Blood Road.

Back at the motel Margot was met with a clean room and a passive aggressive, typed note saying *We want to remind all guests in No Smoking rooms that there are designated Smoking rooms available upon request.*

She flopped onto the bed and propped herself up by the elbows. The two books and the audio recorder were arranged on the comforter in front of her. She had a collection of facts and fiction, a vanished house from 1897, a flashcard full of most likely pointless local history, a phone full of horrifying pictures, and an empty Trailblazer at the edge of a marsh.

She watched her phone, sitting face-up on the bed and willed it to start ringing, for Jane to call and say *actually, forget Cheneaux, forget the whole story, that grocery store in Illinois is haunted after all*—to say that Margot could return to Chicago and all the things she'd left behind. Plants, mostly. A one-bedroom in Uptown, a windowsill full of struggling succulents, a collection of ticket stubs to movies, museums, parks that sat in a candy bowl on her dresser and made her feel cultured even though she knew she wasn't. She did not spend her time in these places looking at the things she was supposed to look at. Instead she people-watched, tried to figure out if they were actually feeling something when they looked at a painting of some buffalo from 1800, or if they were all just there pretending for one another.

She grabbed the pack of gummy worms out of her purse, chewed one slowly. She had not eaten yet today. The sugar turned her stomach and she threw the rest of the pack out of reach and lay face-down on the bed, trying to persuade gravity to stay put.

She'd never heard of Emmett Kacy before Jane's Cheneaux research. Growing up there were always rumors about mysterious disappearances, but local legends felt more like ghost stories than anything based in reality. Margot turned onto her back, and the ceiling waned at her as her stomach and vertigo settled down.

She would never say it to Jane, but Margot did not like mysteries. They were always the same—the initial taste, the devouring of facts and clues, and gnawing hunger when there was nothing left, when the solution had been revealed like a disappointing after-dinner mint. Even worse were the ones that kept feeding her, that had no solution. These were the ones that turned on her, and before she knew it she was the one who'd been swallowed. It happened after the Trailblazer had landed in the marsh, and again when she first started at the podcast, and again and again until she learned. Now she just told herself she did not like mysteries.

The ceiling stopped spinning and she needed to get out of this room. She sat up and shoved everything back in her bag.

Towards the bottom of the spiral of her parents' marriage the summer before senior year, Margot's dad had insisted on taking her fishing on Ashton Lake. At the time she thought this was some kind of attempt at forcing a father-daughter bonding experience that had never once occurred naturally, but as soon as they'd pushed off from the dock next to the Boat Bar and she could not escape, it became clear that the true purpose of their outing was to force her to listen to his complaints about her mom, different versions of, "She doesn't hear me. Twenty years together and she doesn't hear a goddam thing I say," for an excruciating two hours.

Margot had no idea how to catch a fish. Neither did her dad. Their poles dangled uselessly over the side of the boat, tempting nothing but seaweed. The sun was hot and they had not brought enough sunscreen. The surface of the lake shimmered like a rippling piece of tin. Margot was sweating and too angry for words, wishing she could tip the boat over and scatter everything in it—the poles, the tin of bait, the embarrassingly optimistic cooler, the moldy life jackets, her father, herself. But flipping the boat would prolong the experience, and all she wanted was to get back on dry land and out of hearing range of her dad.

She didn't like being pulled on like this, didn't want to encourage the tug-of-war. He was talking like she was already on his side, when all she wanted was to abandon the situation completely. Half of her, the part that scowled at her fishing pole under the burning sun, wished they would just get on with it already, because their home felt like a rigged trap, primed to go off under the slightest pressure. There was always something—dishes, bills, too-friendly coworkers—and she was tired of being another thing for them to fight about—their daughter, whose grades were mediocre, whose future was a black hole, whose troublemaking was always easy to blame on one another.

The other half of her, her child-self who just wanted to run her fingers through the water and listen to her dad's voice no matter what he was saying, sat with a sick clump of dread in her stomach. She kept thinking about when she was little and they'd taken her to Sleeping Bear State

Park and held her small hands as they tried to run down the steepest sand dune. They'd all fallen, tumbled away from each other and scraped their knees and elbows in the burning sand, and when Margot had sat up and looked around they were both doubled over, laughing at the absurdity of one another.

They were probably fighting, even then, but sometimes they held her hands and sometimes they laughed.

Margot wriggled the fishing pole, pretending something had bit before she realized that her dad was not looking at her and was not waiting for any kind of reaction to his stream of complaints. But then the pole shivered and Margot sat up straight. Pretending she'd caught a fish might actually have led her to catching a fish. Maybe that was all fishing was. Bait wasn't bits of worm stuck through a hook, it was belief.

She reeled it in slowly, no idea if this was the correct course of action.

The thing was pulling, but Margot pulled harder, reeled the line in slowly until it emerged from the water, a shimmery mass, flopping feebly. Her dad started in again, this time about some guy that her mom worked with, and Margot said nothing as she pulled in the line and reached out to grab the fish, weirdly excited at her small success.

But she turned it over in her hands and froze.

She didn't know enough about fish to know what kind it was. It was a little smaller than her hand, green-gray in color, absolutely ordinary except for its head. The fish had two faces. One on the left side and one on the right. The gills on the left fluttered, the mouth popped. The one on the right stayed completely still, mouth gaping, eyes glittering. Her body went numb with fear and a noise made its way out of her mouth, a small, choked squeak. She blinked down at the thing.

"Did ya get something?"

She tossed it back in and swallowed over and over, throat tight.

"Just more seaweed."

She wiped her hands on her legs, accidentally spreading out a shimmery, slimy residue over her bare skin. She shivered.

She'd never thought about the water before. The lakes had always just sat there, passively, to be driven over, boated on, swam in. They were coveted, lake front properties sitting empty because they were more expensive than the people of Cheneaux could ever afford.

A bump in the water drifted lazily around the boat. More bumps appeared.

"Seems like there's more seaweed than usual," her dad said, like he had any idea what the usual amount of seaweed was. "Is it called seaweed in freshwater? Gotta look that up when we get home."

A fly buzzed around her head, and her head kept buzzing even after it left. She looked around slowly. Something was in the boat with them. She couldn't see it, but it was there, in the corner of her eye, just out of sight.

"I want to go home," she said, gripping the pole very tightly.

She didn't know if it was because her dad was getting tired and bored or because he'd felt it too, but he turned on the motor.

"Do you feel that?" she said as they headed towards the dock.

Her dad swallowed and glanced around. It was a beautiful day and there wasn't a single other boat on the water.

"Feel what?" he said, and sped up.

They parked on the side of the road with the other cars, and Declan and Margot followed Andy and Christy through the woods to the sledding hill.

Margot's snow pants were purple and Declan's were blue. Andy's were plain black, because he was seventeen and too old for fun colors. Christy said snow pants made her look fat, so she was shivering in her jeans. Andy was usually the one to shuttle them around, and Declan wasn't really sure why Christy was here as well when she clearly didn't want to be. There had been hushed and angry words between the two of them and their mom in the kitchen before they left, while Declan was still in his and Andy's room struggling into his too-small snow pants.

They hadn't spoken in the car. Declan tried to fill the silence by telling them about Jupiter's moons, which they were learning about in science, even though he knew no one was listening to him. Margot had looked between Christy and Andy, not asking what she clearly wanted to ask. Even if she did, Declan wasn't sure what he would say.

The night before Declan had sat on the bottom bunk doing homework and listening to The Who, when the bedroom window had lit up with Andy's headlights. The front door opened, closed, and a moment later his dad was shouting. Declan paused the tape player but all he could hear was the tone of their voices and random things like *who* and *where* and *none of your business*.

Margot bobbed along in front of him as they walked single-file along the path to the sledding hill. She'd shoved all her hair under a floppy blue hat, but a few red strands had fallen out and floated around her. There were other kids at the hill; there always were when the snow was good. It was tall and not too far into the woods. You just had to remember to bail out of your sled at the bottom before you shot into the woods and hit a tree. There were rumors that a kid had died that way, but Declan wasn't sure he believed them.

Christy complained about the cold, but the surface of the moon was minus 260 degrees, Fahrenheit, which was cold enough to freeze a person solid, which made twenty-three degrees feel warm and comfortable—

“I’m in your science class,” Margot said, half turning back to look at him. “I know all this. Who are you talking to?”

This made Andy laugh, and his laugh made the visible parts of Margot’s face turn red.

Andy shook his head and swatted at the puffball on top of her hat. She giggled and Christy rolled her eyes.

“Sorry,” Declan said, embarrassment curling in his stomach.

Margot shrugged, still looking at Andy. A few kids down the hill took flying leaps over the side and laughed as they careened down the icy snow. Declan smiled, took a few steps back to get ready to do the same, but when he glanced at Margot, she had her thinking face on, eyes darting between Andy and Christy and the sledding kids. Declan could see her thoughts like they were floating over her head—they were twelve now, too old to be doing kid stuff, and cool teenagers like Andy would never really like her if she didn’t act more mature.

“Come on,” Declan said, before she could talk herself into some new, anti-sledding attitude.

Margot nodded vaguely and took a few steps back.

They lined up their sleds and took running starts, leaping on them at the same time. They were the round kind, with hard plastic bottoms that you could never keep aimed straight. The jump seemed to have knocked Margot out of her angst, because she screamed and laughed as they flew down the hill. Declan grinned and hunched around his knees as his sled spun in a circle.

They tumbled off at the bottom, a few feet from the tree line, Declan laughing in the stupid, embarrassing way that made his voice crack. He’d lost a mitten and Margot had lost her hat. Her hair was a mess around her shoulders, was the brightest thing in the woods. She’d always kept it long, but where before it had been ratty and usually swinging behind her in a ponytail, lately it was shiny and

smelled nice, and Declan felt weird for looking so much but he couldn't seem to stop. She grinned over at him and he looked away quickly.

Christy and Andy were still at the top of the hill ignoring each other. Andy held a sled loosely in his hands but didn't seem to plan on using it. Christy wrapped her arms around herself and kicked at a clump of ice.

"Let's go," Declan said, heading for the side of the hill to walk back up. Margot tried her best to race him, resorting to pushing him out of the way with a cackle when she couldn't beat him fairly. Her hair was already full of snow.

A week ago had been the Winter Formal. The dance had been held in the middle school cafeteria, and Margot had been determined to act like she was being forced to go, and ignored Declan's repeated reminders that the dance was completely optional. They sat on the folding chairs that lined the room and Margot giggled about how dumb it all was, even as she looked around at the snowflake decorations, eyes shimmering. Declan's too-small shoes pinched his feet, and his dad had had to punch an extra hole in an old belt to get his dress pants to stay up, but there was something infectious about it all. It didn't matter if it was dumb, like Margot said. He looked around at other kids hopping up and down to the Cotton-eyed Joe and thought maybe that was the point.

Margot had bobbed along to some of the songs but neither of them had actually danced, and as he followed her back up the sledding hill, Declan wondered if she would have forgiven him if he would have asked.

When they reached the top, Andy and Christy had stopped ignoring each other and started arguing.

"Well, you should have worn actual winter clothes. You knew we'd be coming out here."

"Actually, I thought I'd be warm at home all day, but instead you made me come out here."

Andy shrugged. "They wanted to go sledding."

Margot tossed her hair around and frowned at her sled. Declan knew she hated when people talked about her like she wasn't there.

“Why can't you just do what Mom and Dad want you to do, so I don't have to get dragged out in the freakin' woods?” Christy said. “Like how hard is it to just come home on time, and not be a total burn out?”

“Believe me, I didn't want you here either. I swear to God, you're the most annoying person I know.”

Declan ran and jumped again, and imagined that he was sledding down a crater on the surface of the moon, just him and Margot and no one else for hundreds of thousands of miles of frozen emptiness. He could hear her sliding down behind him, but she didn't scream this time. When they reached the bottom, Margot tumbled out of her sled but Declan kept going, trying his best to steer around the trees.

She called his name as he shot farther into the woods and out of sight. The snow was icy and packed tight, not enough resistance for the sled to come to a stop on its own. He leaned around trees as fast as he could, scraping his shoulders and whacking his knees and spinning in circles. The flat landscape started sloping downwards again, and he barreled straight towards a wide tree trunk. He leaned sharply and went skidding across the ground, the sled continuing on without him.

He sat in the snow, a chunk of ice sneaking into his boot and soaking through his sock. After a cold moment, he flopped onto his back and looked up at the white sky, the frozen branches, the slow drift of snow around him. They shouldn't have come here today. No one but him really wanted to, he saw that now, and he was annoyed with himself for not noticing it sooner, and annoyed with Margot for going along with it when she clearly didn't want to, and annoyed with Andy because his friends weren't even that cool and it was dumb that he was pissing off their parents just to hang out with them, and annoyed with Christy for making everything worse with her pointless complaining.

Now that he was still, Christy was right, it was too cold, sharp and hungry against his face like a void. Might as well be the moon after all. He spread out his limbs and wriggled them deeper into the snow, wondering what it would be like to freeze to death out here. The chunk of ice in his boot felt like it was eating his foot. Maybe that's what it would be like, being eaten by the cold. For a moment it felt like he was sinking deeper into the snow, like he might be swallowed. Maybe that's what it would be like, being absorbed by the forest and becoming something else.

Declan got up gingerly and turned around. He could just make out Margot's bright colors where she sat in the snow back at the base of the hill. He tried to wave but she didn't see him. He followed after his sled, which had finally come to a stop between two skinny tree trunks. His boots crunched through a thin layer of ice over the untouched snow. He grabbed the sled's handle, and when he looked up, there was a flash of light between the trees. He blinked and looked closer. The light flashed again.

It was a window. He edged around the skinny trees, crunched towards it to get a better look. The trees grew denser and wider, growing practically on top of each other, but as he crashed through the icy underbrush it came more fully into view—a house. It was tall and way too fancy to be in Cheneaux, with a huge round window on the face, and lots of narrow little balconies and overhangs and other complicated bits that made it look like a huge, melting cake.

He got closer, close enough to see teardrop shingles the color of pudding, and the large, shiny black front door. The tallest part of the house was a hexagonal tower sitting to the left of the front door, the roof of which came to a point and was topped with a weather vane. There was no car or driveway, not even a path. Snow piled right up to the front porch, and frozen, leafless vines twisted up around the corners of the house and burst out of windows like long, gray tongues. A large, flat tree stump sat in the front, just past what looked like a rusted black gate.

“Where are you going?”

Declan spun around. Margot was struggling around the trees and through the snow to follow him, and her puffy snow pants sliding together so loudly he didn't know how he hadn't heard her coming.

"There's nothing that way but back to the road," she said, pointing in the direction he'd been heading. He looked back around. The house was gone. Even the tree stump was gone. He rubbed his cold, un-mittened hand over his eyes, as though they were the problem. He was very cold, and felt a sudden bout of dizziness. He had the bizarre feeling that the house was still there, somehow, that even if he had just invented it, it had found its way out of his mind and into the real world.

"Do you see anything over there?" he said. He had to be sure.

Margot raised an eyebrow. "Where?"

There was nothing. Just snow and trees, their bare, frozen branches shimmering in the sun.

"Thought I saw something," he said. "Never mind."

He followed Margot back the way they'd come. He'd gone farther than he realized, it took them longer than he thought it would, and all sound of the sledding hill was gone until they emerged at the tree line.

"Are they okay?" Margot said quietly, though Andy and Christy were not in earshot.

Declan shrugged. "They're fine," he said. They trudged up the hill, dragging sleds behind them. "They'll be fine."

Margot didn't particularly like the Coney Island in town; they'd refused to let her interview for a waitress position back in high school when she'd been desperate for a job, any job, but she didn't have a lot of options. The restaurants in town were pretty much limited to take-out pizza, McDonalds, a kitschy seafood place, and the Coney.

She sat at a booth, drank more coffee, picked apart a BLT, and tried not to get catsup on her shirt. The two books from Rose Fenton sat in front of her. She didn't let her eyes wander, didn't want to tempt any unnecessary interactions, though she could feel curious eyes.

Back in high school, before the failed job attempt, she would come here alone sometimes and watch the traffic out the front window on fall afternoons when her stomach was lit up with butterflies that just wanted her to get out, get out, get out. Now she sat with her back to the window. She'd gotten out a long time ago, didn't need to watch cars speed past or wonder what the air smelled like in faraway cities.

A chunk of lettuce fell onto her open notebook and she wiped it away.

Interviews, she wrote.

Rose Fenton. She wasn't far enough away from the interview yet to know exactly what she'd learned from Rose.

Rob Ackerman. Rob had dug out the lost parts of the Trailblazer. He'd never been Declan's biggest fan, but he was probably enjoying the attention that had accompanied the discovery.

O'Neill family? She couldn't give up on them just because Lena had told her to.

Cheneaux PD, if possible. The Sheriff probably still hated her, probably still hated everyone, but Westfall had always been nice. And if she read his stupid book maybe they'd have something more to talk about.

Chuck Kacy. His interview was already set up for the next day. Strangely he'd asked to meet her for a game of tennis, apparently under the impression, like Lena's friend, that Margot had been on

the tennis team. She didn't know much about Chuck Kacy. Margot had encountered him a handful of times in high school when she'd gone to visit Lena at her ice cream parlor job. He was distant and aloof towards his employees, mostly giggling high school girls who had no problem rolling their eyes at his attitude and imitating him behind his back.

Hannah Kacy? As painful as it was to admit, Hannah was a reporter and she was Declan's ex-girlfriend. It was stupid and unrealistic to assume she wouldn't be helpful. Except Margot's stomach clenched with the memory of the previous night, and she thought maybe she'd rather be stupid and unrealistic than attempt to talk to Hannah again.

She took a frustrated bite of her deconstructed sandwich. Somehow, in all the anxiety over returning to Cheneaux it had not occurred to her that she, Margot, would end up being the worst part. It was like she'd crossed over the county boarder and regressed back to her messy, teenaged self, wild and angsty and so excited to hate anyone who looked at her sideways.

Back in school, Hannah had been all the things Margot would never be: tall, rich, well-spoken, effortlessly poised. Throw Declan into the mix and it had been inevitable that Margot would hate her, that they would hate each other. She hadn't thought much about Hannah since leaving town, hadn't expected the tension between them to still be quite so thick.

Wait, Margot, she'd said in the car, like she wanted to actually say something, instead of just staring at her in the dark like some tall, blonde cryptid.

The old waitress, possibly the woman who'd rejected her interview plea, refilled Margot's coffee.

"Anything else?"

She had never noticed the Michigan accent until she left and came back. Now it hit her in full force.

"No, thank you," she said, trying not to sound so clipped and irritable, trying to find her way back to the person she'd spent the last twelve years creating in Chicago.

“You in town for graduation?” she said. Margot had no idea if she was asking because she recognized her, or because she didn’t.

“Ackerman wedding,” she said, because it was easier than attempting to explain the truth.

The waitress just nodded vaguely and moved along, and Margot returned to her mess of a sandwich and her mess of a notebook.

She crossed out the question mark at the end of Hannah Kacy’s name.

Jane had not given her a lot to go on. The notes she’d shared were long, but when all the myth and legend was stripped away, the facts were pretty weak. Margot listed them under her list of potential interviews and leaned back against the cracked booth seat, feeling shriveled in the face of them.

Declan O’Neill missing under mysterious circumstances - 2009

Edgar Lehmebeck missing then found dead under mysterious circumstances - 1919

Emmett Kacy missing under mysterious circumstances - 1897

Kacy mansion vanished - 1897

‘Sightings’ of the Hunter’s Ghost, particularly on Blood Road - unknown to present

She was supposed to be looking for anything out of the ordinary, anything interesting, but all she saw were separate instances that were not enough to build a narrative on, and a string of ghost sightings that were no different from what you’d find in just about any small town. Even as she tapped her pen and glared at the page for not offering up something more substantial, the memory of the fish bit at her. She’d convinced herself soon after it had happened that it had all been in her head, that maybe the fish had an extra eye or something, but not two faces, nothing so dramatic to warrant the intensity of her dread. But even after so long she could not let it go.

There were a dozen campfire stories she could think of as well, but it was impossible to know if any of them were grounded in fact. She rubbed her eyes, remembered too late that she’d made an

effort to put on eyeliner that morning and swore under her breath at the black smudges on her palms.

She flipped a page and made another, hesitant list. Overdoses, all the ones she could remember, everyone she'd ever known or heard about. She started with *Andy O'Neill*. It was not something Jane would care much about, was not supernatural or even particularly interesting, but maybe there was an angle there, something that could tie this mess of a story together.

That's like, literally exploitation, Lena had said.

She stopped in the middle of *Kyle Stanton*. Crossed out the whole thing. Rubbed a hand over her face in frustration—fuck the eyeliner. Maybe if she left right now she could just drive back to Chicago, return the rental car at another drop off location. She hadn't left a key for anyone to water her plants. Maybe she'd left the oven on. Maybe she'd forgotten to pay her bills. Maybe if she didn't get out of here, she would set herself on fire.

She took a big bite of the BLT and told herself to stop being so dramatic. Back in Chicago she had tried to explain that the “personal connection” Jane had been so excited about was not, in fact, going to help her put a story together, but instead was very much going to get in the way of her doing any work at all. But she was already here. It was already happening.

She finished the sandwich quickly and scooped up the books and notebook. In the car she flipped through her phone and dialed Amy's new number.

“Hello?”

“Amy? It's Margot.”

“Oh. Hi.”

Margot couldn't interpret her tone of voice.

A man's voice was in the background.

“Who is it? Hey? Gonzgo—”

Amy took the phone away from her mouth to tell the voice to shush.

“What’s up?” she said to Margot.

Amy hadn’t been Amy Gonzalez for years. Who would still be calling her Gonzo?

“Um. Can I ask a favor? I don’t have anything to wear to the wedding. Lena already vetoed my work clothes.”

Amy sighed.

“She didn’t actually invite you until last night, did she?”

“Nope. But now I’m expected to be there so…help a girl out?”

Things had always been a little easier with Amy. She was not as dramatic as Lena, not as quiet as Fawn, and communication had never been a barrier between the two of them. And yet, they’d never been particularly close. Maybe it was *too* easy. Maybe Margot required some kind of unmanageable complication to all of her relationships. Or maybe Amy had just always held her at arm’s length.

“Yeah, no worries, I got you,” Amy said. Last night’s bafflement at Margot’s reappearance had faded to resignation. “I meant to call you, actually.”

“Yeah?”

Amy’s silence was hesitant. She took a breath, and when she spoke next it was in her old student council voice, peppy and higher-pitched than normal.

“There are some things I think we should talk about, but obviously today is not ideal, with the wedding and all, so why don’t you stop by, or give me a call back later? Just sometime before you leave for Chicago? And as for the dress, why don’t we meet at the community center in an hour?”

Margot swallowed heavily, wondering if these *things they needed to talk about* were Declan-related or Margot-related. Amy had always been able to deliver a fantastic lecture when she wanted to, and she’d had twelve years to ruminate on the things Margot had done wrong.

“An hour. Alright. Thanks, Amy.”

Which left Margot with an hour to herself. An hour alone with her rental car, her notebook, and the Trailblazer at the edge of her mind.

She shook her head and started the car. With nowhere to go and no desire to return to the motel, she headed automatically for her parents' old house. It was still raining, and the dirt roads were starting to soften and run with mud. She passed a cornfield on the other side of a thin line of trees separating it from the road. To one side of the field lay the remains of a collapsed deer blind, now just a pile of rotting wood and a few two-by-fours that swayed where they were still attached to the tree. A large, shiny black truck kept her company along the backroads, sailing easily over the potholes that made her little car rumble and groan.

The black truck slowed down as she pulled into her old driveway, then sped away.

While packing her bags in Chicago and stressing about the next few days in this cursed town, an image kept materializing: standing cross-armed and brooding in front of her childhood home, perhaps watched suspiciously by the current occupants as she silently judged what they'd done with the place. But there were no current occupants. There were several peeling papers attached to the door and a half-rotted mailbox by the road that still said *Hill*. The house's emptiness made the whole image much less interesting, but she acted it out anyway, getting out, shuffling her way through the uncut grass to stand in the front yard and survey the damage. They'd always had a mold problem, and now the thick black and green moss that her father had battled every spring had spread over the entire roof. The once white siding was now gray and brown, and leafy trees had taken over the left side of the house, completely obscuring the windows.

She had not been around when the house was seized, hadn't even been present for the official end of her parents' marriage. She'd taken off for Chicago as soon as her financial aid had been approved and she'd been allowed to move into the University of Chicago dorms, barely saying goodbye. She told herself it wouldn't feel as bad that way. It would be a clean break.

Now that she was here she didn't know what she felt. She thought she might not feel anything. It was just a house, barely looked like the one she'd grown up in. The rain gathered in her hair and darkened the red to muddy auburn. It dripped into her eyes, soaked through her thin button-down

in seconds. She headed back and attempted to dry off in the car, annoyed at herself for getting out in the first place.

Her mom had always hated it here. The house was close enough to the trailer park to bring down the property value, a fact she'd used as ammunition against everyone who lived there, particularly Margot's friends. Margot always wanted to remind her of the few years she had lived there, too, before she had gotten married, but when her dad beat her to the punch she found it unnecessarily cruel. She hated the transparent delight he took in tearing down whatever her mom said, even when she hated whatever her mom had said just as much.

She wrung out her hair onto the car floor, wishing she would have brought an umbrella so she could walk around the property. She couldn't see it from the front, but beyond the small backyard was a bench that sat a few feet into the woods, and beyond the bench was a narrow path. If she hiked back there and took that path it would lead her to the power lines, and if she followed the power lines they would lead her to the O'Neill's house, the trailer at the very edge of the park. Declan and Andy's bedroom window faced the woods, so all Margot ever had to do was sneak up and knock on the glass and Declan would appear.

Halfway in between was the transmission tower under which they had buried the marbles. Andy had helped them dig the hole that first time, and it got easier every time after that. Declan had insisted on burying them, as though they'd amassed a treasure that would surely be stolen if not properly hidden. Margot found it ridiculous but, as always, complied.

Margot had learned three things from Andy O'Neill: how to swim, how to swear, and how to deal with a crush. His favorite thing to say was "fuck muffins," which had always made her laugh and which still found its way out of her mouth when she stubbed her toe or hit her knee on the coffee table. He taught both of them how to swim when they were seven, the summer after they'd met, and for years she'd had a sweet but aching crush on him, which faded as they grew up and she felt awkward about how much Declan was starting to look like him.

It had been all she could think about at Andy's funeral. How much the two of them looked alike, same gangly limbs, round eyes, and nervous energy. Rob had once pointed to this resemblance as some kind of proof that Declan must have gone down the same path as his brother, that if his family just looked hard enough they'd dig him out of some drug den somewhere on the other side of the state.

Margot's phone rang. She took a deep breath and answered.

"Hey."

"Hey, how's it going? How's the town?" It was Jane.

Margot watched the rain fall in a stream off the roof of her old house.

"Fine. It's fine."

"How was the interview? Any updates on the O'Neill boy?"

Margot cleared her throat and reached for her notebook, trying to reign herself in. She was here for a reason.

"No, um. Not that I've heard." She cleared her throat. She could almost feel the presence of the bench on the other side of the house, just out of sight. "Hey, Jane? I knew him. O'Neill."

"You knew him?"

"Yeah. Pretty well, actually." It had been too bright out the day they sat on the bench together, surveying the woods, and he kept squinting at her from under the curly mop of his hair. "Sorry, I'm not sure why I didn't say anything."

She hadn't said anything because she had never figured out how to categorize their relationship in her own head, and she did not want to try to do so out loud.

"That's okay." Jane sounded confused. Margot blinked and tried to shake it all away from her.

"Sorry," she said again. "I just...keep thinking about it."

Jane was quiet for a moment. Margot was hot suddenly. The clouds rolled and rippled above and she felt like she was underwater, under an endless current over which she had no control.

“The radio producer part of me wants to encourage you to follow those thoughts and include more of a personal thread here, but the friend part of me wants to make sure you’re alright. If there’s anything you’re uncomfortable pursuing here, we can leave it out. This is your story. It’s in your hands.”

“Thanks,” she said, and quickly moved on to the pictures she’d gotten from the historian.

Jane got excited when she described the Kacy House.

“That’s something you can follow up on with the other guy. It’s his ancestor, right? Perfect.”

“Yep. That’s about it for now. Got roped into going to an old friend’s wedding. At the trailer park community center, of all places,” she said, and immediately hated herself when Jane laughed. Lena’s face popped into her head. *Please don’t*, she’d said, when Margot had tried to pay for their drinks.

“Well, good luck with *that*,” Jane said. “As for the rest of it...why don’t we set the O’Neill stuff aside for now, especially if there’s nothing new on that, and try to focus on finding out more about this house, okay?”

“Sure,” Margot said. “Alright.”

Amy brought Margot a wrap dress in green, and Margot was too grateful to complain about it, even though green fabric plus red hair made her look like a god damn Christmas tree. She tried to linger in Amy's presence to see if she would tell her anything else about what she'd said on the phone, but Amy had disappeared to go do bridesmaid things after first proclaiming Margot "beautiful!" then re-evaluating and downgrading to "yeah, you look nice, you're ready."

She tried to fluff the ponytail crease out of her rain-damp hair in the club house bathroom but all it did was frizz up the whole mess. She gave up and tied it back up again, examining in the mirror the makeup job Amy had inflicted upon her, which made the eyes that a guy had once called 'buggy' bug out even more.

Margot planted herself near the enormous duck mural that decorated one wall of the community center, and waited for things to get started, secretly sucking on a gummy worm as she people-watched and tried to ignore her intense discomfort. The center reminded her of a school cafeteria, gray, low-ceilinged, with long mis-matched tables and cracked tile floors. Declan's dad had once tried to teach his children and Margot how to play Euchre there. None of them had the patience, and Margot had been too distracted by the ducks to pay much attention.

Someone had attempted to cover the bulletin boards with green and silver streamers, but schedules for latchkey, bingo, and AA were still clearly visible. The tables had been pushed aside and covered in emerald green table-clothes in preparation for the reception dinner, which Margot could smell cooking in the small kitchen at the back of the room. Jane's laughter ran through her head again. She pinched herself.

People trickled in slowly. Margot desperately wanted Amy to come back, even just to have someone to stand awkwardly next to instead of standing awkwardly alone. What she wanted much more was a drink, or a cigarette, but she'd already given herself a stern, silent talking to about being good.

The last Lena-and-Rob wedding had taken place in the same location. Last time, of course, she had joined Amy and Fawn as bridesmaids, the three of them wearing different but equally purple dresses and posing for pictures that were still on Lena's Facebook page. The *deja vu* was dizzying. If she stared at the tile floor hard enough, she could pretend no time had passed. But this time around Lena's pregnancy was not as obvious, and her dress was strapless. This time around Margot could hear Rob laughing from the other side of the building about how none of the original wedding party could fit into their old attire. This time around, Jack did not seem to be there. She kept an eye out for him as she helped set up the folding chairs, no idea what either of them would do when they saw each other, but it grew closer to three o'clock, and he did not appear. Why had Lena answered his phone that morning? She could not picture Jack hanging out with Rob and Lena and their three children any more than she could picture him leaving anywhere without his phone.

The answer was obvious, as much as it didn't make sense: Lena had answered his phone because she had woken up with him. High-school-Lena had flirted indiscriminately, and combined with high-school-Jack's anything goes attitude, it had always seemed inevitable that they would hook up, though he claimed they never had. But wouldn't Rob have noticed? Why would they still be getting married?

At five minutes to three, as people were starting to take their seats, the overhead lights flickered. There was a collectively held breath, then darkness. Gasps, sighs, groans. A boy somewhere laughed loudly. With the doors open it was still light enough to see, but everything was shadowed and gray. Someone immediately tripped over a folding chair.

"Again, really?" Lena's mom said from the other side of the room.

"It's been doing this all morning," said a woman somewhere behind Margot. "We had to completely start over on the lasagna earlier."

A flurry of cell-phone lights appeared, shining in every direction.

“It’ll be fine, just give it a minute,” called the pastor from the balloon arch at the front of the room. In the cell-phone light, it looked even more like the ducks were dive-bombing the balloon arch, aiming to pop.

The sound of a power-outage was like a relic of Margot’s childhood, as familiar as the sound of dial-up internet, or the click of the turn-signal in her dad’s car. Outages were so regular that every room in their house had a flashlight, and everyone she knew had little tricks and tips for cooking, showering, keeping warm in the dark.

Margot smiled in spite of the low-level panic coming from the wedding party at the back of the room. She liked the sound of outages, the sound of absence when electricity was unexpectedly sucked away.

The room fell quiet in the low light. It was much stranger to be sharing space with so many people in the dark than it had been in full light. Before she moved away, Margot hadn’t known that other places didn’t lose power on a weekly basis, and it wasn’t until a year into college that she realized she owned an excessive number of flashlights in preparation for something that was unlikely to happen.

The lights flickered back to life. Everyone clapped like they’d just successfully landed a plane. At the back of the room, Lena—in full bride gear now—wiped imaginary sweat from her brow and laughed, grinning around at everyone in her immediate vicinity. Margot smiled at her, though Lena wasn’t looking her way.

A couple of old men hurried to close the community center’s double doors, as though this would stave off another power outage. They shut with a snap, and Jack was officially not there. Which maybe made sense if they were sleeping together. And if they were sleeping together, it was none of Margot’s business, she had no right to feel anything in particular about it, but this didn’t stop the sour taste in her mouth. It wasn’t quite jealousy, felt more like a twisted, unwanted homesickness.

Tinny music started up over the loudspeaker. Those who were not seated scrambled for seats, suddenly able to move again with the lights back on. Margot took a seat at the back next to Amy's older brother, Mikey, though he probably didn't go by Mikey anymore. He squinted at her when she sat down.

"Margot Hill?"

"Yep."

"Wow," he said, nodding. "Wow."

She had no idea what this meant. They'd never interacted outside of two semesters of wood shop, and now she wasn't sure how to talk to him without sawdust in her mouth.

Margot spent the ceremony either staring at the duck mural or trying to figure out who all the children belonged to.

Lena and Rob's oldest, Scott, was the ring bearer. His pants and suit jacket sleeves were both an inch too short. The little girls, Cassie and Bella, trailed down the aisle after him in matching pale purple dresses with little baskets of fake flower petals. Scott kept up a fake smile so wide it was almost hostile. He reached the front and handed the rings to his dad without looking, like he was handing over an empty plate after dinner. Rob's jaw tightened. The music ended, someone coughed, and the pastor started in.

Lena gave Rob a shimmering smile, but she also blinked very quickly, and kept glancing at the double doors. Her hair was pulled away from her face in a few braids stuck with some fake flowers, better than it had been last time when it had been down, hanging limp and bleached over her fleshy shoulders. Rob looked like he was ready for the whole thing to be over, his posture awkward and one scuffed shoe shifting minutely every few seconds. As obnoxious as he could be, Rob also turned a bit shy when faced with too much attention.

Their divorce had not come as a surprise to Margot, and neither did this re-marriage. They'd always been this way, even after three kids and a new pregnancy—circling each other with one eye out for something better.

Margot looked away when they started on their vows, watching instead as Cassie stuck leftover flower petals into her little sister's hair.

Her college boyfriend, Luca, had accused her of being 'allergic to romance,' after she'd poorly and obviously lied about how much she liked the flowers he'd given her. But at nineteen displays of sincerity had made her cringe, overcome with embarrassment. She thought she'd grown out of this until another guy, years later, complained that she never wanted to go on any 'real dates,' and she realized that it had just settled in her and turned cold. Dating was impossible, and being alone was impossible, so the last decade had found her in a long string of half-relationships that she never cared about enough to end, that all seemed to just fall apart one day when she wasn't looking.

The longest relationship to date had been Luca. When she thought back on it now, it felt like sitting in traffic while you slowly became late for an appointment. They were forever hurrying to get somewhere else. He'd been in such a rush—to graduate early, to get a promotion, to get to their one year anniversary, to move in together, to get married. It was like once he crossed some imaginary finish line, he and Margot could "finally start their lives." Not once while they were together had Margot responded to this with what she was really thinking: if they weren't living yet, what the hell were they doing? It hurt more than she thought it would when it ended.

The ceremony ended with clapping and laughter and an even greater sense of having already lived this moment. But then the little girls skipped down the aisle towards Lena's smiling mother, and Scott's fake smile vanished.

The music got louder and Lena's mom shouted over it, asking for volunteers to help set up the tables. Margot lifted up her folding chair and stood there as things moved around her, unsure why

she was holding it, but feeling too awkward to do anything about it. It struck her suddenly how strange it was for this all to be happening a second time.

“Just put that down, Mo,” Fawn said, appearing at her side. “C’mon, you can help us with the food.”

She put down the chair and followed Fawn into the back kitchen, trying to appear useful, even though her dress was not the correct shade of Bridesmaid green.

Lena’s mom and various other women occupied the small kitchen, moving around big vats of lasagna, bowls of salad, and bottles of ranch dressing. Amy and Lena stood to one side, almost behind the door like they were hiding.

Lena was still blinking.

“I know, I know,” Amy said, under her breath. “But you weren’t really expecting...I mean, after everything isn’t it better this way...?”

“You’re right, you’re right.” Lena spotted Margot and Fawn and smiled, throwing her arms out.

“Mo, you came!”

“It was lovely, Lena,” Margot said, and hugged her back this time.

Lena’s strapless dress was dangerously low cut and when they parted she pulled it back up, wiggling a bit.

“You’re so cute. Thanks for coming,” she said, and turned away.

“Oh, here, honey.” A woman who Margot vaguely recognized as Lena’s aunt handed her a bowl of lettuce. “This needs to go on the silver table under the windows, okay?”

Margot cradled the lettuce, a *thank you*, automatically making its way out of her mouth, and left the kitchen, feeling like a pinball.

The male half of the wedding party dragged out the purple tables and pushed the chairs into place around them. Rob waved at her from across the room, and she nodded back, unwilling to let go of the lettuce.

“Excuse me?” said a child’s voice. “You’re Margot, right? I mean, Miss Hill?”

She looked around and her lungs stopped working. There was a ghost standing in front of her in an overlarge suit jacket and braces. The ghost held out one sparkly nailed hand, the other tugging nervously on the end of a tie in the shape of a fish.

“I’m Benji O’Neill, and I know you’re investigating all the weird shit—I mean, stuff—in town, but I know you also used to be friends with my uncle, so I have some stuff I wanna talk about with you that I think you might be interested in.” The kid rushed through this speech like it had been prepared.

She shifted the lettuce and shook his hand weakly, staring at Declan’s face. The last time she saw Benji was at the not-a-memorial, a newborn in Declan’s older sister’s arms. Benji’s hair looked exactly like Declan’s had at that age, the badly cut dark curls that weren’t in style then and surely weren’t now either. The eyes were different, though, pale blue and hidden behind smudged, pink-rimmed glasses. His smile was enormous, braces on full display, rubber-bands a brighter pink than the glasses. When Declan was this age, he’d been hyperactive, pretentious, unbearable to nearly everyone but her.

“Hi, Benji,” she said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hi!” he said. “So I went on your website, and I listened to all your episodes last week, and they’re all like, so freakin’ cool, but my favorite was the one about the werewolf hunters in Alabama—Did you know there’s a werewolf in Michigan? Le Loup Garou?” He continued before Margot could figure out if she was supposed to answer or not. “But I was wondering about this episode, like, are you gonna just be focusing on uncle Declan, or are you gonna talk about the other stuff too?”

“Other stuff? Like Blood Road?”

“Mm, yeah,” he said, tilting his head. “But also, like, the woods, and stuff.”

Margot frowned. The hunter had died in the woods, and the old Kacy house was apparently out in the woods, but Jane hadn't mentioned the woods themselves as a topic of interest.

"What do you mean, what about the woods?"

"Benji."

Christy O'Neill appeared and set a hand on Benji's shoulder.

"Mom, this is—"

"I know, honey, can you go get some food with Grandma? She's waiting for you."

"But—"

"Now, please."

Benji pulled a face and waved goodbye, slouched off toward the food table. His dress shoes seemed to have been spray-painted silver.

"Hi, Margot," Christy said, and gave her a one-armed hug, too quick for Margot to return. "It's nice to see you."

"You too."

Growing up, Christy'd had even less interest in hanging around with Margot and Declan than Andy had. She was four years older than Declan, so it was understandable, but as a kid, Margot had harbored a secret resentment over being ignored and dismissed.

"I hope everything's good?" Margot said.

"Can't complain," she said, folding her arms and smiling in the way people smile when they want a conversation to end. Margot plowed on anyway, too shaken from the brief interaction with Christy's son to reconsider.

"Listen, I meant to call, I was wondering if you'd be able to—"

"I know, I heard about your show, Rose Fenton's been bragging about it at church," Christy said. She bit her lip and took a breath. "Now's not a great time, Margot. Dad's not doing well, and I don't think interviews are a good idea. He doesn't need to be thinking about all that. I'm sorry."

“Oh. Um. That’s okay, of course, I understand. Is there anything I can do to help with—?”

Someone called Christy’s name from the food table.

“I’m sorry, I gotta—” she said, pointing towards the interruption. “It was nice to see you.”

She left, and Margot was still holding lettuce. She delivered it to the food table and took stock of the room, trying not to wither with guilt and embarrassment. Everything had been moved from ceremony seating to reception seating. People began lining up around the food table, some opening beers or wine coolers as they—

There was a man staring at her. Margot looked quickly away after catching his eye, only getting a brief impression of sandy blond hair and a corduroy suit jacket. She let herself be herded into the food line and picked up a paper plate before looking around again, wondering if she’d really seen who she’d thought she’d seen. He hadn’t moved, back now to her—Chuck Kacy, amateur historian and Hannah’s older cousin, passionately hated by Rob and likely half the guests here. He stood with one hand in his pocket, the other holding a beer as he talked to an uncomfortable-looking Mikey Gonzalez. Chuck was perhaps the only man in the room whose suit jacket fit him.

Rob’s dad had been dropped from his grocery store job as unceremoniously as Margot’s dad had been let go from the Kacy’s car dealership. It was one of the few things they’d ever been able to bond over. But Chuck had been Lena’s boss for a couple years in high school and was Rob’s boss now. He probably couldn’t get away from the Kacys if he tried.

There was no seating arrangement, leaving her to drift around after she’d obtained a plate of mushy lasagna, trying to catch someone’s eye. Benji O’Neill waved at her, half out of his seat, but she just smiled back and headed for the end of the table. Christy clearly didn’t want her talking to him. There was no room there, anyway; he was squashed next to his grandma and nearly sharing a seat with Lena’s son, Scott.

Declan’s mom smiled politely at Margot as she passed, like she would an acquaintance.

At the end of the table was someone she knew, after all. Old Deputy Westfall sat by himself and looked up as she approached.

“Well, if it isn’t Miss Margot,” he said. He didn’t look surprised to see her.

His gray hair was very short now, finally looked regulation, but he still had his scraggly mustache and beard. It was his big, droopy eyelids and long, sharp nose that had always made her like him, made her want to trust him. The other one always around the station, Sheriff Madison, was scary in the way that way specific to cops, smug and too shiny in his sunglasses, hands always leaning on the various threatening items around his belt. But Westfall felt more like an old dog who’d wandered out of the woods.

“Can I sit?”

“Course.”

She was a little surprised he remembered her. It had been a long time ago, and she’d only bothered the local PD for a few weeks before giving up on thinking they had any real interest in finding Declan. Last time she saw him he’d shoed her, somewhat regretfully, out of the station when she showed up to try to convince them of her latest theory. But now they were looking into his case once again, so whatever they’d found in the marsh must have been significant.

Margot glanced around and picked at her food. What she wanted to say was: *You’re reopening the case?* But Benji O’Neill was sitting right in her eye-line, an almost perfect replica of pre-teen Declan, and Lena and Rob were getting married for the second time in the exact same place. And now here she sat with the man she’d already pestered once for information on this exact topic. The *deja vu* sat heavily on her chest. She couldn’t bring herself to aggravate it. So what she said instead was—

“I just bought your book.”

He lit up.

“How’d you get ahold of that?”

“Had an interview with Rose Fenton and she, um, recommended it.”

He chuckled through a mouthful of lasagna and swallowed heavily.

“Oh, Rosie,” he said, shaking his head. “You don’t have to be nice. She only keeps that book in there ‘out of respect,’ she says. I know she thinks it’s all bull.”

“The stories, or the respect?”

He gave her a look. She grinned, feeling seventeen for a moment.

“The stories,” he said. “They aren’t just stories, though. Not at all.”

They’re all looneys, Rose Fenton had said.

“Yeah?” Margot poked at her lasagna.

“Sure, some of them are old folk tales, but even those didn’t just spring out of nothing, y’know. But some of them aren’t folk tales, might as well be my personal memoirs.”

He waved his fork at her.

“Chapter twelve, ‘The Fingers of Cedar Road,’” he said, grandly.

She cringed internally at this title.

“Not even Rosie Fenton can dispute that one, ‘cause I was there. You read it yet?”

She shook her head.

“Well, you’ll see when you read it. Strangest thing I ever seen.”

She put down her fork.

“Would you be interested in telling me about on the record? Maybe this evening?” she said. “I work for a Podcast that—”

“Yeah, I’ve heard all about your show. Them kids won’t shut up about it,” he said, waving a hand in the direction of Benji and Scott.

He eyed the recorder, half wary, half curious. “Ah hell, why not. Maybe if I’m on your show they’ll listen to me once in a while.” He laughed. “Boat Bar? After the reception?”

“I’ll be there,” she said, and he nodded slowly and took a bite of lasagna.

At the head of the table Lena sat between Fawn and Amy, smiling so wide her eyes crinkled up, and not touching the food on her plate. She was looking at Chuck Kacy, though Chuck was not looking back at her. Instead he glanced again at Margot. She raised an eyebrow and he raised his beer in her direction. She nodded politely, trying to acknowledge their planned meeting for the following day, though she hadn't realized he knew what she looked like.

Near the center of the table, Lena's son sat with Benji O'Neill. *I wouldn't say they're friends exactly*, Lena had said, but this didn't seem to be true. They were whispering, heads together, and poking at one another in between making a mess of their food. Scott made a show of trying to steal Benji's fish tie. There was naked disapproval on some of the adult faces around them—raised eyebrows at Benji's painted nails and general loudness.

When Margot and Declan had been a bit younger than them, maybe nine or ten, her parents had stopped letting Declan spend the night. *Boys and girls just aren't supposed to be that close*, she'd overheard her dad say, *not when they get older like that*. She chewed on her nail and wondered if Benji and Scott had started hearing their version of that same thing.

Her eyes found Chuck Kacy again—standing just a few feet behind the boys, and as she watched he leaned over and said something to them. They turned around, faced away from Margot, and she couldn't get a read on their postures, if they wanted to be talking to him or not. Scott sat up straighter, and Benji cocked his head to the side like Chuck was saying something interesting. Chuck handed him something small and white—a business card, just as Rob appeared behind him and jabbed a finger into his shoulder to get his attention. Chuck turned and smiled politely, but Rob said something too quiet to hear, his face twisting as he made tight, aggressive hand gestures. The boys turned back around quickly, heads bent to avoid the confrontation. But Rob's gestures grew larger and his voice grew louder.

“—I don't care, no one wants you here.”

Westfall swiveled to look at the sudden noise. So did others, an audible hush falling over their section of the room. Chuck stood up a little straighter, tall and composed, while Rob scowled at him, belligerent and a little sweaty.

Scott watched the two of them nervously over his shoulder, while Benji looked down at Chuck's business card. He flipped it a few times between his fingers, then caught Margot's eye and looked quickly away.

"Honey," Lena said, very loud, a huge smile on her face. "It's okay, I sent Chuck an invitation. I thought it might be nice."

She shuffled towards them—her wedding dress dragging around her feet, too long now that she'd abandoned her heels.

"Why'd—?" Rob shook his head, giving up as soon as he'd started. His face was going a bit red from anger, or beer, or both. "He's a fuckin' asshole and I don't want him at our wedding talking to my kid."

Chuck held up his hands to calm him down, which only seemed to piss him off more. "I was just—"

"I don't care! You think 'cause I work for you, you can come in here and talk to my son, you fuck'n creep?"

Rob was starting to slur a bit, and he took an aggressive step into Chuck's space, which Chuck did not back away from.

"Guess that's my cue," Westfall sighed, and got up and made his way over.

He shuffled over and a few degrees of calm fell over the conversation. Their voices lowered as Westfall intervened, and everyone made an effort to stop watching. Lena hovered nervously on the periphery of the conversation, holding her hands up like she might be able to reign it in. She kept glancing up at Chuck, but he didn't look at her, instead glancing at the boys who were still ignoring the situation.

Rob regained some of his composure and gave Chuck a tight smile, Westfall's hand heavy on his shoulder.

"I'll get going, then. Sorry for the misunderstanding," Chuck said, loud enough for everyone to hear. He turned to Westfall and shook his hand. "Nice to see you, Deputy."

Westfall clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Drive safe, Charlie."

"Congratulations," Chuck said to Rob and Lena, and headed for the double doors. People scattered, pretending they hadn't been listening in.

"T-thanks for coming," Lena called after him, stuttering a bit like she wasn't sure if she should be apologetic or upbeat. Face red, she leaned down and said something to Scott, who slid out of his chair without a word and headed over to where a teenager sat with a laptop and portable speaker in front of the duck mural. Benji followed, slipping the business card in his pocket as he went. Rob drained his beer as Chuck pulled open the doors and left.

Lena smiled brilliantly around at everyone and nearly tripped on her dress.

The teenager with the laptop, looking increasingly annoyed at the boys' presence, started playing some generic pop, and a few people bobbed around the newly cleared dance floor. Margot got up, tossed her picked-at food, and approached where Lena slumped down in her chair, the top of her strapless dress looking ready to give up. She still made an attempt at a smile when she saw Margot.

"It was good to see you," she said. "Thanks so much for coming."

They were like strange, warped copies of their former selves, and this copy of Margot had no idea how to behave.

"It was a beautiful ceremony," she said, stiffly. "I should probably head out, though. I've got an early start tomorrow."

Lena nodded. "It's good to see you," she said again. "Rob's gonna wanna talk to you, if you're still interested. I'll call."

Margot nodded. "Thanks."

A few more people had started dancing and Margot tried to avoid them as she headed to the exit. She'd had half-plans to change back into her clothes and return Amy's dress, but she felt a sudden urge to leave, an itch under her skin. She'd give it back later.

She spotted Rob with some of his groomsmen near the keg and paused, wondering how unforgivable it would be to interrupt his wedding day to ask what they'd found in the marsh. He laughed and clapped a hand on Josh Torres's shoulder, the previous confrontation seemingly forgotten. Too unforgivable, she decided. She could wait until the morning. She wondered as she made her way towards exit whose idea the whole ceremony had been, Lena's in some attempt to reclaim romance, or Rob's in a bout of possessiveness. As Margot left the wedding, the community center rang with voices and the opening of a new song.

Margot gave Westfall an hour before pulling into the Boat Bar. It was too early to be busy, just a few big guys in work overalls eating nachos at a booth, and an elderly couple sitting at table on the back deck. Westfall sat in the back corner next to the windows, hunched over the bar. The dingy room was strangely beautiful in the pink light of the sunset, the dust shimmering in the air. He didn't look up from the window when Margot slid onto the stool next to him.

"Looks like it's on fire back there, don't it?" he said, nodding towards the other side of Ashton Lake, where the sun shone through the pines.

"Sure does."

He sighed and took a sip of his beer. "Drama never ends with those kids."

"Rob and Lena?"

He nodded slowly. "It's always something."

Margot ordered a drink against her better judgment, needing something to cool her down after the strangeness of the wedding, make her feel like herself again. She pulled out her recorder.

"I'm gonna start now, if that's okay."

"Yep," he said, swiveling the stool in her direction.

She turned on the recorder and did the usual introduction—time, date, location.

"So, Deputy, can you repeat what you told me earlier?"

He did, including the awful title. His voice was both stilted and a little too excited, like he had no idea how he should talk in front of the recorder. He tapped his fingers against his beer can.

"Well, let's see. This was about, well," he spluttered for a moment, looked up at the ceiling to think.

"Just take your time," Margot said. "This thing can record for ten hours at a time so, no rush."

He nodded, then blinked slowly, gathering himself. He drained the rest of the beer and raised an eyebrow at the bartender, which was apparently all that was required for another can to slide into his hands. He popped it open and just sat with it sweating in his hand.

“Alright,” he said. “This was in the fall of 1987. Must’ve been.”

She nodded and checked again that the recorder was blinking red.

“So I get a call in the afternoon that some kids saw something weird out in one of the Kacy’s cornfields, the big one off Cedar Road,” Westfall said. “Must’ve been on a weekend, otherwise they’d’ve been in school. So I’m thinking they probably found a dead deer and got scared, or maybe someone planted some marijuana out there or something. Worst case I’m thinking it’s a body, but I figured the kid’s mom woulda mentioned that over the phone if it was. I’m not taking it too seriously, is what I mean, but the sheriff—Zeller back then—he’s always afraid of pissing off the Kacys, so he sends me over to check it out.

“When I get there, Mrs. Kacy’s in hysterics, demanding I search the whole damn field, stalk by stalk, because there’s a man out there following her kids, she says. But the whole Kacy clan is already out there in their tractors and on foot, searching, so before I charge out after them, I sit down with the kids and ask what happened. Charlie—goes by Chuck now, I’m sure you saw him earlier. Hard to miss with all the commotion. Anyway, I talked to him and his little sister Meredith. He was probably eight or nine, she was a couple years younger.

“So the kids tell me they were out in the fields, playing around and looking for props from some Halloween maze they’d put on the week before, y’know, spooky masks and stuff that some of their hired ghosts had left out there. And they’re running around, chasing each other, not paying too much attention, getting farther and farther out in the field. And out of nowhere little Meredith starts screaming, and it’s not a playful kind of scream. And when Charlie looks at what she’s pointing at, he sees something, too—there’s a face between the corn stalks, looking at them. Neither of them

can tell me what the face looked like. Charlie said it was a man's face, but Meredith said it didn't look like a person at all.

"Now, I'm not usually inclined to believe it when kids come up with stories like this, but this time I do. I was the school liaison at the time and I know this boy isn't the type to exaggerate. Charlie likes to be taken seriously, still does. I don't think he woulda risked looking like a scared little kid if he hadn't been seriously freaked out.

"The Kacys've been all over the fields looking for this thing, but Charlie hadn't wanted to go back out there, you see, not until I came, so they'd missed the right spot. So I ask him to take me out there, and even though he's scared, he does. At first I'm a little skeptical that he's gonna be able to remember where it happened, 'cause it's all just dried up corn stalks, far as the eye can see, but it turns out he doesn't have to remember too hard, 'cause when we get close it's pretty obvious."

Westfall paused for a moment and chewed on the inside of his cheek, making his face even more gaunt than usual. He took a sip of the new beer, and Margot took a sip of her drink, too, for something to do.

"The only way I can describe it is like a hole, like a big hand came down and tried to scoop up everything in about a ten foot radius. All the corn stalks are scattered and broken, some of 'em half buried in the dirt, which looks like it's been tilled up and thrown around. And in the middle of all that mess, in a little puddle of blood, sits two, human fingers."

Margot stared at him. Her drink was too sweet, stung in her mouth. The bar top shone red with the reflection of the sunset.

"The kids scream and run, and the farmhands all scatter, searching for a man with a bloody hand *and* for whatever cut his damn fingers off. I do my best to gather up the evidence and keep a cool head—somebody's got to, with everyone else running around like headless chickens. So I bring the fingers back up to the house in a corn husk, and take them back to the station. Didn't get a picture of the hole in the cornfield before the Kacys pulled up the whole area—superstitious morons—but

there's a pretty good pic of the fingers in the book, when you get a chance to take a look. Nope, not even Rosie Fenton can deny that one."

The story ended abruptly, with a small nod from Westfall like a period. He took a sip of his beer and blinked slowly at Margot.

"Oh," she said, trying to catch up. There were too many things he hadn't answered. "Um. Which fingers were they?"

"Pinkie and ring, formerly attached to a man's left hand."

"I'm assuming you never found out who they belonged to?"

"We did not," Westfall said. "All that came of it was Mrs. Kacy wouldn't let her kids play in the fields no more, and people started grumbling about 'vagrants'."

He cleared his throat.

"I'll admit I went a little cuckoo for a minute over the whole situation. I just couldn't get it out of my head. I even sent the fingers off to the county department for fingerprinting, but they never got any matches. We didn't have the money for much else."

"And this was on Cedar Road?" Margot said.

"Yep. The Kacys're still using that field today. Not sure which of them owns it at this point."

Cedar was way out on the back roads, deeper in the woods than the trailer park and Margot's old house. There was some kind of state park back in there, too, with badly kept trails that she'd once walked with Declan, and where Declan had kept walking without here once she'd finally grown tired of his obsessions. It was where Andy...

She took a deep breath and tried to think of what Jane would say next, tried to hear Jane's narration in her head. *Two, human fingers sat on the ground, freshly cut off from an unknown source. To me, this suggests...* But Margot had no idea what this suggested.

"What do you think happened, Mr. Westfall?"

He leaned forward and steepled his long hands around his chin like a back-woods Sherlock Holmes.

“Want me to spin a theory?”

“If you’d like.”

“I know no one likes to talk about it seriously, but I think it’s all pretty clear. I think,” he said, with emphasis. “There’s something in the woods.”

Margot watched condensation from her glass pool on the bar, not sure what to make of this. “Something in the woods? What kind of something?”

“Well, no one seems to know, and I’m not gonna make a fool outta myself by throwing around words like ghosts or monsters. I’m sure Rosie still thinks I’m a wackadoo. But she don’t go out in the woods, and I do.”

He shifted his beer can so it fit inside a big round stain on the bar top.

“You ever go out there?”

“I used to. As a kid.”

The woods around Cheneaux were diverse enough that walking through them felt like walking around the world—sometimes thick with hills and scraggy pines, sometimes marshy and half-dead, sometimes pretty and sweet smelling, with rolling hills and a soft layer of orange pine needles under foot. Sometimes they were broken up by an unused dirt road, or a forgotten stretch of stone wall, but mostly they were wild and large enough to get lost in. Over the course of their unsupervised childhoods Margot and Declan would run wild, sword fighting, or playing at magic, or building half-hearted little shelters that would always collapse before they returned to them. Then there’d been the long, strange days after Andy’s death, when Declan had spent almost all his time wandering the woods, and for reasons she could no longer remember, or maybe didn’t care to, Margot had not joined him.

“Then you know,” Westfall said. “How it feels out there. It’s like something’s watching you everywhere you go. Or like you left the oven on and should go home to check. The animals are weird too. Seems like they’re everywhere until you go out there to hunt, then they disappear like they’re messing with you.”

They watched the remains of the sunset disappearing behind the trees on the other side of the lake.

Margot glanced at the recorder.

“So. You’re reopening the case?”

Westfall wheezed out a laugh. “We’re back there, are we?”

Margot smiled and took a sip of her drink. “Always.”

“Yep, we are. I’m sure you’ve already read all the articles you can get your hands on.”

“Not hard, there aren’t many.”

“Well, then you probably know as much as I do.”

“Tell me what I know,” she said, and Westfall laughed again and cleared his throat.

“Well, that property at the south end of Ashton Lake was bought by someone new around last summer, and apparently the property line goes a ways into the marsh. The new owners were tired of looking at the whole area, wanted to dig it out and extend the lake or something, I dunno, so they hired a landscaper to start the whole process. That should have included dragging out the car, but they didn’t get that far because they started digging up some of the muck to see what they were dealing with, and they started to find debris, and, well, that’s about all I can say right now.”

“They found front seat, the wheel, and dashboard wires?”

“See? Everything I know.”

“That’s all you can say right now? So there’s more?”

He sighed. “I don’t want to get your hopes up, Hill. You’re just gonna have to wait on it.”

He leaned against the bar and she watched him drink his beer, trying to tame her disappointment.

“Is there anything else you can tell me? Any thoughts or...? Just anything?”

He peered over at her and she wondered for a moment what he saw, if she had aged in his eyes or if she was a dramatic kid too.

“You know I can’t tell you anything about an ongoing investigation,” he said, slowly. “Besides, it sounds like you’ve got a good thing going with this show you’re working on. And I’d hate for you to get caught up in some distraction. Especially, let’s be honest, one that’s probably not gonna go anywhere. Just like last time.”

She smiled tightly and pushed some cash across the bar for their drinks. “Thanks for talking to me. Appreciate it.”

“Any time,” he said.

He was right, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to tell him that.

The drive back to the motel was dark—parts of town had lost power again. This time she didn’t avoid it; she took a straight shot down M-15 until she saw the trailblazer off the side of the road, barely visible in the reflection of headlights. She pulled over and put her hazards on. The pale reeds rippled and swayed in the gusts of wind, another storm imminent. She watched the trailblazer like it might start up and drive away, and wondered what Declan would think about the wedding he had missed twice, or the nephew he never met, or the details of his own disappearance.

She turned the car off and shivered in the gathering chill, feeling less than solid, somehow, just the memory of a person looking for the memory of a different person. Because as much as she ordered herself to move on, she had never been successful. She was always looking for him. Sometimes she found him, too—the flash of a face in a crowd, a familiar arch to someone’s back, an awkward smile that showed too many teeth. Every time, even when every rational thought told her to stop thinking about him, the simple part of her brain thrilled over these small pieces.

She'd never tried to forget, wasn't sure she knew how when those pieces of him followed her everywhere. The Trailblazer in the marsh, the bench behind her house, the patch of grass under the power lines, they'd all followed her to Chicago, made space for themselves in her head and refused to be moved.

It was hot and sticky, and Declan's mom had sent him and Margot on a mission. They were to deliver a dish of pasta salad to her friend Cindy, who was on hospice and lived on the other side of the park.

They walked side by side down the trailer park streets, letting cars irritably drive around them, though it was technically park rules that you were supposed to move into the grass when cars came by. But Declan had long known that Margot didn't like rules, categories, boundaries. Something in her seemed to require breaking them, even if they were stupid—don't listen to music in the hallways, don't roll your eyes at your parents, don't hold hands with your just-a-best-friend.

The handholding had been an odd but necessary development because Margot had been strangely dizzy all summer.

It seemed to start at random. They had laid in the grass behind her house, complaining about work and wondering if anyone was planning anything that night, when she sat up with a gasp, and then fell back down again.

"Are you okay?"

"I—I'm dizzy. I feel like everything is pushing me to one side."

Declan sat up as Margot lay on her side and took deep, slow breaths. As much as she complained about things, she never complained about feeling sick, even if she was.

Dehydration, her parents decided, didn't think it was worth going to a doctor just for them to tell her to drink more water. Declan worried, though. She was always slightly off-balance now, and when it was really bad, she would stumble around like she was drunk, clinging to whatever was nearest and blinking too quickly, blushing and refusing to make a big deal out of it.

And so, they held hands. Declan was overly aware of his hand in hers, could feel every point of contact like it was pricked with a pin, and hoped she didn't care how sweaty his palm was. He tried not to think about the fact that when Jack was around she held his hand instead, and Declan

suspected it had nothing to do with feeling dizzy. It wasn't exactly a new development, and like too many things lately, he couldn't think about it too much before he felt like he was going to implode.

Her hair grew frizzier by the hour and the freckles that usually only dusted her nose and cheeks had darkened in the sun. The day was too hot, steam rising from the concrete from last night's rain and rippling everything in front of them like a mirage.

"How's your dad?" Declan said.

Margot shrugged. "The same. Keeps yelling about the governor. How's yours?"

"Haven't seen him much. He's been driving around like a job might jump out in the road."

Their dads had been laid off within a week of each other, hers from the car dealership, his from the auto parts factory in Milton. Neither of their families had ever been particularly well off, but now things were bad, so bad Margot and Declan kept sharing bouts of strange manic laughter because everything was so absurd, and scary, and they didn't know what else to do.

The heat, the dizziness, the new worries about things like money and rent and food—none of it felt real.

It was also Margot's birthday. She never mentioned it, her hatred for being born in the summer a hold over from when they were little and it meant she was a bit younger than everyone else. Declan had used this constantly to justify why he should choose the movie, or game, or ice-cream flavor, not because he particularly cared but because her nose scrunched up in fury and he thought it was funny.

As they walked one of his pockets bulged out with what was possibly a really stupid birthday gift. So stupid he was nervous to give it to her.

Cindy's place had bright blue flower boxes in the windows that Declan's mom commented on every time they drove past, but this summer they were empty. Declan hopped up the steps and rang the doorbell, Margot two steps below him and still attempting to hang onto his hand.

The door opened and a woman in a blue polo shirt and an illegible name tag squinted out into the sunlight at him.

“Yes?”

Declan held out the pasta salad, feeling stupid and childish.

“This is from my mom, um, from Kathy O’Neill.”

The nurse took it.

“It’s for Cindy,” he said, unnecessarily.

“Thanks, honey. She’s not eating a lot of solid foods right now, but I’ll let her know. I’m sure she’ll appreciate the thought.”

He nodded. The inside of the trailer was dark, thick blankets hung over the windows. The nurse smiled at them and shut the door.

Declan descended the stairs backwards so he wouldn’t have to let go of Margot’s hand.

“Well,” she said, and he just nodded.

His mom’s friend Cindy used to babysit him, had even picked up him and Margot from school a few times, years ago. She’d been sick for a long time. That was what everyone always said at funerals, that they’d been sick for such a long time.

They were silent for a half the walk back. The silence felt like the heat, pressing down on him from all sides, and he pulled Margot’s stupid birthday gift out of his pocket just to change the mood. It was a pop can with a piece of rolled up paper stuffed in the top.

“Hey, catch,” he said, and tossed it sideways at her. She spluttered and snatched at it, but it fell and bounced hollowly on the concrete. She stopped and tried to glare at him but a smile peaked through.

“Why did you throw a can at me?”

He shrugged. “Happy birthday.”

The attempted glare disappeared in a laugh, and she dropped his hand to pick up the can. She peered at it, and slowly pulled out the rolled paper.

“It’s a...message in a can?”

“I couldn’t find any bottles.”

He hadn’t known what to get her. His gifts for every person in his life had always just been whatever book he was most recently obsessed with, and it had taken Rob’s forced enthusiasm over a thousand page fantasy book for his most recent birthday for Declan to be hit over the head with the realization that not everyone liked the things that he liked. He wasn’t sure if Margot would like this any more than Rob liked a thousand page book, though. It had been so long since she’d even tolerated any of the games they used to play together that he very well could be setting himself up for her version of forced enthusiasm—a smile that was more like a cringe.

She had no expression at all when she handed him the can and unrolled the paper. But then, looking it over, realizing what it was, her face split into a smile, one of the big, real ones that showed off her prominent eye teeth.

People were sometimes put off by Margot, by her coldness and her apparent disinterest in the things around her, which only made her moments of sudden excitement more jarring for them. But Declan had long ago learned how to read her, knew she kept everything hidden in plain sight—the left side of her mouth, smiling, tightening, twitching, gave away her every emotion. He had them catalogued in his mind, knew when she was about to laugh, cry, purse her lips, roll her eyes, say something she’d regret, say something she meant.

“It’s a treasure map?”

He nodded.

She laughed and he wanted to hold her hand again, even though at the moment she seemed steady.

“What’s at the other end?”

“Let’s find out. Onward!” He took off running down a side street just so she would have to yell through her laughter that he was going the wrong way.

At the end of the map she would find a small weird ceramic figurine of a bear with its thumb held out like it was hitch-hiking and she would laugh and put it on her window sill and continuously knock it over every time she snuck out. But for now it didn't matter what was at the end, because she reached out and took his hand again and held it tightly in hers.

Back at the motel Margot dreamt of a day she'd sat on the bench in her backyard with Declan. It was the height of summer, a few months before senior year. In reality their houses lay just beyond the woods where they sat, inhospitable in the aftermath of both their fathers being laid off. Hers had grown too loud from the shouting and his the opposite, from the slow panic descending over the house as his parents tried to remedy their financial situation.

But in the dream there was nothing beyond the woods—the trees and the bench were their entire world. The bench was the only remaining evidence of their effort to make a fort when they were kids, a few old crates they'd rescued from the trash.

In reality they complained about their families and friends, and the chronic power outages plaguing the town, and the start of Margot's vertigo.

In the dream it didn't matter what they said, it was all white noise beneath the questions that were growing between them. Margot watched a bird bounce along a tree branch. Lately there were times when she couldn't look at Declan, when every bit of her was painfully aware of every bit of him, and she felt like she was leaning over the edge of a cliff.

They'd fallen into a tense silence, and Declan seemed nervous all of a sudden, his shoulders curling in on himself, fingers gripping hard at the edge of the bench.

"Do you, um?" he tried, and looked out at the trees like they might be able to help. His ears were turning red.

"What?"

"Jack...? I mean, um."

"What?" she said again, laughing because Declan was never so inarticulate.

"You're hanging out a lot lately, he said, and stared at his feet. And Rob and Lena are back together—I think?—and Fawn's going out with that church guy, and I dunno about Gonzo, but you and Jack are hanging out a lot lately."

“We’ve always hung out a lot.” She shuffled her feet, not sure why she sounded so defensive.

“Yeah, but...” he said, and hunched his shoulders even more. “I dunno. I dunno why I’m asking.”

He was fidgety, and she hated him being so uncomfortable, especially when it was her fault. So she looked at him, even though turning her head felt like leaning too far forward over the edge of that cliff, and holding eye contact felt dangerous.

He looked back, eyes wide and nervous, and leaned towards her very slowly, every breath a question. She didn’t move. Something was transmuting at her core, going floaty and incandescent as she lost track of a body reduced down to nothing but unkissed lips and anticipation.

In reality, when Declan brushed their mouths together, Margot kissed him back for a single, staggering moment, then she flinched away. She leapt off the bench and ran, fingertips going numb. She left him behind and ruined everything.

In the dream when he kissed her she stayed.

She woke later in the night to the room spinning. Headlights whipped past the open window, throwing shadows around the room. There were noises overhead, like marbles bouncing, rolling down the back of the sloped roof and falling off into the trees. Something was knocking, quietly, testing all the boundaries of the motel, looking for a weak point through which to slip inside. And something was screaming. Outside, directionless, could have been a mile away or right under her window. She didn’t sit up, didn’t look away from a safe corner of the ceiling, just in case. The scream was high-pitched and agonized, not like a howl or anything with purpose other than pain, like it was being torn open.

She pulled the greasy comforter over her eyes and tight around her body, trying to keep her head from rolling away from her. She tried to sleep.

In the morning, Margot flipped through Westfall's book to the story about Cedar Road. At the end were three pictures. First, the fingers sat beside a ruler on a gray desktop, presumably Westfall's at the station. Second, the two fingerprints in black and white. Last, a picture from the road of the field where they'd been found. The Kacys had cut down the field before Westfall had gotten a chance to return and take a picture of the scene or of the "hole." Maybe they hadn't allowed him back on the property at all, if the dirt road was as close as he could get.

How would she spin it if it had showed up fully formed in her editing room? What was missing? She tried to hear it in Jane's voice. *To me, this suggests that Westfall is right: there's something in the woods. Or this suggests nothing more than a deranged stalker who cut off his fingers in 1987. Or this suggests that everyone in Cheneaux is nuts.*

She got up and called Jane, relayed Westfall's story while she paced the room and twisted her ponytail in one hand, trying to correct the lingering vertigo of the night. The weather was giving her a headache, and she pressed the cool back of her hand to her forehead.

"Fingers?" Jane said.

"Yep. Two of 'em."

"That's..."

"I know."

The rain had stopped, but the wind still whipped through the trees and the sun peeked through big, dark clouds. All she could see of the parking lot was the rental car and a patch of withered pines separating it from the road.

"I'll be honest," she said. "Even with the fingers, I don't know how much we've actually got here."

Jane sighed on the other end.

“You know these people, Margot. Even if you don’t know all of them personally, you know the town and the history and you know what they’re like. Use that.”

“Yeah...” she said, thinking of Benji O’Neill’s enthusiasm, and of Christy’s obvious determination to keep him away from Margot.

“It always takes a little while for any kind of story to emerge, but it seems like there’s a lot of potential material. You’ve got what, one more interview?”

“Two,” Margot said. Rob and Chuck Kacy.

“Okay, then, why don’t you just spend some time poking around town, try to connect some dots?”

Margot nodded, pointlessly, hand held to her forehead.

“There’s something that the Deputy said yesterday that I keep thinking about,” she said. *There’s something in the woods.* “Declan, he believed a lot of...things about this town.”

“What kind of things?”

“Things that would probably make him sound like a superstitious hick. It was mostly when we were kids, and I always thought he would grow out of it, but I don’t think he ever actually did.”

“I told you, you don’t have to pursue that angle if you don’t want to, remember?”

“I’m telling you because I think other people might believe the same things. And I’m not sure what to do with that.”

“I think you do,” Jane said. “Find out what those things are. Find a way to make them seem real.”

When Margot locked up the room, she heard another shriek from the woods, the same sound that had kept her up in the night, high-pitched and inhuman. She followed it, circling around the back of the motel and watching for something injured. The ground was mushy and the woods were dense where the pavement ended. With every gust of wind came another, and when she finally looked up she saw it—an enormous branch, still partially attached and swaying in the wind, fallen

into the outstretched arms of another tree. When the wind blew hard enough, the wood scraped together and the trees screamed.

She went back to her car.

Lena and Rob lived on the same street Declan had grown up on, where his parents and Christy still lived, where Benji now lived as well. Rob and Lena's place was a little nicer than the O'Neill's trailer, with a little more space out front and many toys littering the yard. In a plastic sandbox lay a series of tiny buckets and matching shovels, a stuffed rabbit whose paw seemed to be taped to a Barbie's little hand, and a pink tent with unfamiliar cartoon characters on the side.

Two kids came hurtling around the corner of the house as Margot pulled into the driveway, one holding a large stick and the other laughing and running away. Benji and Scott. They stopped running when they saw Margot's car. Benji dropped the stick and smiled, his glasses slipping down his nose as he waved enthusiastically. They both wore bandanas around their foreheads, shorts and t-shirts, but Benji also wore a skirt over his cutoff jeans, black with a big smiley face painted on one side.

Scott pushed his falling bandana out of his eyes as Margot got out of the car.

"You're the lady from the podcast, right?" he said.

"That's me." Margot smiled, gathering her bag over her shoulder.

He opened his mouth several times, but seemed struck by sudden shyness. Benji spoke up instead as Margot edged around the other cars, parked nose-to-nose to fit in the driveway.

"Miss Hill, can we talk about—?"

The door opened then and Rob planted one foot on the top step. He ignored the boys, looking tired and hungover even through a smile.

"Hey, come on in, Mo."

Benji looked like he wanted to finish his question, but Scott glanced quickly between him and Rob. He pushed his bandana up again and grabbed Benji's sleeve, pulling him towards the street.

"We'll be at Benji's," he said.

"Don't go too far," Rob said, as though he hadn't heard him. "Sorry about that. Come on in."

It took Margot a second to realize he was apologizing for Scott and Benji.

"Oh, don't be," she said. "They're sweet."

Rob raised an eyebrow at the ground.

Inside she was hugged once again by Lena.

"So good to see you," she said, as though they hadn't seen each other the day before. "Do you want anything? Pop? Coffee? Water?"

"Coffee would be great, thanks," she said, and Lena bustled over to the kitchen. Evidence of the wedding was scattered around the house—a pile of streamers and unused balloons on the kitchen table with the remnants of the cake, wilting flower arrangements piled up near the hallway to the rest of the house. Most of the hall was taken up with Lena's wedding dress, hung from a hanger on the back of a door. Across from it sat two small bedrooms, one with a sparkly sign on the door that said *Cassie and Bella*. The door at the end was plain and ajar, but sitting on top of the carpet, right under where the door would close, were little piles of white laid out in a line. Salt. Margot raised an eyebrow, wanting to know but unwilling to ask. She sensed that Scott was not a topic she should broach with Rob.

"Can you grab me a coke, babe?" Rob said, and gestured for Margot to follow him to the living room. The girls, wearing tiaras and big play-jewelry, bounced around some kind of half-built princess castle. Rob ruffled the hair of the smaller one. The older one, Cassie, looked up at Margot.

"You're pretty," she said. "But your shoes are ugly."

"Um. Thank you."

"Cassie!" Lena called from the kitchen. "That's not very nice."

“I like your tiara,” Margot said. She had no idea how to talk to children. Cassie turned back to the castle and ignored her.

“Glad you could be here, Mo.” Rob grinned and thumped her on the back like he used to do in high school. Nothing about him had the *I haven't seen you in a decade* look that she was already getting sick of, and she smiled back.

“Glad to be here.”

He thumped her on the back again and she resisted the urge to cough as she sat down.

He fell heavily onto the couch. “Never thought I’d be surrounded by sparkly pink shit, did you, Mo?” He laughed. “We were hoping this next one would be a boy, but no such luck.”

Lena set the drinks down on the coffee table and sat down next to him.

“Well, you’ve got Scott,” she said, in her end-of-conversation voice. Rob had always been immune to that voice.

“Yeah, Scott, who won’t play any sports and spends all day with that little...with...”

“Scotty has a lot of friends,” Lena cut in. “He’s always off at someone’s house.”

“Sure,” Rob said.

Lena smiled as though he hadn’t said anything. Margot gazed around the room, trying to politely ignore this. Their snappish way with each other had apparently not changed. Something crashed and Bella pushed Cassie, who fell dramatically on her arm and started crying.

Lena smoothed her hands over her jeans and stood up again. “Alright, Mommy mode,” she said. “I’m gonna take the girls into our room. I’m sure you don’t want crying babies on your show.”

“Thanks, babe,” Rob said as Margot smiled tightly and pulled out her notebook and recorder.

“I’m gonna go ahead and get started if that’s alright,” Margot said, trying not to sound impatient. Westfall hadn’t told her anything, but maybe Rob would. If there was anything to tell. She tried to shake away a little glimmer of excitement, settle into some version of professionalism. She turned on the recorder and went through the time, date, and location.

“Thanks so much for agreeing to speak with me, Rob. If you could tell how you came to find the missing items from the Trailblazer, and also a detailed account of what those items are?”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “So, I work for Kacy Total Landscaping, and a few weeks ago we got a call about a project at the south end of Ashton Lake, y’know, the area where it gets all marshy. Which of course is right where the old car is.”

He walked her through a more detailed version of what Westfall had told her—while preparing to convert the marsh into lake, Rob and two of his coworkers had started coming across weird bits of plastic and metal, clogged and covered in much.

“You remember how it was so weird that the front seat was missing?” he said. “It wasn’t even like it was removed, like they would do in a garage if they needed to fix something—it was like it was torn out. Same with the steering wheel and those wires? Well, we found all of it buried about ten feet in front of the car. The seat, the wheel, and a bunch of bits ripped out of the dashboard. So we dragged it all out, and I had a pretty good idea what it was, but it was all so filthy we couldn’t be sure and we didn’t wanna call the cops for nothing, so we hosed it down, and well, there was some, uh.” He hesitated. “The cops say there’s some blood remnants on the front seat.”

Margot looked up at him. Blood.

“A lot of blood?”

“Not sure,” he said. “It didn’t look like much, just some stains on the side, but I dunno what happens to blood in mud like that, if gets washed away or whatever.”

Margot swallowed, sharpness in her mouth.

“So I guess it was a crime scene at that point, or whatever, but the cops around here aren’t exactly equipped to search through a place like that, so they asked us to stick around and help dig up some more of the area, just in case, y’know.”

“And did you find anything else? I found a few articles but that was all they said.”

He nodded, glancing at her. He rubbed his baggy eyes.

“The cops told us not to say nothing about it, but yeah, we did.”

One of the girls shrieked something and Rob glanced over at the hallway. He sighed.

“So we kept digging, and a few feet away from the other shit we found a bag, like a plastic grocery bag, and inside—and keep in mind, that it’s all been just about ruined from being in that mud for so long—but inside we found a rusted old hand gun, and a little box full of vials of some shit and a bunch of needles. Like, hypodermic needles or whatever. Sorry.”

He said it like this definitely meant something, but it didn’t. Heroin wasn’t stored in vials. Declan had told her about the kit he’d found in Andy’s car; it didn’t sound like this. She took a long sip of coffee and tried to focus. She cleared her throat.

“Do they know what it was?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got no clue. You know I don’t know about any of that shit. It didn’t look like heroin, I at least know that, but that doesn’t mean...well, that doesn’t mean anything, really.”

There was a time after Rob got his first job when he was buying up a pretty big percentage of Jack’s weed stock, but as far as Margot knew, he’d never been into anything harder. She drained the rest of her coffee, trying to settle her nerves. A gun and a box of unidentifiable drugs. It had been so long with no real evidence. Nothing they’d ever found had made any sense. And now this. She was surprised by the solidness of it, the reality.

She took a deep, shaking breath. She hadn’t realized how tightly she’d been holding onto the completeness of his disappearance, the special strangeness, as though the weirder and more unexplainable it was the more likely he was to just pop back into existence. But guns and drugs weren’t strange. That shit was everywhere. There was nothing special about it at all.

Rob opened his mouth and she thought suddenly that if he said something like *Y’know, I always told you it’d be something like this*, she would lose it, knock her coffee mug onto the floor like a vindictive cat. But he didn’t.

“I’m sorry, Mo. I know this isn’t the news you were hoping for.”

She shook her head and shrugged sharply, picking up the empty coffee mug and running a finger around the rim.

“Why didn’t they find these things years ago?”

Sure, they’d hadn’t exactly torn the town apart looking for Declan, but she remembered the police tape they’d set up around the Trailblazer, Westfall and a couple other deputies out there with flat shovels, sifting through the muck.

“That’s another thing, it looks like the stuff was buried in the mud back then.”

Buried. She set the coffee mug down, fiddled with her hands instead. Buried was bad.

“They’re sure?”

“Mhm.”

“There’s no chance the stuff just sank into the mud?”

“In just a few hours? No way. Cops were there the morning after the crash, and they would’ve seen it.”

“So it was definitely buried.”

Rob shrugged. “The stuff was scattered a bit, but yeah, I mean,” he shifted uncomfortably. “If it was all covered in blood, it was probably a lot easier to bury it all at the scene of the crime than try to drag it off somewhere. What I don’t understand is how the cops didn’t dig up around the car back when it happened. Like, what if Dec... What if he drowned?” He shook his head. “Dave probably thought it was a fucking werewolf or something. I mean, I love the old dude, but I’m sure things get botched because he’s thinking about ghost stories and not fucking evidence.”

Margot’s headache was back. She rubbed her temples.

“What do you think happened, Rob?”

He scratched at the back of his neck. “Declan was, I don’t wanna use the word *mysterious*, but he was a weird dude, y’know? I don’t think it’s that crazy to think he was mixed up in some shit. Whether that was something drug related or something...weirder, I dunno.”

Margot nodded, trying to forget hearing Declan’s name used in the past tense.

“You didn’t find anything else?” she said.

“Like what?”

“Like...” She wasn’t sure what she was looking for. *Like a fish with two faces.*

She just needed *something*, couldn’t just let the whole thing get more complicated without being any more understandable, couldn’t go down this path again without something to hold onto.

“Anything strange? Even just something small?”

Rob chewed on his lip and looked at the floor. His phone buzzed and he opened it. “Ah shit, work.” He stood up. “I’m sorry, Mo, that’s all I’ve got. I gotta run.”

“Of course.”

He got up and poked his head into the room Lena had disappeared into, then threw on an old Carhartt jacket with a huge rip in the back shoulder.

“See ya. Call me if you need anything else, ‘kay?”

She nodded, and he left. Lena emerged with the girls as Margot was packing up.

“Landscaping on a Sunday?” she said, closing her bag.

The girls ran back to their castle and Lena joined Margot on the couch.

“He picked up a second job. Maintenance. Just while I’m on leave. Y’know how it is,” she said, looking down at her wedding nails. “Get everything you need?” she said, and Margot wasn’t sure if she was inventing the tone in her voice.

“Yep, thanks again. I appreciate it.”

Lena just nodded and watched the girls argue over a piece of fabric that was getting sparkles all over the floor. Margot was trying to work out a graceful exit when Lena spoke again.

“I’m crazy for having another one, aren’t I?” she said. This time there was no cutesy smile. She laid a hand on her baby bump, much more visible in her tank-top that it had been in her wedding dress or the sweater at the bar.

“Not if it’s what you want,” Margot said.

“It is now,” she said after a moment. “Wasn’t always, though.” She grabbed Rob’s abandoned Coke and took a sip. “What about you? Kids in your future?”

“I’m not even in a relationship,” Margot said. “One thing at a time.”

Lena smiled, then looked out the window. The sky was still overcast, and the Lena that sat next to her now was different than the Lena that had dreamed about boys and the future so long ago.

“Hey, um. Maybe I was a little harsh the other night and I’m sorry about that. I just wanted to like...” Lena paused, a line appearing between her eyes that Margot was unfamiliar with. “You seem good, y’know?” she said. “Like you’ve got it all together now, and no offense, but that was definitely *not* the case when you left. You just kind of stopped talking to everyone. And we never talked about any of it, and then you left. Maybe it’s just the mom in me now,” she laughed a little and rolled her eyes. “But I just wanted to see how you were doing. With all this I mean.”

Margot was glad Lena kept her eyes on the window. The room swam a bit in front of her. She set her bag on the floor between her feet.

She cleared her throat. “For some reason I thought I could just pretend it was someone else’s life and it would be fine, but that’s not working.”

Lena nodded. “I know you two were...whatever you two were.”

Next to the princess castle, Cassie gathered up some of the glitter on the floor and spread it on Bella’s cheeks. Margot thought about having kids the same way she had when she was a teenager, with a vague sense of *someday*. But she wasn’t a teenager anymore, and life was moving on without her. Everyone around her grew older, met spouses, had kids, settled into careers, and she kept buying pencil skirts and watering her plants, like it was the same thing.

“You gonna talk to Chuck about all of this?”

Margot looked at her, but Lena kept her eyes on the girls.

“We’re meeting up tomorrow to talk town history.”

“Mm,” she said, the line between her eyes deepening.

The front door wrenched open suddenly and Scott’s head poked inside.

“Dad’s gone?” he said.

“Mhm,” Lena said. “Hey, Scotty, come say hi to your Aunt Margot.”

Scott shuffled awkwardly in the doorway, and Margot got quickly to her feet.

“Actually I should get going, Lena.”

“Oh—”

“Thanks for the coffee, and I’ll be in touch about the interview.”

She gathered up her bag. The room still swam a bit, from vertigo or Rob’s interview, she wasn’t sure. Her shoes made harsh clacks on the linoleum. Scott jumped down the steps to get out of the way of the front door. The boys had forgone the bandanas, and Benji now listened to something on his phone with one earbud, the other hanging at his side.

“Thanks,” she said, descending and heading for her car. Footsteps crunched behind her.

“Um, Miss Hill?” Benji said.

She opened the car door, hoping the boys would sense her mood and scatter. No such luck.

Scott leaned his arms on the low roof of the car.

“Can I actually call you Aunt Margot?” he said.

“Your mom said you could, didn’t she.”

“Yeah, but like, you’re not my actual aunt, so that seems weird.”

She shrugged, wanting this conversation to be over. “Call me Margot, call me whatever you want.”

“Um, do you think we could talk?” Benji jumped in. “Not now, but maybe before you leave? It’s just, like, everyone says I look like my uncle but no one ever talks about him and...I’m sorry. I don’t want to bother you.”

Margot shook her head, even as it throbbed.

“You’re not bothering me,” she said. “But I don’t think your mom wants me talking to you, so you’ll have to ask her if that’s okay.”

He nodded, frowning at the ground, and he looked so much like twelve-year-old Declan she had to look away. She gave a tight goodbye wave and got in the car. The boys headed for the house, Benji shoving his phone in his pocket and re-inserting the earbud. Scott grabbed the other one.

Margot sat in the car for a moment and took a breath.

Scott and Benji disappeared inside, and a moment later a light came on in one of the windows. There was something scattered along the window ledge, just visible when it caught the light. She squinted. Salt.

Blood Road ran mostly through the marshland, half of it just a raised dirt path surrounded by murky water, salt grass, and dead trees. The start of it, though, was still paved and marked. Despite its length, it was not a through street—there was one way in and one way out. Jack's house stood at the very end of the road, one of a handful of mansions around Ashton Lake. Jack had always hated that word, but Margot refused to call it anything else. In comparison to Declan's double-wide and Margot's moldy ranch, it was a castle with its clean, modern lines and big swaths of glass.

She had a few hours to kill before meeting up with Chuck, so she drove down the road slowly, stopping periodically to take phone pictures out the window.

Movement caught her and she slowed the car again to a stop. An enormous owl stared at her from its perch on a dilapidated and mossy wooden fence. It was darkly overcast, but it was still solidly daytime. The owl blinked lazily, eyes on the car. She took a picture slowly so not to scare it off, then moved along, a shameful chill down her spine.

She thought there was a bit of a problem with including Blood Road in the Podcast, because it felt like it had already burst, fully formed, from a story. It was so creepy it felt like a gimmick, like a haunted house tour with fake ghosts. It was listed on various Haunted Michigan websites, but each one told a different story about it, all of which, incidentally, were different than the one she had heard growing up.

Andy had scared her and Declan with it when they were still young enough to show fear of such things, giggling and hiding behind their hands when he made his voice all low and scary. All that had stuck with Margot from Andy's story was the fear, crawling up the back of her neck, hating and loving him for making her feel something so awful and exciting.

Jack had told the story years later, maybe the same one, though even at the time she couldn't remember. It was the summer before senior year, only a couple weeks after she'd run away from the

bench where Declan had kissed her, and a few weeks before her parents' daily shouting matches turned cold, started including threats of divorce.

In the middle of it all, they sat around the fire pit on the beach at Jack's house. Despite the benches and hand-crafted Adirondack chairs, he lounged in the cooling sand, back up against Fawn's legs as he smoked out of a glass pipe and did not share. Beaches around Cheneaux were grassy and dark, mostly dirt, but Jack's parents had imported barrels of fine, pale sand from Florida that practically glowed under the moonlight.

Rob and Lena had been "on a break," the prolonged period between their dramatic end of junior year break up and their tearful beginning of senior year make up, and they sat on opposite sides of the fire, as far from each other as possible while having the option to look as much as they wanted. Fawn sat in one of the Adirondack chairs with a drunk Amy sideways in her lap. Margot and Declan sat stiffly on a bench, space enough for Jack—or anyone, really, anyone at all—between them.

Maybe there'd been others there. Margot remembered more people sitting around the fire, but now they were just blank figures, faceless, just a collection of mouths and eyes.

"You know why it's called Blood Road?" Jack said.

"Because when it rains the red clay runs all over the road like it's bleeding," Fawn said.

Jack blew a stream of smoke upwards and laughed when Fawn and Amy coughed.

"Shut up, you're gonna ruin it," Jack said.

"Ruin what, man?"

"The story."

"We're really gonna sit around telling ghost stories?" Rob laughed. "I'd rather you just shared the fucking pipe."

"Getch'er own."

“Dude, I literally tried to pay you for some earlier and you said I had to catch you first and you ran away.”

The faceless kids around the fire laughed, because that was just *so* Jack. Jack laughed too, and threw a handful of Florida sand towards Rob. It mostly just scattered across Margot, Declan, and the very empty space between them.

Jack shrugged. “You never caught me.”

“I’m not gonna chase you around like some little...like some kinda...” Everyone could feel him gearing up to say something rude. It was usually what happened after he stuttered over himself for a moment, like even he wasn’t sure if he should say what he was about to say. Lena cut him off before he could get there.

“Just sell us some weed, Jack, *fuck*,” she said. “It’s like, the only reason we keep you around.”

Jack grinned at her, teeth sharp in the firelight.

“Fine, lemme tell my story,” he said. “Then we can figure something out.”

Rob clapped his hands together. Lena rolled her eyes.

“Okay,” he said. The faceless kids leaned closer to the fire. “So when my dad was a kid—actually no, when he was our age, when he was seventeen or eighteen. Yeah. When he was seventeen or eighteen him and his friends would drive up and down Blood Road because of all the stories about it, y’know, just waiting for some creepy shit to happen. Nothing ever did, and they’d sometimes just get chased off by the cops for reckless driving or whatever. But there was this one time they were bored and went driving really late. This time it was only my dad and his buddy, Rick.

“They’re driving real slow like always, but this time, maybe because it was just the two of them and they were being real quiet, they start to feel super weird. They get the shivers and stuff, and Rick taps the breaks and says to my dad, ‘are you sure we should be out here? It feels like we shouldn’t be out here. Not tonight.’

“The break lights make everything behind them look all red. My dad can see the red out of the corner of his eye but he gets this weird feeling like he shouldn’t look back there. But my dad doesn’t want Rick to know he’s getting scared, so he goes, ‘I thought you were bored. What else do we got to do? Let’s just drive down to the end and come back.’

“So Rick starts driving again, but the feeling doesn’t get any better. The trees are all black and they look like they’re bending over the road, and my dad feels like they’re driving into a giant mouth, like the road is a tongue and the trees are teeth.

“But they make it to the end no problem and they turn around right up there—” Jack pointed behind him up towards the house and the dead end sign.

“There’re no cops out. No animals, no birds, no other cars or anything. It’s just them and the woods and the marsh. Rick starts getting more freaked out, because the turning radius on his truck is shit so he’s having a hard time turning around, keeps having to back up and turn everything red again. It’s really, really quiet, just the sounds of the car backing up and going forward. They finally get the thing turned around and start heading back down the road, and my dad gets the weird feeling again, like he shouldn’t look behind them. And even though they’re in drive and the taillights aren’t on, he thinks he sees red light coming from behind them. Real quiet Rick says ‘I think there’s something following us,’ and he starts driving faster and faster. But they get through the marsh and get to that part in the woods where the road’s real bad, and the car skids over the washboarding and Rick slams on the breaks. Now the taillights are lit up again, and my dad can’t help it—he looks behind them. ‘Don’t look at it,’ Rick says, ‘cause he must’ve seen it in the rearview mirror. But my dad looks. There is something following them, *someone*, someone that’s stumbling after them, limbs swinging everywhere like it doesn’t have control of its body, and it’s covered in blood, dripping and flinging so much of it that it seeps into the mud with every step it takes.

“And *that*,” he said, throwing his hands out dramatically. “Is why they call it *Blood Road*?”

A moment of silent. Then the reviews began.

“Dude, you have no idea how to tell a ghost story.”

“That was literally the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

“So what, *your dad* named Blood Road?”

“Isn’t your dad from Lansing?”

Jack just laughed.

“I’m pretty sure it’s been called Blood Road for way longer than that.”

“It’s called Blood Road ‘cause when it rains the red clay runs all over the road.”

“We *know*, Fawn—”

“Your dad didn’t see any of that, dumbass. Kids’ve been telling that story for like a hundred years,” Rob said.

“I thought it was good,” Amy said. “I’m kind of scared. Are you guys not scared?”

Declan’s eyes were white in the reflection of the bonfire. He hadn’t said a word all night, and Margot bit down on her tongue to scare off the lump in her throat. Everything was changing, slipping through her fingers like water. The things she had thought were true had not ended up being true. She had thought they were best friends, but then everything had changed and Declan was more unreachable than ever. She’d thought the story of Blood Road would scare her, like it had when Andy had told it all those years ago. It was supposed to give her goosebumps, make her feel like the world she lived in was exciting and dangerous, but it didn’t. It was just a stupid ghost story after all.

Some of them went back inside. Some of them slipped off into the trees, melted back into the darkness.

Jack finally shared his weed and they lay on the floor of his finished basement and passed around his fancy little glass pipe. It was very shiny and entirely red. At one point Lena called it “the Devil’s dick,” which made Jack cackle and roll around on the floor, and made Rob feel “weird and gay” for putting his mouth on it.

Declan only took the pipe once. He didn't usually partake—it didn't have much of an effect on him so Jack called it a waste of merchandise. "Besides," Jack had said, more than once. "You don't even need it, man. Your head's in outer space just, like, naturally."

Margot took it every time it was passed to her. She had a terrible tolerance, and never knew where her line was, but she wanted to forget this night even as it was happening. It worked—the night quickly fell apart, time chipping away as some moments dragged on for an hour and some hours passed in a blink.

She was on the floor, clasping Declan's hand tightly even as she refused to look at him. She was in the kitchen watching someone slowly nudge an empty glass to the edge of the counter until it fell off and shattered. She was back outside, watching figures move behind the enormous windows, more than there should have been. She was in the water, up to her waist, wanting to fall asleep but knowing she shouldn't fall asleep because she was in a lake, and because something was touching her legs. She was back in the Florida sand, wet and shivering, Declan sitting next to her and finally talking. But he was talking about bees again, his interest-of-the-summer, and she seemed to have become entirely deaf to any word besides *bees*. His mouth moved but all that came out were bees.

She could not forgive the kiss and even she did not understand why. There was a version of her, drunk enough to not remember, high enough to pretend, who ached for how much she had wanted that kiss to happen. But that Margot could only exist outside of reality, just like anything more between the two of them. Because reality meant her parents picking each other apart like buzzards, Jack's parents living in the same house and never speaking, Rob laughing at Lena's dreams behind her back. Reality meant they were seventeen, and boys talked about girls like they were possessions, and girls talked about boys like they were a ladder.

She'd thought the two of them were above all of it, the stupid games and labels and categories people put each other into, and the more she let herself sit with it the more it felt like a betrayal, like

somewhere along the line he'd stopped thinking of her as his best friend and started thinking of her as some sort of goal to be achieved.

His hand was loose in hers, sand rough between their fingers. She wanted to squeeze at the same time that she wanted to push him away from her, never look at him again.

She watched a dark shape moving in the water, making ripples around it as it made its way towards the shore. The fear hadn't hit her during Jack's story, but it did now, because the shape was getting bigger, and the ripples it made in the water extended to catch her, too, sending cold terror down her back. It made it to the shore and dragged itself out of the water, rising up on four legs, moving fluidly like it was still swimming. Margot flinched, dropped Declan's hand and got to her knees because the thing was coming towards them, but Declan didn't even seem to see it. She shook Declan's shoulder and watched the thing drag itself up the beach, leaving long black scars in the sand behind it.

"Y'know, bees have five eyes."

"What's that?" Margot said, pointing.

"Can you imagine having five eyes?"

The thing was smiling at them, and her whole face went numb before she realized that it was just Jack, crawling through the sand, black hair and wet clothes plastered to his skin.

She giggled when he grabbed her foot, the absurd fear melting away, and he flopped into the sand in front of them, playing with her bare toes.

"What's got five eyes?"

"Bees, apparently," she said.

"They all do different things," Declan said. He sounded defensive.

"Cool," Jack said, raising his eyebrows at Margot the way he always did when Declan was being particularly weird, like he didn't think Declan would be able to see his sarcasm.

But Declan saw everything. He deflated.

“Where’s the pipe,” he said.

Jack sat up and tried to wipe sand out of his eye.

“You gotta call it ‘the Devil’s Dick’ or I’m not telling you.”

“Where’s the Devil’s Dick.”

Jack laughed. “Gonzo’s got it, I think. Hey, if you go up there, tell her to slow down. And make sure no one’s gotten into the tackle box. It’s not the night for that shit.”

Declan got up and trudged back to the house, leaving the two of them alone in the too-bright sand. It was weirdly soft, unnatural. It had always felt like the surrounding trees were staring down at it, wanting to remove it and whoever sat on top of it like an invasive species.

Margot had no idea if Jack still lived at the end of Blood Road. She was pretty sure he’d never moved away, even after his dad had finally left and his mom had moved semi-permanently back to Japan, but they hadn’t spoken since that awkward phone call years ago. She wondered what would happen if she drove up right now and knocked on his door.

But she couldn’t make it to his door, because half-way there, the marsh had overtaken the road. The road would flood all the time in high school and she’d just speed through it anyway, probably ruining the undercarriage of her dad’s car. But either water levels had risen, or the road had sunk in the last ten years, because when Margot arrived at the narrowest point in the road, the stretch surrounded by the marsh, the murky water covered it completely, as far as the tree line a hundred yards ahead.

She carefully turned around and headed back the way she’d come.

Margot wasn't sure if there was a reason she was meeting Chuck Kacy at the tennis courts other than a sense of drama. She drove across the lot and parked in front of the courts. The paint over the blacktop was peeling, the cement cracked and sprouting weeds. Parts of the fence surrounding them had rusted away and been partially replaced with thin strips of wood. On the other side of the courts a line of trees leaned over the high fence, unintentional spectators. She got out of her car and stood, arms folded, watching a few birds hop around in front of the closest net.

Years ago it had not felt so small or quite so run down. Lena had been on the tennis team up until she got pregnant with Scott, quitting halfway through the season the spring of her senior year. Margot hated going to her matches, but she always went. She sat in the back of the bleachers, sometimes with Jack, sometimes with Declan, sometimes others, and watched Lena hop around the court like those little birds, movements just as mysterious.

Margot sometimes felt guilty for her surprise every time it turned out that Lena's hopping had achieved something, that she'd won the game again and again and again. Refusing to learn anything about tennis, Margot never knew how good Lena actually was. She wasn't sure if Lena did either. Sometimes she'd acted like tennis was just a stupid way to kill an afternoon, but sometimes she'd acted like it was the only thing that mattered, like she could actually *do* something with it in the way that, growing up, adults would compliment someone for being good at math or woodworking—*wow, you could really do something with that if you just apply yourself.*

Margot's dad was a big fan of this phrase, saying it so often to Margot, for such menial non-talents, that she imitated the words in her head when he said it, and was embarrassed for him every time he did. She was embarrassed for Lena too, every time she had implied that tennis might be some part of her future. A dream like that was so unobtainable it was hard not to be embarrassed for her. Now Margot wanted to slap that cynical, cringing girl, shake her until she fell away from the spell of *cool* that had such a grip on both her and Jack.

Because Lena had been talented. The coach was always bad at disguising his excitement when watching Lena play, and as much as Margot had joked with Jack about how he must have some creepy thing for her, she knew it was because Lena had potential. Chuck Kacy had too, she remembered suddenly. After that summer Lena had worked at the ice cream shop he'd sponsored the whole season, bought new uniform t-shirts everyone was mad about because they had the Kacy name plastered all over them.

A car door slammed and the birds flew away. Margot looked around but it was just a car over on the school side of the lot. The campus was set back from the main road, part of it half-sunk into the marsh—moldy and always in need of renovation throughout Margot's school years—and the rest of it, parking lot and tennis courts included, seemed in constant danger of being swallowed by the woods. Leaves and branches littered the court, knocked loose from the storm. The woods now seemed to be spreading over the blacktop, trying to reclaim some lost territory.

Margot checked her watch. Chuck was late. She checked her email again, though she was sure she was in the right place. A few more people left the front doors of the school and headed to their cars, but there was no sign of Chuck Kacy.

Someone stopped and looked over at Margot. Fawn. She waved, and Margot waved back, and before she could figure out how if there was a way to politely indicate that she did not want company, Fawn was heading over.

Margot fixed a smile onto her face and waved again.

"I guess you still have to be here even after school is out?" she called.

Fawn nodded and smiled, hand held up to shield her eyes from the sun, her large, floral patterned blouse swaying in the breeze as she approached.

"Yep, until the office is ready to close up for the summer I gotta be here. What are you up to?"

"Oh, y'know," Margot said, not quite willing to say, especially after what had happened at the wedding. She shrugged. "Just checking out the old sights. Been awhile."

“It has.”

Margot was unsure how to interpret the look on Fawn’s face, like there was a question she wasn’t ready to ask. She looked at the ground for a moment, blinking. Awkwardness grew between them.

“I, um, tried to drive down to Jack’s place,” she said to fill the silence. “Road was all flooded though, couldn’t get past that long stretch through the marsh.”

“Yeah, it’s been like that all spring. There’s a back way to get to that part of the road to avoid it.”

“Is there?” Margot said, so she wouldn’t say what was in her head, which was *how do you know that and I don’t?*

Fawn turned a bit red.

“So I hear,” she said, quickly.

“Have you seen Jack lately? I can’t seem to get ahold of him.”

“Oh. He’s around. I’m sure you’ll run into him before you leave,” she said, and looked around nervously. “I’ve got to go, but it was nice to see you.”

After she was gone, Margot leaned against the side of her car, trying not to once again feel like a copy of herself. She checked her watch again. A sharp hill separated the parking lot from the overgrown soccer field slash football field, depending on the season. She and Declan had always talked about stealing cafeteria trays and sledding down the hill one day, but it had never happened. At first the excuses had ranged from the quality of the snowfall to the ability of the plastic trays to withstand the journey. Then they’d morphed into vague concerns about getting caught and getting in trouble, which Margot didn’t particularly care about, but which Declan was practically allergic to. Eventually they had to acknowledge the real reason: they were no longer children. Even Declan, with his fixation-of-the-week and his fantasy books and his obsessive walks had understood that.

Something shimmered at the top of the hill. Margot squinted. Something moved. A piece of glass was reflecting the sun, and it took her a moment to realize she was looking at a pair of binoculars, which were looking back at her.

“What—?”

She took a step forward, and the binoculars moved again, along with the person they were attached to. A man, tall, blond, though it was hard to make out much else from the distance. She started forward, crossing the parking lot even as the man disappeared over the other side of the hill.

“Chuck?” she called. She broke into a jog as she reached the grass, regretting her loafers as her feet sunk into the mud and made the gradual climb very slippery. When she made it to the top, she turned on the spot where he must have been, where there was an indent in the grass from his body, but he was gone. The path that he’d flattened in the grass headed towards the woods. She watched them for a moment, but there was no movement.

Her phone was back in the car, but even if she had it, she wasn’t sure who she’d call or what she’d say.

To me, this suggests someone is watching you. Not just someone. Chuck Kacy.

She was too confused to be scared. Instead of fear, her mind was just a current of why, why, *why*. No idea what else to do, she made her way slowly back down the hill and towards her car, eyes on the silent, unmoving woods. She would call Jane, just to have someone to tell, and to have someone confirm that this was as utterly bizarre as she knew it was. She got in the rental car and locked the doors immediately, but a little *ding* told her that a door—the passenger door—was ajar.

And on the passenger seat—

Her hands went numb. Sitting like it was waiting for her on the dark leather was a single marble, cold, chipped, and malt blue.

It was January and Declan's brother was missing. The fact of it loomed over every moment of Declan's day. He was supposed to be studying for a pre-calc test and starting cross-country practice by running circles around the gym, but instead he was wandering Cheneaux looking for Andy. Sometimes his parents joined him, sometimes Margot or Christy, but it was infuriatingly difficult to convince anyone, even them, to take it seriously. The difficult truth was that this wasn't new. Andy had disappeared before, found after a week with a new girlfriend in Midland, or a few days later in the basement of some friend or another, claiming he'd been "working on a project" even as he rubbed his arms and looked at his feet. So "missing" was not a word anyone else was willing to use.

"He'll turn up, just like last time," his parents said again and again, like they were refusing to give Andy the satisfaction of their worry.

But it didn't feel like last time. There was no new girlfriend—Andy had always told Declan about the girls he hung around with, even when he kept them a secret from their parents and Christy. And he was not in the basements or on the couches of any friends because Declan had called all of his friends, and none of them had seen him. He'd even knocked on a few doors of the guys most likely to keep Andy hidden if he was on a bender and didn't want to get in trouble. No one had seen him.

It had never gotten to this point before, and Declan didn't know what the next step was. Margot had half-heartedly suggested the police, but even before it was fully out of her mouth she was trailing off, already giving up on the idea. The Sheriff had always hated Andy. He hated pretty much everyone under thirty, but he especially hated the residents of the trailer park and had long ago categorized Andy as a trouble-maker and Declan as following in his brother's footsteps.

Besides, there was almost no incentive for the cops to go out looking, not when the economy was spiraling, jobs were disappearing, and the whole town was looking for something to be furious about. It wouldn't look good for cops to take extra shifts to search for someone like Andy.

“You know what he’s doing, right?” Margot had asked him. She’d seen him at a party in Midland, had witnessed it in person. She’d gone to the party with Jack, and this was all Declan could think about, despite what she was telling him—that he had been left behind. It was maybe worse if it had been unintentional. He hadn’t been left behind, he’d been overlooked, forgotten. It had been that way ever since that night in her backyard, when he’d sat on that stupid bench and leaned his stupid body towards hers and made the stupidest mistake of his life.

“No,” he lied. It was hard to not to be suspicious when Andy’s shoulder bones suddenly stuck out like doorknobs and he’d taken on a twitchiness and irritability that he’d never had in the past. Not when his friends pulled up in their driveway at three in the morning for a whispered conversation and a rushed hand-off that Declan watched from the kitchen window. Every time he asked about these meetings, Andy had the same answer—that he’d left something at a friend’s house and needed it back. His explanations were always so half-assed, so transparent that Declan wondered if he wanted to be caught.

Declan wasn’t sure if their parents knew or not. Their mom was hardly ever home, taking all the shifts she could as they felt the absence of their dad’s paycheck. Their dad spent most of his time at the library now, looking up office jobs that didn’t exist and that he wasn’t qualified for anyway. The only time Declan had witnessed his parents talking to Andy in the last few months was to ask him yet again to get a damn job. To this Andy only ever said “I’m working on it.”

On the news they called it the “War on Drugs,” but he’d never really understood what they were talking about. He got, abstractly anyway, that it wasn’t a real war with guns and bombs and all of that, but there didn’t seem to be anything like a ‘secret’ war happening either. If there had been, Jack would be in trouble, Andy would be in trouble, Ed, Sasha, Kenny, *plenty* of other people around town would be in trouble. But they weren’t.

The first time he’d even realized things like heroin existed outside of movies and big cities was in 9th grade when he’d come to school and Mrs. Simmons had stiffly informed homeroom that Dean

Finley, who sat two seats in front of Declan, had overdosed the night before and his funeral would be on Friday. They didn't hold a school memorial like they had for the girl that had died in the car accident the year before, and all the teachers shook their heads when they talked about Dean, the same way they shook their heads for the next four years when it was Kyle, then Phil, then Rachele, then finally Travis, just last summer.

Declan had gone to Travis's funeral with Andy, who'd looked pale and shivery the whole time, swallowing too much and blinking like the light in the dimly lit church was way too bright.

He kept hoping that *Andy's problem*, as he'd taken to calling it in his head, would go away on its own, like a mild cough, or the fat raccoon that sometimes prowled around outside at night. But it just kept getting worse and Declan didn't know what to do.

On day three of Andy's disappearance, Declan searched their bedroom for the mint tin that Andy carried around everywhere, the mint tin that Declan had never seen produce a mint. He wasn't surprised when nothing turned up, Andy kept the thing in his pocket always, guarded it obsessively. Declan wasn't sure what it would have meant if he'd left it behind, or what it meant that he'd taken it.

On day five he skipped school. He ignored two texts from Margot and one, surprisingly, from Rob, all asking where he was. It was getting down below zero at night but the days were bright, up in the thirties and warm enough to walk around to all Andy's usual haunts and knock on doors.

Strangely, Jack was on the other side of one of them.

"Hey, man." He leaned against the doorframe, crossing his arms and smiling in that casual-cool way that Declan, in all his gangly awkwardness, couldn't help but be jealous of. He was pretty sure they'd been friends once. It was hard to tell with Jack, sometimes, what was genuine and what was a joke, but there'd been moments over the years that Declan could convince himself had been real.

"Have you seen Andy?" He wasn't going to let Jack pretend he didn't know. If Declan and Margot were right about what Andy had been up to lately, there was no way Jack wouldn't know.

“Shit, no, is he alright?”

“I dunno,” Declan said, shuffling on the doorstep. “Any idea where he could be?”

Jack glanced over his shoulder at someone Declan couldn't see.

“Um, I mean, I'm sure he's fine, but like, Kenny definitely sold to him a few days ago so just like, be on the look out.”

Declan blinked at him.

“Yeah, hey!” came a hoarse, female voice from inside. “Check that dirt road that's like way out by the Christmas tree farm, y'know? It's by some trails and shit. He likes it over there.”

“Do you want me to come with?” Jack said.

“No, it's okay. I'll text you, I guess,” Declan said, and left.

The girl inside was talking about the old hiking trails, where Declan used to go as a kid. Sometimes Andy would pick him up where the trail started, at the end of a narrow, winding road that he didn't think anyone actually maintained. It wasn't well marked, either, but Declan knew the route by heart.

It was early afternoon by the time he got there, the snow shimmering and crunching under his feet as he edged around a snow drift and turned down the narrow road, hands in his pockets.

When he was little he used to wander the woods constantly, sometimes with Margot, sometimes without her. It was fun to have her around, but he'd never gotten her to believe in the things he felt so sure of—that the woods were alive, and that when Declan looked out into the trees, they were somehow looking back. When she was with him, they'd run around and pretend they were sorcerers or elves or some other creature that took them far from reality. But when he was alone out there, he would just walk, sometimes far enough that he felt like he'd fallen out of time, and if he ever found the road again, it would be a hundred years before or after he'd left it.

But he hadn't been in the woods in a long time, and as he walked along the dirt road leading to the old trailhead he had the weird urge to apologize. He climbed up a familiar slow incline. He

couldn't remember the last time he'd been out here or why he'd ever stopped. The trees around him were bare, their trunks and branches pale with ice and snow. A huge, fallen tree lay at the top of the hill, the middle long since chopped away to make room to drive past, and—

And there was a red Trailblazer at the bottom of the hill. It was parked in front of the snow-covered warning sign. *Keep to the path*. Declan had to keep himself from running down the slick hill, had to keep himself from thinking about anything but moving forward. He found the car, it was all okay, it would all be okay...

He took a deep, icy breath, and carefully walked along the edge of the road, feet crunching through a foot of snow. Even through his snow boots, his feet were soaked but he didn't care because Andy's car sat at the bottom of the hill. The inside was dark. The outside was frosty. He made his way down the hill and approached slowly, like he might scare it away. His eyes stung with cold, and his throat felt tight.

He knew before he opened the door what he would find inside. Except that wasn't true—only half of him knew. Later, when he thought about this moment, he would realize that it was the beginning of the first split, on the slow approach across the frozen gravel, his face heating up like a fever already trying to burn out what he might see. But Andy would just be sitting in there hotboxing, maybe playing his old game boy, maybe humming tunelessly along to Sisters of Mercy. But the windows were iced over and the roof held a few inches of snow and these two possibilities could not live side by side.

If he never opened the door, neither of them would ever come true. He could never open the door. He had to open the door.

The car was unlocked, though the door was partially frozen shut, the window completely obscured with frost. He pulled hard, then eased it open, ice chips falling onto his boots. The stillness was only interrupted by his own puffs of hot breath.

Andy sat slumped in the driver's seat, head resting on his shoulder. His coat was white with frost. So was his face. A small collection of shiny things sat in the passenger seat. An open Altoids tin. A spoon. A lighter. The other things were too scary to look at, and a sheet of panic fell over Declan, rattling his bare hands more violently than the cold. He reached over and tugged the keys out of the ignition—because it would be a bitch to try to tow out of there if it ran out of gas—but the car was not on, had already run down to empty. He was worried about something that had already happened. Declan took a sharp breath and jostled Andy's shoulder. It was more solid than it should have been, like cold concrete. He told him that Mom was making potpie for dinner and it would warm them up when they got out of there, told him that Dad was going to be so pissed when they got back, ask where the hell Andy had been for the last five days, but that Christy would give him a big hug and tell him about the ultrasound. But the inside of the car was silent.

Andy looked like he was sleeping. He was sleeping, sleeping, just sleeping—

Declan couldn't breathe. Something clawed at his throat. The frozen gravel rose up to meet him and he hugged his knees and there was a sound coming out of his mouth that he didn't recognize—

His vision spotted and flickered out. His body was moving on its own, without his permission. An enormous *something* enveloped him and started folding him into a new shape. It pulled this new him through thick darkness, like water—seaweed clinging to Declan's ankles, trying to drag him down towards something unknowable, something he didn't want to touch. Fingers brushed all over his body, some trying to pull him in new directions, some just pushing him along on his current one. He tumbled, thrashed, swam. He could not grab onto anything, hands just brushing against the soft nothingness all around him until he emerged violently, coughing, on another shore.

He blinked down at blinding snow, clinging to consciousness like a life vest. He was not kneeling on gravel next to the Trailblazer. He was gasping, standing in the narrow road, at the top of the long hill down to the park. The snow on the ground was blown outward in a circle, like he'd kicked it all away from him. In the parking lot at the bottom sat Andy's car, engine off, doors frozen shut, and

Declan did not understand, because that was not how he had left it. Had he shut the door and run away? Had he imagined the whole thing?

He had dreamt it. Andy was down there right now, high and listening to music. He had to get to him, had to help him get home.

He wanted to run in the opposite direction, call the cops, call his dad, make some adult handle this so he could curl up on his bedroom floor and try to block out the world. But a heaviness sat on his mind, told him to get down to the car. The snow to the side of the road was still smooth, untouched by his footprints.

He ripped open the door this time, ice bursting off in puffs, and Andy was sitting there again, head still propped on his shoulder, mess of paraphernalia on the stained passenger seat. The keys were in the ignition. But this time he smelled something in the car, and even though he'd never smelled it before, some primal part of him knew it.

But he was just sleeping, just got high and conked out. If Declan poked him, he would take a deep breath and sit up.

He reached out and poked Andy's shoulder. It was more solid than it should have been, like cold concrete. Declan shook his head quickly, felt like he was seeing double, felt like that thought was echoing around in his head. He pressed his fingers into Andy's cold throat and felt nothing press back at him. No blood. No pulse. Declan's breath came in short little bursts, like hiccups, and he didn't know how to stop it. He retracted his hand, closed the door gently, and sat on the frozen ground, watching the Trailblazer like it might suddenly rumble to life, like Andy might wake up and turn it on.

Nothing happened except that it started snowing gently and Declan got colder and colder as he remembered how to breathe, teeth chattering so hard they hurt. The horrible dark thing wanted to swallow him up again, drag him somewhere else, but he fought it off, hands against the side of his

face to hold himself there. When it finally left, when the tides retreated, he flipped open his phone and called his dad.

The funeral was so mundane Declan wanted to scream through the entire thing. Part of him wanted to scream. Another part wanted to sit in silence, plug his ears up with cotton, and then be left alone in his room for the rest of his life. Even Margot sitting next to him was too much. He could hear the knees of her black tights scraping together and he could hear her picking at her fingernails and he could hear her ever-turning mind, and it all made him want to get up and run out of the funeral home and plant himself like a tree out in the forest.

It was all happening too quickly. He'd called his dad and it all spiraled out of control. The cops showed up with a pointless ambulance that had to stay out on the main road because the path was too narrow and pot-holed for it anyway, and someone threw a bunch of blankets over his shoulders and told his mom he needed to go to a hospital to be treated for hypothermia, but they didn't go to a hospital, they just went home and he drank hot chocolate and hot soup which he threw up later, and he sat on the floor in front of the space heater and tried not to think about when he'd looked back out the passenger window of his mom's car and had seen a bag on top of a stretcher, black and final.

The rest of them hugged each other out in the living room, Christy sobbing on their dad's shoulder, Mom shaking in disbelief. Declan didn't need to tell them to leave him alone. He wasn't sure what would happen if someone tried to hug him and he didn't want to find out, so he just hugged his own knees and watched the metal tubes in the heater turn neon orange.

He'd been to funerals before, but he hadn't realized the turn around from putting Andy in a black bag to putting him in the ground would be so quick. Someone at the front of the church said some nice-sounding bullshit and everyone shuffled up single-file to touch a closed casket.

Declan's family all laid a hand on it as they passed, his mom stroking over the top like it was more than just a hunk of shiny plastic, and Declan couldn't stop himself from knocking lightly on the thing like it was a door that Andy might open.

The burial was a blur of tears and cold, and then Declan found himself in the church basement with a plate full of crackers and shriveled grapes. There were so many people around, invisible for the entirety of Andy's life, only to turn up for his death. Margot stuck next to him, hands in the pockets of the big blue coat she refused to take off. Since Declan's growth spurt she was a head shorter than him, and still so wispy that he sometimes worried for her in a strong wind, but while everyone else hovered, tiptoed around him like they were afraid of waking him up, she stood there, solid and unsmiling as ever, and he knew that if he collapsed somehow she would catch him.

He chewed on a dry cracker, and for the first time since it happened Declan thought about the *thing*. He had no idea what to call it, how to think of it, if it had even been real. One moment he was falling apart next to the Trailblazer, the next he'd been standing on the road a hundred yards away.

Once, when he was seven or eight, his family had driven over to the west side of the state to visit his mom's aunt, and they'd gone to the beach. Lake Michigan was so much bigger than he thought it would be—it looked nothing like the marshy ponds and forest lakes of Cheneaux he was used to. Lake Michigan was massive and exhilarating, and Declan had rushed into it, not caring that the waves were well above his head or that there were red signs all over the beach telling him not to. The water felt like a punch of ice to the brain and he tripped on the uneven lake bed and was bowled over by a wave. All he remembered was darkness and panic, and the feeling of being tugged in several directions at once, until Andy hauled him out. He sat coughing in the wake, goggles gone, shirt torn half off his shoulder, and he spent the rest of the afternoon shivering and watching the waves in vague embarrassment while Andy and Christy made sand castles.

But Lake Michigan had not felt like it was *aware* of him. It felt like something far too big to care about him, like he'd wandered into traffic and was met with the inevitable consequences. This,

though. The moment in the forest had felt like an unseeing eye turned on him, a mess of fingers wrapping around him. Like all his childhood fantasies about the forest had come true. Like he'd been seen and chosen.

He was being delusional. There was nothing out there that could have done the choosing. He had dreamed the whole thing up in a fit of grief.

He played it over and over in his head, watching light move across the grody, colorless carpet while anonymous hands patted him on the back and people said things to him that he did not hear. There were no loopholes, no memory of walking back up the hill or returning the keys to the dead ignition. He wasn't sure if a panic attack could explain it all away, wasn't sure—

It didn't matter what had happened at the trailhead parking lot because he was at Andy's funeral and they were telling him that Andy was gone. That Andy was never coming back. That Andy was—

Ever since it had happened he'd felt split in half, like part of him was still on the ground next to the Trailblazer, was still trapped in the non-thoughts of that moment. The rest of him was walking around, only half present.

One of the grapes fell to the floor and Margot knelt down smoothly to pick it up. She plopped it back on his plate, and he wanted to hug her, but had no idea if it would be accepted or not. He'd lost all sense of their boundaries, if he'd ever really understood them to begin with.

The day after the funeral he went back to the woods. Their house was full of flowers and pictures of Andy and casseroles from church and he couldn't stand to be in it for another second. Six months ago, before The Incident, he would have driven to Margot's, camped out on the couch in the Hill's moldy basement until her parents hinted that he should leave. But he couldn't think about that either. Instead, he drove back to the trailhead. He parked where Andy had parked, though a new blanket of snow had erased his tire marks, and got out, stood by the sign and wondered if the thing would happen again. *Keep to the Path.*

He headed into the woods. The trail was only a season or two from being completely overgrown. Just a few yards down the path a tree had fallen over so long ago it was nearly rotted through. He stepped over it and kept going, boots sinking into a foot of snow. He walked just far enough that he could see no hint of the car through the bare trees, and stepped a few feet off the path, into the trees, and tried to feel...*something*. He wasn't sure what. He took a frozen breath and peered around at the trees, unsure if the shadow in the corner of his eye or the shivering down his spine were real or if it was put there by his mind.

He looked around at the forest and said, so quiet that only the leaves could hear him, "What did you do to me?"

Margot sat at the Coney Island and ignored another sandwich. Her hand sat on the table, palm open, the blue marble catching the light as it sat in the middle of her life line. She replayed the last hour in her head, but it made no more sense than it had when it had happened.

Had it been Chuck? Had he somehow circled around when she'd been on the hill looking for him? She'd seen Fawn get in her car and drive away, but maybe she'd come back.

Neither of those options answered why either of them would put the marble in her car. No one beyond Declan's and Margot's families had ever known about their collection. The only person who might have known, simply based on his apparent interest in his uncle's life, was Benji O'Neill. But even if he had for some reason wanted to play a trick on her, he wouldn't have known she was at the tennis courts.

The waitress came by and refilled her water in silence. When she left, Margot held the marble up to the light. She remembered, suddenly, performing this exact ritual as a child. She sat on the beach towel with Declan and imagined slipping the marble into her eye socket to look around for a while at a dusty blue world.

She closed the marble tight in her hand. She didn't trust her pockets or her purse. It had popped into the world from nowhere and she didn't want to tempt it to return.

Movement from the other side of the Coney—a blond ponytail over flannel, across the table from an elderly man. He was reluctantly in tears, face quivering with the effort of keeping them contained as he spoke quietly and pointed to an open photo album on the table between them. The ponytail belonged to Hannah Kacy, Margot was sure of it, and the guilt of her drunken antics returned like a dull punch. She squeezed the marble in one hand, took a distracted bite of her sandwich with the other.

She should call Jane. She should get out her notebook and document what had happened. She should pull out Westfall's book, flip through the other stories and try to keep her mind contained.

She didn't do any of those things, she just ate slowly and stared at nothing while she ran her thumbnail over a minuscule chip in the marble's glass.

When she finished the sandwich, tasting none of it, she looked up again and saw that Hannah was alone. The man had left, taking his tears and his photo album with him. Margot grabbed her bag and stood up, leaving cash on the table. She had no explanation for why she headed over to Hannah. She felt like the marble's sudden presence had dunked her in icy water, and when she emerged, everything was wobbly and malleable and new.

"Hi," she said. "Can I sit?"

Hannah looked up at her, ponytail swinging, face performing a series of maneuvers from surprised, to annoyed, to polite.

"Of course."

Margot slid into the other side of the booth. Hannah had no food in front of her, just a cup of coffee and a notebook.

"Is that for *The Citizen*?" Margot said, nodding to the notebook.

Hannah closed the book and took a sip of her coffee.

"It's not."

"But you are a journalist now, right?"

Hannah nodded. "And you work for a podcast," she said, a small acknowledgement of this strange new thing they shared.

It was awkward. Margot didn't know how to make it not awkward, and Hannah didn't seem interested in trying.

"I'm sorry," Margot said, which would do nothing to help the situation, but which she felt like had to be said.

"For what?" Hannah said. It was not implicit forgiveness, it was a *for which part?*

"The other night. I was being dumb."

“What else is new,” Hannah said, deadpan, and it took Margot a flushed second to notice the glint in her eyes and realize she was joking.

“What’s your podcast about?” Hannah said, and smiled a tight, professional smile.

“We investigate supernatural occurrences,” Margot said. “Hauntings, monsters, ghost stories. That kind of thing.” It sounded so feeble, even with the blue marble still clutched in her hand. She watched Hannah’s eyebrow twitch. “You think that’s bullshit, don’t you?”

Hannah shrugged and took a sip of her coffee.

“You do, don’t lie.”

This was what had always driven Margot crazy about Hannah, this poised judgment that always felt a little too deserved, a little too fair for Margot to handle.

“I’m not saying it’s bullshit,” Hannah said. “It’s just maybe not the most ethical form of journalism.”

Margot swallowed the urge to ask about the great, ethical work she was doing for *The Citizen*.

“What do you mean?”

Hannah sighed like she didn’t want to have this conversation, like Margot had just plopped down unexpectedly in front of her.

“You talk to people who’ve had something strange or awful happen to them, and instead of leaving them be to deal with it, you feed into a delusion and make it that much harder to confront what happened.”

This was not the same Hannah Kacy that Margot remembered from high school—the girl who’d crept through the halls and was so quiet teachers constantly asked her to speak up. This Hannah crossed her arms on the table, elegant despite her flannel and jeans, looked at her expectantly, like she was being interviewed, and Margot cursed herself for sliding into this greasy booth.

“And what if it’s not a delusion,” she said. Her Chicago self was in there somewhere, laughing at her. Was she a believer now? One of the town looneys like Dave Westfall?

Surprisingly, Hannah did not laugh at her. She nodded as though this was an actual consideration.

“Okay, sure, maybe there’s some ghost or something that makes weird things happen every couple of decades and a few people get hurt. But twenty-three people died of cancer in this township last year, four from car accidents, six from overdoses. People die and people disappear and we make up ghost stories to feel like it’s out of our control and we’re not responsible for any of it.”

“So you’re saying—”

“I’m not *saying* anything, I’m not judging you for doing your job I’m just, I’m just...” She trailed off, thinking for a moment. “If Declan hadn’t found Andy’s body, if no one ever did, would he be part of your story too?”

She didn’t make it sound like an indictment, she just sounded curious, which made it much worse because it meant Margot couldn’t write it off as an insult, she had to wonder the same thing. Her throat was dry. She ran her thumbnail over the chip in the marble.

“I’m talking to people here who are sick,” Hannah said, “and half of them seem to either think prayer will save them or that they’re cursed.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Or the town is cursed, or they’re haunted, or some other fantasy, but the *point is*, there’s a cancer cluster in Cheneaux, and it’s not spiritual or supernatural. People are getting sick and dying because the soil they live on is polluted and that pollution seeped into the water in their wells. The town is falling apart, and *maybe* pretending it’s because of ghosts isn’t doing anything to help.”

The marble was warm and sticky in Margot’s palm. For a wild moment she thought about telling Hannah everything, imagined the look on her face if she opened her hand and told her what the marble meant. What it might mean. What it had to mean. But Hannah wouldn’t believe her. She’d say Margot was messing with her, or that someone else was messing with Margot. Her grip on the marble was tight but her grip on everything else was slipping, and she knew that one wrong look from Hannah would push her over some threshold she wasn’t yet willing to cross.

Maybe Hannah was right, maybe the episode, and their stupid little show, and Margot's facsimile of a career were laughable. Rob had found a gun and drugs in the marsh. No fingers, no marbles, no claws.

"Is that what you're writing about?" Margot said, finally.

Hannah nodded. "It's a few square miles to one side of the trailer park and stretching back into the woods. About two hundred homes in all. There are soil samples and toxicity tests and everything, but the town doesn't have the money to do anything about it, and the people responsible are long dead."

"Who?"

Hannah raised an eyebrow and took a sip of coffee.

"My lovely ancestors. Who else," she said with a sharp smile. "A factory in Detroit paid my great-great-grandfather a bunch of money to dump their chemical runoff on his land. The factory doesn't exist anymore, Emmett Kacy did that as a private citizen, and my grandma is claiming the family had no idea there was anything wrong with the land when they sold it to developers in the '70s. Chuck keeps trying to get me to drop it before the people that own the trailer park get wind of what I'm writing, but I can't just..." She shook her head. "I'm not gonna climb up on my soap box. You get the idea."

Margot blinked at her, wanted to demand to see the toxicity levels, a map of the area marked with the O'Neill's and Rob and Lena's places, and hell, her *own* childhood home. But she got caught on one small part of what Hannah had said.

"Chuck," Margot said. "I was supposed to meet with him earlier." She had no idea how close Hannah was to her cousin, and she watched her for any indication that she might know about his bizarre behavior. But Hannah just raised an eyebrow and looked unimpressed as always.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He didn't show up."

She rolled her eyes. “Believe me, you dodged a bullet there.”

“Why?”

“Oh...” she trailed off, waving a hand again. “He just kind of sucks. I can tell you everything he would have told you, anyway. I assume he wanted to tell you the family ghost story?”

“That was the plan, yeah.”

“It’s not worth it, believe me.”

Margot cocked her head to the side, considering, then felt around in her bag with her free hand until she grabbed the recorder. She smiled her most polite smile and set it on the booth between them.

Hannah looked from it to her. “Really?”

Margot shrugged.

Hannah sighed and looked like she was going to argue, but then rubbed her eyes.

“Fine. I need a break anyway.”

“Thanks,” Margot said. “This’ll save me having to reschedule with Chuck. Or search for your grandma.”

Hannah cringed. “Even worse.”

Margot smiled and had an uncomfortable moment of clarity—they could have been friends. In another life, perhaps the one right next to their current one, they were. She turned on the recorder and did her brief introduction, trying to feel confident in her delivery as Hannah watched.

She nodded for Hannah to begin.

“So,” she said. “The story goes that my great-great-grandfather moved up here with his family in the late 1800s and tried to start all sorts of businesses...Keep in mind that my great uncle told me this story, and he’s not exactly a reliable source of information.” She paused. “Maybe I shouldn’t say that on the record.”

“Do you want to start over?” Margot said, but Hannah shook her head.

“Doesn’t really matter anymore. Anyway. Emmett Kacy moved here around the turn of the century when the town was very small, bought a bunch of land in the area and started farming and logging it, hired a bunch of people around town to work it. The family has all sorts of anecdotes about how he was a saint and saved the town and everyone in it, but I’ll spare you those. He wasn’t a saint, he was a businessman in the late 1800s, with all of the values and ethics that you’d assume from that information. At first it seemed like the farms and the logging were going great. He had family money, but he was making a ton more, and he built an enormous house in the woods for his wife and two kids.

“But pretty soon things took a turn. The farm land had fertile soil and great crops but weird stuff started to happen to them. I don’t remember everything Uncle Mike said about it, he’d go on and on about things that couldn’t have actually happened, but I remember he said some of them would flood out of nowhere, even if they were too high to actually be in danger of flooding. Sometimes early in the season they’d be overrun with rabbits that would eat all the seedlings and destroy the crop. Or they’d go out there and try to harvest the corn and a big gray wolf would be chase them away. Oh, I remember the most ridiculous one, used to keep me up at night. The farm hands once made a scarecrow out of corn husks and a cow skull, hoping it would help with their problems, but one day they arrived at the field and it was gone, just completely vanished off its wood cross. Later, one of them thought he saw something near the edge of the field, so he went over there and saw the thing in the woods, standing there upright, just looking at him. He was so scared he went up to the house and quit.

“But, regardless of what was actually happening, Kacy’s fields got a reputation for being haunted. The story goes that the workers were scared but trusted Emmett to keep them safe, but I think it’s more likely they were scared but had no other employment options. Somewhere in there he tried to start logging the tree farms he’d planted when he arrived, which according to the story was the beginning of the end. They couldn’t even get one shipment out of it there were so many

problems. First, after one day on the job all of his workers came down with a strange, vague illness, which kept them away for three days until one of them confessed they weren't really sick, but that out in the woods they'd all felt such an intense feeling of dread that they thought it was a premonition of some kind of calamity. Then, when he made them return, half the trees they cut were spontaneously full of termites. Then the whole area flooded and made it that much harder to get out there to cut. Then one of the workers felt so disturbed being out in the woods that he was suddenly sure the tree he was cutting was trying to kill him, and he set it on fire. It caught others and the whole farm burned for a few hours before they could get it under control.

“Emmett became obsessed with the whole situation. He was convinced the forest was alive, and if he just asked nicely, it would give him what he wanted. He stopped leaving his house to try to make the forest happy.”

Hannah paused for a moment, and folded her hands on the table.

“My grandma claims that she once read an account of what happened in Anne's diary—Emmett and Martha's daughter. Apparently Martha, Anne, and her brother James went south to visit family. Emmett was basically a shut-in at this point and stayed behind. When they came back, the drive through the woods seemed much longer than it should have been. Their driver got nervous that he'd gotten them lost out there, because the road where he thought the house was led them nowhere, just a dead end in a small field. They drove all the way back to town, then out again but they still couldn't find the house. James joked that they'd been gone for so long they'd forgotten where they lived, but it got late and they started to get scared. They went and stayed in town for the night, but it wasn't any better in the morning. Then they found out that no one had seen or heard from Emmett for days. They kept looking for the house in the place they were sure it had been, but there was nothing there. Finally, while walking around, Anne and James found the remnants of a statue they'd once accidentally broken and had hidden out behind the house so they wouldn't get in trouble, and they

knew that, even though it was impossible, they were in the right place. Eventually they had to accept that somehow the house had vanished, and Emmett had vanished with it.”

Hannah took a sip of her coffee.

“But before that happened he got paid to dump a bunch of toxic chemicals, which is far scarier than anything that did or didn’t happen to him.”

She folded her hands on the table.

“So, according to the story, what caused all of it?” Margot said. “What made Emmett disappear?”

“Uncle Mike was always pretty vague about that part. Once he claimed Milton Cheneaux was somehow behind it all, because he was jealous, which is ridiculous. Another time he said that the land was cursed and the curse passed to Emmett because he owned so much of it, or because he cared for it so deeply, which is also ridiculous.”

“And what do you think happened?” Margot said.

Hannah hummed.

“I think Emmett was a bad guy to work for, and his farmhands made up ghosts and curses to deal with it. I think he had another family somewhere else, and when his businesses here started failing he went back to them and abandoned my great-great-grandmother.”

“What about the pictures of the house?”

“What about them?”

Margot shrugged. “They exist. The house existed. So where did it go?”

“Sure, the house existed, but who’s to say where those pictures were taken? Sure, maybe they were taken in the Cheneaux woods and the house disappeared with Emmett inside like my Uncle Mike claims. Or maybe he built his mansion in Milton, or Mount Pleasant, or anywhere else and Martha Kacy just hated him so much after he left that she had it torn down.”

Margot nodded slowly.

“Did you ever believe any of it?”

Hannah considered, looking out the window. “I think when I was little I did, like how you believe in Santa and ghosts. But the more Uncle Mike told, it the more ridiculous it sounded, and by the time I didn’t believe in Santa or ghosts anymore, I also didn’t believe that my family was any more special or strange than anyone else’s. Chuck still believes it, though, probably takes it more literally than anyone else does.”

She took a deep breath and looked out the window again. “He gets a little intense with all this stuff about the old house and the Kacy Family Legacy, and all that.”

Intense. He’d been spying on Margot, watching her through binoculars. She opened her mouth to tell Hannah, but the waitress appeared to ask if she wanted any more coffee, and Margot decided against it. The waitress filled her mug and Hannah held it in her hands and watched the steam rise.

“I see through this, you know,” she said quietly.

“Through what?”

Hannah took an annoyingly slow sip of coffee. “If you care about any of this stuff, it’s only because you think you can somehow connect it back to Declan.”

Margot swallowed, put the hand that held the marble on the table, fist still closed. Hannah glanced at it. With her free hand, Margot turned off the recorder.

“Don’t you want to know what happened?” she said.

“Of course I do, but it was along time ago, and there are so many other stories to tell.”

Margot watched sunlight flicked on the too-shiny table. Her face felt too hot, body felt too cold. She didn’t know how to reconcile the two parts of herself—the one who agreed with Hannah, who didn’t always like her job, who looked around this town and saw a long chain of cause and effect—and the one who refused to let go of the marble, who had held pieces of Declan in her brain for far too long, who would create ghosts and monsters if it meant she could have answers.

Margot had seen Hannah and Declan at the grocery store once, about a month before he disappeared. They didn't see her and she didn't want them to. Declan looked so quiet, so unlike the boy she thought she knew. He looked content. Grown up. They didn't hold hands, but they didn't need to, everything about the way they moved around one another broadcasted their quiet, matter-of-fact relationship.

"Did you love him?" she said, and wanted to take it back immediately for how childish it sounded.

Hannah huffed out a laugh. "Margot, we dated for about three months, twelve years ago. You're making it into something it wasn't. You always have."

Margot stared at the tabletop, nodding absentmindedly. Hannah gave her a moment, then shuffled around, gathered up her things. She dug through her purse and set cash beside the half-full mug.

"Call me if you have any more questions," she said.

Hannah said goodbye and left Margot to sit alone and watch coffee steam rise, the marble growing heavier in her hand.

The spring meandered and Declan meandered with it—down trailer park roads, down school hallways, down frozen, half-forgotten paths in the woods. The woods felt more familiar than they ever had, like he'd lost part of himself there long ago and had only just found it. The thing had not happened again, but he kept going back anyway.

Sometimes, Margot came with him, and when she did, it was Jack who dropped her off in front of Declan's house, Jack who had not sold to Andy, but who hadn't stopped Andy from buying either. Jack who must have known what was going on and hadn't done a single thing. He tried not to think about it.

Instead he thought about how there used to be words between them, how even when she was quiet, he'd always had something to say. But now there was just silence. It wasn't always bad, but it was new, and neither of them had ever been quite okay with new.

And then, on a walk that spanned half the town and he didn't ever want to end, she slowed down and he stopped to look at her. Her hair was in a long red braid tangled up in the scarf around her neck, the rest of her wrapped up in her enormous blue coat that went down to her knees. She squinted at him, hat slipping down over her eyebrows.

"Are we looking for something?" she said, and he blinked at her because her silence hadn't been silence after all, but confusion. The whole time he'd thought she'd been walking with him and reading his mind, somehow, but she hadn't been, she didn't understand that he needed movement, needed to feel like he was moving forward, because, because...

He sat on the ground outside Andy's trailblazer, unable to breathe.

When she got tired of the walks, citing freezing temperatures and homework, he didn't blame her. He had leaned on her too hard, like a walking stick, and of course she didn't want to be a walking stick.

He walked alone, after that, and stopped walking along the highway and through town, kept more and more to the woods, started each time from the trailhead, walked over the frozen dirt where the trailblazer had sat with Andy inside, traced over his footsteps from the day before, and the day before that. He was starting to think he was the only person who came out here. The trails weren't maintained, and the map he'd found online was mostly inaccurate. So he started a new one, tried to measure the miles he walked, the elevation, the landscape.

He thought about the times he used to walk through the woods with Margot as kids, about how much, and how little, had changed. The wind through the leaves sounded like whispers, just as it had then. The trees looked back at him, just as they had then. He felt *something*, just as he had then.

The bare branches sparkled with ice, but he kept his eyes down, watching each time his foot crunched through the thin layer of ice on the ground and interrupted the perfect snow. Something growled, and when he jumped and looked up, there was a girl a few yards down the path, looking back at him. She stood in the middle of the trail, holding onto the leash of a big dog with both hands and wearing an expensive-looking ski jacket and boots.

"Hannah," he said.

"Declan."

They knew each other from school, had known each other since kindergarten, technically, though the most they'd ever spoken was when they were paired up once in home ec to learn how to balance a home budget. He'd spent most of it nervously talking about a book series he was reading, and she'd quietly pretended to listen while she typed things into the scientific calculator.

And now here she was, standing in his path in the middle of the woods, looking paler and sadder than he remembered. The longer the financial crisis stretched on, the worse people were at school. A year ago she'd been prom queen and now no one spoke to her.

The dog sniffed the air, then pulled her down the path towards Declan.

"This is Waldo," she said.

“Like *Where’s Waldo?*” Declan reached out a hand and Waldo sniffed his palm.

“Like Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

“Are you a fan?”

“My cousin named him. He’s a pretentious dick,” she said, and Declan laughed. She smiled.

They walked together again the next day, and kept walking together after that, and at some point her mittened hand found its way into his.

Weeks passed. Declan worked on his map. Time with Hannah escaped the confines of the forest, broke out into the real world, where it was never quite as satisfying.

They didn’t see each other much at school, but it didn’t take long for his friends to catch on anyway, and for him to be leveled with every version of *what the fuck, man?* they could come up with. He either shrugged or he didn’t answer, didn’t try to justify it. The version of him that had once craved approval from Jack and attention from Margot, had hoped Rob would quit teasing him about his hair and his clothes and whatever else he could find to poke at, had evaporated, been left at the bottom of the dark river that had swept him away from Andy’s body. He always hated that needy part of himself but now it was gone he felt empty, cold. Every time he thought about wanting something he was back at the trailhead, on the ground next to the Trailblazer losing his mind.

The more he walked the more he could feel what was not there. Margot’s absence was a blank space that stood next to him, and instead of propping him up and pointing him towards reality, it pulled at him, confused him, scrambled him more than he was already scrambled. Margot wasn’t gone, not the way Andy was gone, but his relationship with Hannah felt like the final doors closing between them. He wasn’t sure how Margot found out about their relationship, but it was clear when she did because she stopped talking to him, stopped looking at him. When he sat down at their lunch table, she quietly pretended he wasn’t there.

When he met Hannah's family, he was introduced using the word *boyfriend*, which felt accurate but strange. It did not go well. Hannah was stiff and snappish at everyone but him, and the rest of them, parents, older sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, their eyes slid over him like he was only partially there, and asked about his college plans again and again until he hid in the bathroom for ten minutes. He didn't want to see the looks on their faces if he told them that college was too expensive, and in the fall Hannah when would be somewhere far away, he would still be at the dusty hardware store downtown.

But then he met Hannah's oldest cousin, the one who'd gone to an Ivy League school and was slowly taking over the family businesses. The one who everyone in the family seemed to gravitate around, even Hannah, as much as she disliked him. Chuck's eyes didn't slide past him—they stared at him, and it wasn't disapproval in his face, it was the squint and furrowed brow of Declan's math teacher when asked a difficult question, or his mom when doing their taxes, or Margot when she wanted to complain about something but didn't want it to sound like a complaint.

"He's an ass, don't worry about him," Hannah said after they'd left, her parents eyeing Declan's—Andy's—trailblazer. Declan didn't say anything. He usually didn't say anything. It was different with Hannah than with other people, easier, quieter. Despite the title he'd been given—*boyfriend*, *boyfriend*, *boyfriend*—she never seemed to require much of him. Sometimes he liked that and sometimes he didn't. He tried not to compare her to Margot and hated when it happened anyway, when she looked at him and he didn't know what it meant because it was Margot's face he was used to reading.

Though his dad had lost his job last summer as well, unlike with so many others, the Kacy family was not directly at fault, and Declan's family accepted her with warmth and only minimal confusion.

"But what happened to Margot?" his mom said as they stood in the kitchen, him drying dishes after she washed them. The trailblazer sat in the driveway outside, took up half the small kitchen window.

Two months ago Andy had gotten in it and driven away. He would come back. Somehow. Any time now.

“Mom...”

“I’m serious, you two were the perfect little couple for years and now suddenly there’s this new girl? Did you fight?”

“We were never...” he sighed. “Margot’s fine. She’s dating Jack. I think.”

His mom grumbled about this but didn’t pursue it. He wasn’t actually sure if this was true. Unlike everyone else in high school Margot and Jack seemed unconcerned with words like *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*, which he had to admit probably made them perfect for each other. She was able to keep up with Jack, able to employ what Declan secretly thought of as defensive irony. To Jack, everything was a joke, and you had to pretend you were in on it, because if you didn’t it might end in a laugh at your expense. It probably meant that whatever was between them was a joke, too. He wasn’t sure how he would feel if it turned out that it wasn’t.

The *did you fight* question was more complicated, because Margot never fought with anyone, not really. Instead she amputated relationships, left them hanging while she got over a perceived slight or some confused emotion she wasn’t willing to confront, until she was ready to reattach. It had happened to just about all of them at some point, all of them except Declan. Until now. He was trying not to be pissed about it, because after everything she’d said—and didn’t say—last summer, it wasn’t fair for her to go and ice him out for dating Hannah, regardless of how much she disliked her

None of it mattered. Margot, Hannah, Jack, none of it. The ground was so, so cold.

Declan shivered, dried his last plate, and left the kitchen.

“You only come out here when you’ve got Waldo,” Declan said. It was getting warmer, the ground starting to thaw, rain turning the snow slushy with mud.

Waldo tugged on his leash and Hannah let out the extension so he could sniff at a tree.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

She stopped and watched Waldo investigate the tree. It was getting dark, a dome of clouds over the sky only letting a few streaks of orange sunset break through.

“Don’t you feel that?” she said, so quietly he almost didn’t hear it.

He looked around at the trees, excited for a moment, remembering the pull under a dark current, being swept away.

“Feel what?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure how to describe it. Being out here...it makes me feel crazy. Like there’s always someone behind me, but I shouldn’t turn around to look.”

Declan looked behind them automatically.

“But there’s nothing. See?” he said, turning her by the shoulders. “Nothing.”

Hannah smiled. He kissed her and told himself that this was what he wanted and that everything was okay.

His map of the forest grew bigger and grew stranger as he ventured farther from the path and from the parking lot. Sometimes, with a stab of fragile satisfaction, he was glad Margot was not with him, because she would be too logical, she would ruin it like she’d always ruined it when they were kids. Now he didn’t have to wait for her, didn’t have to turn back when she got scared.

Even though he kept drawing them, he knew maps weren’t supposed to have extra spaces, weren’t supposed to include places that were sometimes there and sometimes weren’t. He taped new pages onto the paper, foldouts of clearings, little marshes, unnamed streams, valleys of dead pines that appeared one day and were gone the next. When he found somewhere new, he stood for a

moment and tried to think back to the car, and the feeling of being swallowed. It wasn't that he wanted it to happen again, but he did want to understand it, however the forest wanted to explain it.

What did you do to me?

He wasn't sure what exactly he was looking for on his walks, if he was looking for anything beyond an answer to that question and an endless march away from the sight of Andy's frost blue face. He found things, though. He found a hunting rifle, old and filthy, and growing moss on the wood on the stock. He found a tree that had been struck by lightning and splintered down the middle. He found a field of stumps with the flaky bark of pine trees, all cut strangely at eye-level.

He never brought the map out when Hannah was with him, kept it carefully folded in the Altoids tin in his pocket until he was sure he was alone, because he wasn't sure if he'd be able to explain it if asked. Sometimes he would doodle little impressions of a new place so he could remember it later.

It was the end of March and he stood off the path, peering through the trees. A moment ago he'd been sure he saw something just over the ridge of a hill, something too symmetrical, man-made. Maybe an old hunting blind. Or a roof. Something about the shape of it felt familiar, but when he reached the top of the hill, there was nothing, just empty, endless forest.

A twig snapped behind he and he spun around. There was a face looking at him through the trees, a man standing back on the path. It was Chuck Kacy, wearing an orange safety vest and carrying a hunting rifle. He stared at Declan, brow furrowed, and opened his mouth.

And Declan ran. He had no idea why, but he did—turned and bolted down the other side of the hill, towards the roof that had disappeared. For a moment he was sure Chuck was crashing through the underbrush after him, or leveling that rifle like he was a fleeing deer. He ran faster, barely felt when his clothes and skin caught on thorns and branches because there was an enormous, irrational fear coursing through him, that if the man caught up with him, he would poison him and cut him

apart and burn him to the ground. When he stopped, breathing hard and propped up against a tree, Chuck was gone.

If his family noticed that he was disappearing in the evenings and that he was skipping school, they said nothing. The pictures of Andy that had covered the house after the funeral had slowly migrated to the shelf in the living room as the house filled up with baby things for the impending arrival of baby Benjamin. They were brought out of storage and gifted by neighbors and relatives after word had gotten out that Christy was having a boy, and Declan felt like he was sitting on that shelf with the pictures of Andy, like their house was trying its best to contain him so it could move on.

Sometimes, especially in the middle of the night, unable to sleep in a half-empty bunkbed, Declan had a thought: he was no longer the only person occupying his brain. There was the him that went about his day, not sleeping, pretending to eat, shuffling the halls of the high school, but there was the other him, too, the boy who had curled up on the frozen ground next to his brother's body and got swallowed up by the forest. And even as time passed, days turned into weeks turned into months, the other boy, the other him, still sat there on the ground.

There was still time, still time, he could fix it, Andy was just sleeping, not gone yet—

Declan was beginning to understand what had happened that day. He couldn't think about it too hard, though, not yet. If he named it, it would crumble, but if he could just feel blindly along its edges, maybe the truth of it would take shape. There was something he hadn't tried yet, something he was too scared to try because he had a feeling it might work. He had been trying to make it happen again, and it was like forcing open a door that was locked. He needed to ask for the key.

April began and the woods rained even when the rest of town did not, ice melting steadily from branches, and wind dislodging the night's rain from budding leaves. Declan wore Andy's red rain jacket around everywhere, the hood pulled up just in case. Hannah had stopped venturing out in the woods with him, preferring to stick to the sidewalks in town or the paved roads. She claimed this was due to the spring mud, but Declan couldn't help think about what she'd said a few weeks earlier. *Don't you feel that?* Whatever she had felt, he had not.

He followed the longest path he'd found yet, the one that took him to the edge of an abandoned farm, and then to a not-abandoned corn field, then curled deep into the forest. He climbed a long, slow incline and followed the path along a ridge with ravines on either side. Eventually the path veered off the ridge, wound down the side of the ridge and toward a little stream at the bottom, but Declan stayed at the top, stepping carefully off the path. The trees were thinner up here, tall thin pines with most of the needles at the very top. The ground was cushioned and orange with dead needles.

He walked a few yards off the path, his footsteps silent. The sky was more visible up here with the thin pines, and he could see the big puffy clouds had darkened with the promise of rain. He looked around at the pines and tried not to think about Andy, even though part of him was always thinking about Andy.

He took a deep breath, and zipped up the red jacket.

"Do it again," he said. "Please." He closed his eyes, reached out his hands like he could pull the forest to him, meet it halfway. It was almost immediate—a tingling in his feet, an undeniable presence all around him, like he'd jumped into Ashton Lake. His eyes flew opened—he wanted to see it this time, wanted to understand. The forest looked sharper somehow, though at the same time like it was losing color, the lines distinct but the details blurring.

And hope and excitement swelled in his chest, because it was real, it was *real*, and it wanted him. He didn't know what that meant but he didn't care. He felt his body moving against his will, though when he looked down at himself he was completely stationary. It was a feeling inside, a feeling of—

“Declan?”

He spun around towards the path to see a dog pulling at a leash to get closer to him, panting. It was Waldo, and holding his leash was Chuck Kacy, staring at him from a few feet off the path—and Declan was swallowed once again.

He was pulled through thick darkness, things like hands brushing against him as he tumbled along the bottom of a current. It dragged him along farther this time, so long he started losing track of his thoughts and descending into panic, his chest tight, lungs forgetting how to breathe, hands unable to grab anything solid, softness slipping thorough his fingers like water—

He gasped, hands on his knees, struggling not to fall over. He stood in the middle of the path. The sun was higher in the sky than it should have been, and to his right was a half-collapsed farm house and a silo with a tree growing out of the top. The abandoned farm. He turned around quickly, still breathing hard, looking everywhere for an explanation of what had just happened. But he knew what had just happened. He asked the forest to do it again, and it had. It worked.

He crouched on the ground, not trusting his legs. It worked. He kneeled, soaking the knees of his jeans, and reached out at the ground, grabbing two handfuls of dead leaves and squeezing them until they crumbled. Most of them were scattered away from him, like he blew them away when he landed.

He was really here, on solid ground and not being pulled along the bottom of that endless river. His mind was a stream of questions, and ideas, and possibilities. He was not wearing a watch, but if he had been he wondered what time it would show—the time he'd just left or the time he'd arrived in? He was almost afraid to think about it too much, as though too many questions would spark anger, or crush some fragile, existential organ.

He sat back on his heels and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He flipped it open. It had been fully charged when he left, but now the battery was dead. If it was fried he was in trouble, he couldn't afford a new one and his parents definitely wouldn't help out, but he couldn't think about that right now. He put it back in his pocket and got up slowly, his legs feeling more solid.

He followed the path in the same direction he had earlier. He had no plan beyond asking the forest for what he wanted, and now that it had happened he felt pulled along on another type of current. He stopped in the middle of the path, remembering suddenly—Chuck and Waldo had seen him. Had they been following him? He kept walking, sped up when he came again to the incline. He was not sure what he would find at the top of the ridge. A nudge at the back of his mind, like a hand on his shoulder wanted him to turn away, whispered that it wasn't something he should see, but he had to see, he had to know.

Part of him felt like he was still standing on that bed of pine needles, surrounded by the thin trees, because this time as he climbed the hill there was a bubbling in his chest, a sense of expansion. If he reached out he would be able to touch more than tree bark and cool wind, he might grasp at the edge of some immense, impossible language.

Except, part of him was still sitting on the frozen gravel, too, back up against the side of the Trailblazer, his whole body rejecting the cold fact of the body in the driver's seat.

He heard footsteps and the jingle of a leash and slowed down, not wanting Chuck to see him or Waldo to smell him. They came into view and he kept his distance, staying just close enough to make out their colors through the trees. They followed the ridge, Waldo speeding up like he'd caught a scent.

Declan sped up, too, the dirt and pine needles softening his footsteps. He caught a flash of red up ahead. His breath caught and something sick dropped into the pit of his stomach. He should turn around, shouldn't try to see what he was trying to see, but the new, indestructible bits of his

mind charged on, determined to know as much as he could. He came around a bend and there he was, a boy in a red raincoat a hundred yards away and standing beneath a copse of enormous pines.

The sick feeling gripped him harder. He took slow steps forward. Chuck had clearly seen the boy too, was approaching cautiously, though Waldo was pulling at the leash to run over to him.

The whole image looked strangely soft, like he was unable to focus his eyes. He rubbed them and looked again. No, it wasn't the whole image, it was just the boy in red that was blurry at the edges. The boy in red, who he was not quite able to think of as anything else, *anyone* else.

"Declan?" Chuck said.

The boy spun around and saw Chuck. His expression did not change even as they stood there looking at each other. He was frozen in awe, eyes white like a frightened horse. He flickered, stuttered, and his eyes slid from Chuck to Declan. When their eyes met, pain split through Declan's head.

The sick feeling spread outwards into his limbs and up his neck in waves. He gasped, hands shaking, and fell heavily to the ground, clutching at the pine needles. The boy in red stretched and blurred, his face wispy and pale like a smudge on the face of the forest. He flickered again, and vanished. Declan felt like he was flickering too, the forest pulling him, pushing him, unsure what to do with him.

There were hands on him, on his shoulders and face, real hands this time, and he opened his eyes to see Chuck Kacy standing over him. Waldo edged his way in as well, pressed a cold nose to Declan's forehead.

"You okay?" Chuck said.

Declan tried to say *yes*, but nothing came out of his mouth.

"Come on, let's get you out of the dirt."

Strong hands closed around his arms and hauled him to his feet. He nearly fell over again, the sickness radiating through his legs and wobbling his knees. Chuck kept him upright, and they walked

side-by-side back down the hill, along the path the way he'd come, Declan trying to get ahold of his body and sort through the pain that didn't seem to have an origin point. It was everywhere and nowhere.

Step by step it faded, and he realized that they had turned, and Chuck was leading him down an unfamiliar path. Waldo trotted along in front of them, familiar with the route. They were near the cornfield he'd passed earlier—he could see the flat gray emptiness of it down the hill and through the trees.

“Where are we going?” he said.

“Almost there.”

He stumbled down the hill, Chuck's arm tight around him. At the edge of the field was a small cabin, no bigger than a tool shed. If Declan had discovered it alone, he would have been delighted, but as it was, a different kind of sickness came over him, this time a quivery fear in chest. He didn't want to go inside, but Chuck marched him towards it and he couldn't think of a polite way to get away.

“Got some water bottles inside,” Chuck said, as though he could sense Declan's hesitation.

“You'll feel better. Probably just dehydrated.”

They trudged through dead, wet leaves and Declan stopped himself from looking at Chuck in confusion. Chuck had seen the boy in the red jacket, had seen his face and had seen him disappear. Was he pretending he hadn't? Did he not remember? There were rules here, he could sense them, but they belonged to the forest, and the more he tried to think about the boy in red, the more the strange nowhere-pain returned.

Chuck pushed open the door and they went inside the cabin. It looked even smaller on the inside, with a single window high in the wall, a misshapen table with an electric lantern on top, and a single folding chair. A narrow bed took up half the floorspace, lumpy sheets and blankets piled on

top of it, and a sweater hanging over the end. It seemed weird for Chuck to have a hunting cabin on his own property, but maybe Declan just didn't understand hunting.

Chuck sat him down on the folding chair, then grabbed a water bottle from a big plastic pack in the corner and handed it over. Declan was not thirsty, but he opened it and drank.

He'd never spoken to Chuck without Hannah present, and he wondered if he was about to be confronted about their relationship. Or, perhaps Chuck had realized it was Declan who had panicked and run away from him that day in the woods, and wanted answers.

Waldo circled the floor, big tail thumping on the wood paneled walls, panting breath filling up the silence. He turned around and sniffed at Declan's legs and Declan pet him automatically. He glanced at the sweater on the bed. It was knitted pale pink, with long fringe on the end. It looked familiar.

"So," Chuck said. Declan's whole body tensed and he tried to instruct himself to calm down. "How does it work?"

Declan stared at him. He swallowed a few times, mouth dry despite the water. "How does what work?"

Chuck leaned against the opposite wall, still too close. The only door was to Declan's left, equidistant between them, and Chuck raised an eyebrow at the way Declan's eyes shot to it.

"You know what I'm talking about," he said, with a smile.

Declan drank more water. If Chuck was asking what he thought he was asking, Declan had no idea how to explain, and no idea if he should even try. He didn't understand it himself, and part of him still didn't quite believe in it.

"I really don't know what—"

"Quit bullshitting me," Chuck said, voice growing harder. Declan glanced at the door again. Something at his core felt like it was shaking. Why was he here? What did Chuck want?

Waldo sat down and laid his head on Declan's knee. Chuck squinted at him, took a step closer, crossed his arms. "How old are you right now?"

"What? Why—?"

"Just tell me."

He swallowed. "Eighteen."

Chuck took a deep breath, sucked in his cheek in frustration.

"Damn it," he said. "Was that the first time just now? Your first jump, or whatever?"

"I don't know what you're—"

"Yes, you do. Answer me."

Declan petted Waldo's head slowly, trying to calm himself down. Maybe Chuck knew something. Maybe he'd be able to help him find answers for what was happening. He hesitated, then shook his head slowly.

"Not the first time," he said, quietly.

Chuck nodded, something sparking in his eyes. He pushed off from the wall and took a step forward, arms crossed.

"Tell me how it works."

Declan looked out the small, high window. He had the sudden feeling that they were not alone, that they had an unseen audience, and that even if he could answer Chuck's question, their onlookers would not want him to. He glanced again at the pink sweater.

"Why do you want to know?"

Chuck raised an eyebrow. "These are my woods," he said. "This is my property."

"Has it happened to you? The thing that happened to me?"

Chuck watched him closely, shook his head.

"Do you want it to?"

Chuck narrowed his eyes, held his gaze steady. "You don't know how it works, do you?"

Declan said nothing. His mind was spinning, caught between whatever the hell Chuck wanted, and the springy tension in his shoulders, and the pink sweater, and the stretched, white face of the boy in red, and the dark river running beneath everything, ready to pull him down once again.

And the hilltop. And the frozen gravel.

He took a deep breath and scratched Waldo behind the ears.

Chuck shook his head, looking out the window. “Just my fucking luck,” he said.

“I don’t understand any of this,” Declan said quietly. “I don’t have any answers.”

Chuck didn’t look at him.

“I’m sorry,” Declan tried. “I think I want to leave now, though.”

Chuck chewed on the inside of his cheek again, lost in thought, head tilting to one side. Declan stopped petting Waldo and the dog whined and nudged his leg. He stood up slowly, clutching the half empty water bottle.

“Thanks for your help, but I’m gonna go.”

“Sit your ass down,” Chuck snapped.

Declan sat back down.

Chuck shook his head again. “I don’t believe you,” he said, deciding. His eyes grew bigger, snapped back to Declan. “You must have done something. Even if you don’t know how it works, you know *something*. The forest, what does it want?”

“I—I don’t know how it works, I don’t know why it’s happening, I don’t even know how to describe it, I’m sorry—”

“No, that’s not good enough. We’re finally talking like adults, like human beings, and that’s all you have to say? You’ve been a plague on this family for a hundred years, and now you’re following Hannah around, dragging her into this, trying to get closer to the family because you want something. What do you want? Tell me.”

Declan's mouth fell open. There was too much there that didn't make any sense. Maybe Chuck was just crazy. Maybe they both were. Chuck pushed away from the cabin wall and took a few steps towards him. His plaid pullover looked suddenly ridiculous, fancy, immaculate wool, like he was just playing dress up.

There was an odd battle in Declan's head—the terrified part of him screamed to get out, get out, *get out* whatever it took, but a new, giddy, wild part of him wanted to laugh at Chuck and throw the water in his face just to bask in his anger and confusion.

“If I stop you right now, would everything change?” Chuck said, taking another step closer.

Declan clutched the seat of the folding chair, the laughing part of him overtaken by fear.

“Stop me how? Stop me from what?”

Why had he gone with Chuck? Why hadn't he tried to get away when they were back outside? Regret and terror burned sharp in his throat.

Chuck stood way too close, inches from Declan's bent knees, staring down at him. His big hands were stiff at his sides. They twitched, flexed, and Declan swallowed, imagining how tightly they might wrap around his neck.

Everything went cold. Something pulled at him, wanted him to sink down, down, down. He jumped to his feet to get away from it and the folding chair fell over with a bang. Waldo jumped around and started barking. Chuck leapt towards him, threw his arm up against Declan's throat and he choked and flailed, boot slamming into Chuck's shins.

And he was caught again, by hands much larger than Chuck's, and the cabin around him blurred.

“Shit,” Chuck said, and stumbled backwards, staring at him. But his fear quickly soured back to anger, and he lunged like he wanted to snatch Declan out of the forest's grip, but Declan pushed him away, hard.

“Stay back!” he shouted. Chuck flattened himself against the cabin's wall, and Declan wondered if he sensed what Declan sensed—that this time the things that grabbed him felt like fire, itching to

lick at anything that dared get too close. The cabin was blurry around him. Waldo barked and jumped on him, tail wagging and tongue hanging out like they were playing. Chuck shouted at him, and Declan tried to push him away, but Waldo jumped on him again, paws clawing at his jacket even as he was pulled under.

Instead of a rushing, this time his head was full of a howl of pain as he was pulled and spun backwards and backwards, all of the air pulled out of him with a snap.

He coughed and flailed, hands and knees landing in soft wetness, the smell of rotting leaves forcing itself down his throat. He gasped, panting, and his stomach turned horribly when a different smell hit him, something cloying and meaty, and he swallowed over and over with the automatic urge to keep himself from throwing up. The howl echoed after him, had followed him through time. A splash of red painted the leaves beside him, bright and sticky, and in the midst of it—

He went so cold he was sure for a moment he'd be pulled back down. He closed his eyes and took slow breaths, tried to force his body to stay put, tried not to smell the blood of Waldo's paw, ripped away at the joint, tendons still clinging to the muscle and bone.

He fell to his side, shivering, gasping for air, and kept his eyes squeezed shut until everything went black.

He didn't look at Waldo's paw again when he woke, left it where it was and stumbled out of the woods. Curfew had vanished since Andy died and no one noticed the state of him when he came home. He imagined being confronted with the same interrogation Andy always had been, even when coming home on time, but his parents were now occupied with the endless job hunt, and Christy's pregnancy. He'd always been the 'good kid' anyway, the one his parents didn't need to worry about. He hated when they'd use him as an example in front of the others—Declan comes home and does his homework on time. Declan isn't hanging out with bums. Declan isn't getting anyone pregnant—

because though they meant them as compliments, they built the horrible idea of a self-important dweeb of a son, one he was desperate not to be.

Maybe he should do something crazy, get them to re-implement the curfew. Maybe he should go ask Jack about his tackle box. Maybe he should go punch Jack in the face. Maybe he should stop coming home. He showered and shook away these thoughts.

It didn't occur to him until he lay in bed that night that he didn't know what day it was, how far the forest had sent him back. But when he checked his phone it was still April 12th. From that thought spiraled others—how did it work? How far back could it take him? Despite everything, Chuck and Waldo, the boy in red, the sick feeling through his whole body he hadn't been able to shake off, he lay on the bottom bunk and let the feeling on the hilltop overtake him again. Whatever it was, it was real, and it wanted him.

He wanted to tell Margot about it. When they were kids he felt like he had the power to make her believe all the things she was so adamant to not believe in, and he wondered if it was still possible, wondered if he should sneak out and walk through the woods, go knock on her window and whisper through the dark.

He shut his eyes tight. It was Hannah who he should want to tell things to, not Margot. Hannah who he liked, who was so comfortable to be around. Sudden guilt pinned him to the mattress. Would Waldo be alright? Would Chuck come after him again? And then, bigger and more terrifying—had the whole day even happened or had it been erased by whatever the forest did that final time? His head spun thinking about it, but he tried to remember what had happened on the hilltop before he'd 'jumped,' tried to remember if he had seen his other self coming up behind Chuck and falling into the dirt. He remembered and didn't remember. Somehow both had happened, both now lived in his mind side by side, and he couldn't be sure which was more real.

He fell asleep playing the day back in his head, trying to understand. The forest. The boy in red. Chuck. The pink sweater. The way the forest had plucked him out of danger. The horrible thing it had done to Waldo.

He went to school in the morning like everything was normal. Everything was not normal. His head was pounding and he hadn't been able to feel clean or dry since waking up on the wet ground in the semi-darkness. He couldn't seem to get the smell of rotting leaves and blood out of his nose, and everyone seemed determined to be extra loud and annoying, Rob clapping a hand on his shoulder as Declan floated, half conscious through the hallways towards the lunchroom. They sat down and Declan ate mechanically, ignored everyone until Fawn slid onto the bench opposite him and Lena sat down beside her.

The moment he looked at her he knew, he remembered. He tried not to stare, even as his mind spun with new questions, new worries and terrible possibilities—because the pink sweater in Chuck's cabin belonged to Lena.

Margot drove aimlessly through town. Her bag lay abandoned in the backseat, and with it the recorder, the notebook, and all of her remaining plans. She sat at green lights until someone came up behind her. She drove loops around the subdivision where Amy used to live. She drove past the Trailblazer, then turned around and drove past it again. Jane called and she didn't answer. Three different times she saw a big black truck, wide and shiny—peeking around a corner after her, sitting in a parking lot, keeping one car behind her even after she made a few random turns. She was just being paranoid. It was three different trucks that her mind, or her vertigo, or the fucking marble was telling her was the same one.

She turned onto her old street, drove all the way to her house and pulled into the driveway. The truck passed by without slowing down. She parked the car and let her leg bounce up and down while she stared at the marble in her hand. Without her permission, her mind had come to a conclusion about who had given it to her, an impossible conclusion. She remembered this marble, part of a whole batch of milky blue ones that they'd found together in Declan's Grandpa's house. This one was slightly darker than the rest, as though it had been baked for too long. The rest of the batch was still between their houses. If she got out of her car right now and walked through the woods, she could stand over the spot where they were buried. Or—

She closed her hand around the marble and pulled out of the driveway. Her dad's old tool shed was long empty, but maybe—

The trailer park was a five-minute drive. She stopped looking in her rear view mirror, didn't particularly care if the black truck was following her or not. The path between their houses was right at the back of the park, just around the corner from the O'Neill's front door. She parked at the community center, wanting to stay out of everyone's way, just do what she needed to do and get out. Except she had no shovel. She started automatically towards the O'Neill's place, feeling awkward in her pencil skirt and button-down, a marble held in one hand and her bag held in the other.

Declan had always provided the shovel—an ancient, splintery thing he would tug out from under the front steps—but even if it was still there, Margot couldn't just take it and risk being caught by Christy or Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill. Instead she headed past their side street towards Rob and Lena's. Rob was a landscaper, surely shovels were used in landscaping.

“Margot!”

She spun around. Scott and Benji were behind her, Benji on a scooter and Scott on foot, looking embarrassed for having shouted her name. She waved and approached, Scott jogging and Benji rattling towards her.

The scooter had long ago been a charity Christmas gift to the O'Neills from the church, a fact which Andy hated so much he drew pentagrams and death metal lyrics all over it in permanent marker. Most were scraped off, just a few black smudges remaining for Margot to stare at as Benji came to a halt in front of her.

“Are you here to talk to Mr. Rob again?” he said.

“Hi, Benji. No, I'm looking for, well, does your dad have a shovel?” Margot said to Scott.

“Probably. Why?” Scott said.

“I need to dig something up.”

“Is it a body?” Benji said immediately.

“No, it's just something I buried a long time ago. I want to see if it's still there.”

Benji and Scott shared a look and Benji hopped off the scooter.

“Can we come?”

She tried not to look annoyed, tried to slow down and remember what it felt like to be twelve and bored out of your mind. Her friends had rarely talked about the future, and she wondered now if they had, if they would have imagined their children still here, in the same place they'd once felt so trapped.

“Get the shovel and we'll talk.”

Rob wasn't home, and Lena didn't seem to mind the racket coming from the tool shed as they dug out the cobwebby shovel, or at least she didn't come outside.

"Thanks," Margot said, hoisting the shovel awkwardly over one shoulder, her bag slipping into the crook of her arm, the marble nearly falling out of her hand. Benji opened his mouth but Margot cut him off. "But I don't think you should be going anywhere with me without your parents' permission."

"Where are you going?" Scott said quickly.

Margot pointed out towards the woods.

"One sec," Scott said, and ran over to his front door. He leaned his head in and shouted, "Can me and Benji go out in the woods?"

After a moment, Lena's voice floated out to them—"Don't go too far, 'kay?"

The screen door slammed behind Scott and he hopped back down the stairs, grinning.

"Permission acquired," he said, and Benji snickered, and they were off. Scott took back the shovel in a enthusiastic display of chivalry, and Margot led the way towards the woods, trying not to look as suspicious as she felt as they passed the O'Neill's, and wondering if it was a terrible idea to involve the kids in whatever this was. They were just digging up marbles, but she couldn't get the glint of Chuck Kacy's binoculars out of her head, and had no idea what it might mean.

The boys bounced around her, interrupting each other and asking questions too quickly for her to answer. They hesitated a few steps into the woods, glancing at each other. Margot looked back at the O'Neill's, sure for a moment they'd been spotted.

"Everything alright?"

"Yep," Scott said, and sped up to lead the way forward. Benji looked around at the trees.

The path Margot and Declan had forged as kids had nearly disappeared into the underbrush. She doubted anyone had ever used it besides them, and they had not used it over a decade. As kids, the path had been an adventure, but now she found it wasn't nearly as long or as wild as it was in her

memory. As soon as the trailer park disappeared from sight behind them, the long, narrow clearing full of power lines appeared ahead. Scott fell back, grip tight on the shovel and his shoulders drawn up tight. Margot glanced around, wondering if the boys knew something she didn't. It was already overcast and growing darker, but the woods didn't feel any different than they always had.

"Head for the tower in the middle," Margot said, and Scott ran ahead.

"What's buried over there?" Benji asked again, as though she might tell him with Scott out of earshot.

"I'm not sure," she said, truthfully. Twenty years ago there'd been a milk jug full of marbles, but now? The marble was still in her hand and she was starting to worry about dropping it in the tall grass. She tried not to imagine a hand quietly opening her passenger door and dropping it inside, tried not to imagine the someone her brain had decided that hand belonged to.

She shook her head, told herself to be rational.

Scott reached the tower and hooked one arm around its leg, head swiveling like he was looking around for something. Even from a distance he looked skittish.

"Is he scared?"

"What? No," Benji said immediately. "It's just, some weird stuff has happened in the woods before. He doesn't like being out here."

Scott leaned against the tower leg and held the shovel out like a weapon.

"I'm sorry, you two didn't have to come."

"Are you kidding? This is so freakin' cool. We're like, ghost hunters, or treasure hunters or something."

Benji swung his arms, swishing the smiley-face skirt around his skinny legs.

"I like your skirt," Margot said. It looked a bit familiar, like Christy might have worn it as a teenager. Benji looked down at it.

“Thanks. I saw someone do this in a music video. Jeans with a skirt.” He paused, then said, quieter, “Grandpa told me to take it off, but I like it.”

“It looks nice.”

He nodded, still looking down, and tucked a loose curl of hair behind his ear. Abruptly, he took off and ran up the slope to the tower.

When Margot caught up the boys were arguing about where the best place to bury a body would be.

“Start digging in that back corner, right next to the metal,” Margot said. “And I told you, it’s not a body.”

They took turns with the shovel, less because it was too much for one person and more because the boys were too excited to stand by without helping. The dirt was soft and wet, the few tufts of grass not drowned by the heavy rains came away easily under the point of the shovel. Margot looked up at the underside of the tower, just like she used to do when they’d come out here years ago.

“I see something!” Benji said, pointing.

Margot battled with herself for a moment, then slipped the blue marble deep into her pocket. It felt like the marble had moved past the point where it might disappear, had solidified into the real world. Or she had joined it somewhere in the in-between. She took the shovel from him and scraped the mud off the plastic top of the jug, barely a foot below the surface.

“What is it?” Benji said.

Margot didn’t answer, just kept shimmying the shovel deeper around the jug, trying not to cut it open with the sharp edge.

When more of it became visible, Scott leaned down to twist and tug on the handle until it came loose. He set it in the mud next to the hole. It was filthy but intact, mostly a wet, brown mess with bits of plastic peeking through. Margot crouched and started wiping off a big swath of the clay

mud, not particularly caring about her skirt and button-down that were soaking through with the dirt. It took a moment to see that something was wrapped around the outside.

“Shit,” she said, when the mud clung to her hands, then glanced up at the boys. “Don’t repeat that.”

Benji giggled but Scott looked overly seriously, like he wanted to prove he was mature enough to handle bad words. Margot thought of swearing lessons with Andy, she and Declan even younger than these two. Another of Benji’s uncles he would never meet.

Two plastic Meijer bags were wrapped around something thin and bendy, the whole contraption duct-taped to the outside of the jug. Margot gave up on trying to keep her clothes clean; she sat on a patch of grass and tried not to think too hard about what she was doing, about what was happening. She couldn’t remember the last time they’d dug up the marbles, if they had taped the bags to the outside then for some reason, or if they were new. She unwrapped the plastic and tried her best to wipe her hands off before reaching in and pulling out the thing inside—a thin spiral notebook, black, college ruled, the cover worn and the edges so frayed they were soft.

Though it had been buried under a foot of cold, wet clay, the notebook was warm to the touch. It felt strange in her hands, thrumming like it might jump and stutter away.

“Is that Uncle Declan’s?”

“It’s...”

If she said *it’s vibrating*, she would sound insane. Holding the thing made her very aware of her own pulse, pounding in her fingertips, almost as if it belonged to the book instead of to her.

It looked just like the ones her mom used to buy in bulk before the start of each school year. It was thinner than it should have been, thinner than the width of the spiral, like half the pages had been ripped out. She flipped open the cover, trying her best to keep it out of the mud. Sure enough, half-torn pages still clung to the spiral, some of the edges covered in blank ink—hints of the little

doodles Declan used to draw in class, boxes, clouds, stars, elaborate eyes full of all three. She let out a shaky breath, stomach in a free fall.

Beneath these remnants was a full page, mostly blank, a slash of his spiky handwriting right in the middle.

M—

This should explain everything. I'm sorry.

Love, D.

At the bottom was scrawled, *outcome 2*.

The boys leaned closer behind her, started whispering while Margot stared at the handwriting and tried to remember if she was asleep or if this was really happening.

“What the—”

“What d’you think it means?”

“D, that’s Uncle Declan, right? Is this his?”

“Did you know this was here?”

“If she knew it was here, she woulda dug it up a long time ago, dumbass.”

“I dunno, maybe not. Maybe it’s like one of those things we did in third grade, the box that you put stuff in and then you gotta wait ten years before digging it back up. Is it like that?”

Margot didn’t answer their questions. She barely heard them.

“Um, Miss Margot?”

This should explain everything. Declan had never been so succinct in his life. Had this really been buried down here for twelve years? What if she’d never come back? What if she’d never thought about the marble collection again and had never found the notebook? She gripped it harder as though this alternate world was in danger of coming true and ripping Declan’s words away from her.

She went to flip the page.

“Wait!”

She jumped a little at how loud Benji shouted. He shuffled around in front of her, staring wide-eyed at the notebook from behind his smudged, pink-framed glasses. He held up a hand like he might touch it, but thought better of it, let it drop back down to his muddy knees.

“Are you sure you should open it?”

In the overcast gray, he looked sharper than usual. Margot blinked, looked around and realized it wasn't just Benji. Everything was sharper than it should have been, and her grip on gravity was slipping. Even moving too quickly was an invitation for it to fall away from her.

“Why not?” she said.

He bit the inside of his cheek, looking from Margot, to Scott, and back to the book.

“It's just, don't you think it could be cursed?”

“What do you mean?”

Her Chicago self, the person she'd been just a handful of days ago, wanted to smile indulgently at this, but *this* Margot, the one sitting in mud and damp grass with an impossible marble in her pocket and Declan's words in her hands, watched Benji shift uncomfortably and was ready to believe anything he said. All the barriers against this town she'd been so determined to keep standing were crumbling around her.

“It was in the woods,” Benji said.

Behind her, Scott stood up and attempted to wipe bits of earth off his jeans.

“The woods aren't safe,” Scott said.

Benji got to his feet as well, the hem of his skirt dark with dirt and his hands coated in mud. He picked up the shovel.

“I think we should open it,” he said. “Just not here. Besides, looks like it's gonna rain.”

The boys looked up at the sky.

“Community center?” Scott said, and Benji nodded.

Margot closed the book and got up slowly. She slipped on the mud and almost fell on the milk carton.

“Should we put it back?” Benji said quietly, like anything else would be theft.

But Margot shook her head and picked it up. She couldn’t risk there being something else inside, something else she was meant to find. She slipped the book back into the plastic bag.

“Come on,” Scott said, and he and Benji ducked out from under the tower. Benji dragged the shovel through the grass behind him.

Margot trudged after them, slipping so much in her cheap flats that she paused and took them off, tucked them under one arm. There was no saving her clothes now, anyway. The smell of impending rain hit her and she wanted to cry—the squish of mud and grass familiar between her toes, and the jug of marbles heavy in her arms. The notebook. The note. The blue marble. If she thought about any of them she might collapse into the muddy grass, mind overflowing, so she just kept walking.

She’d lost control of the situation, felt like she’d spent twelve years buried too, only to emerge from the mud and be pulled along after two kids who seemed so much more prepared for whatever was happening than she was. Maybe they were.

The sky darkened. A few fat droplets of warm rain hit her arms as they left the woods and hurried along the empty street. Margot kept to the grass. At the sight of the community center's big, double doors, Margot thought of the wedding, and the power outage, and Rob yelling at Chuck Kacy to leave.

"Hey, what did Chuck Kacy talk to you about at the wedding?" she called ahead. For a moment the boys kept walking, not giving any indication that they heard her. Then Benji turned back.

"It's kind of complicated," he said. "We'll explain later. Come on."

"Won't it be locked? I think it's closed," Margot said as they crossed the street. All the lights were off.

"Yeah, but it doesn't lock very well," Benji said. He hung the shovel over his shoulders and hurried across the muddy lawn.

"You can pretty much just push it open if you try hard enough," Scott said.

"You know this from experience?" Margot said, trying again to not look suspicious with their muddy clothes and odd assortment of items, about to break into the community center.

"No," Benji said too quickly. "We've just, like, heard about it."

Scott nodded. "For sure."

They rounded a corner and reached a back door up a few concrete steps.

"Besides, we can't really go anywhere else right now, 'cause my mom doesn't want us talking to you, and Scott's dad will be home soon and he doesn't like me."

Scott climbed the steps and jiggled the door handle.

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true," Margot said at once, in some impulse to protect Benji from Rob's disapproval. "About Scott's dad, I mean. I know your mom doesn't want me around."

"No, he definitely doesn't like me. He says..." Benji trailed off.

“He says mean things, sometimes,” Scott said, and shoved the door with one shoulder. It fell open with a crack, and he gestured them inside.

Rob had never been subtle. When he didn't like something, he made sure everyone knew about it. Margot swallowed and tried not to think too much about what exactly he might have said to Benji. She couldn't get a read on Benji, on how deeply he might absorb hostility like that. He had Declan's face but she was beginning to see a very different set of expressions, and a very different set of difficulties. It had been hard, at times, to read Declan, too. Sometimes bad things slid right off his shoulders, but sometimes he caught them, opened himself up and let them in.

She remembered what Lena had said in the car the day of the wedding, *I just know that family is going to have enough to deal with in a couple years.*

Margot climbed the stairs after Benji. It was so dark inside she stopped in the doorway to avoid walking into something. Scott lit up his phone screen and they crept into the darkness. The door swung closed behind her and she realized they were in the kitchen. One by one they edged around counters and across the uneven linoleum, leaving trails of mud behind. Benji halted and turned around, eyes wide, and Margot startled, heart jumping into her throat. But he just scanned the counters and swiped something small from beneath a line of cabinets. Scott paused as Benji rushed back to the broken door and re-locked it, then crouched in front of it for a moment.

“What are you doing?” Margot whispered, as though someone might overhear.

“Oh, it's just supposed to, um. Help,” he said.

“What is? Help with what?”

“Just things,” he said.

They left the kitchen, following Scott's dim blue light. Margot's feet were gritty on the floor. She looked around, checking the dark corners of the room before she could stop herself. The walls were cluttered with stacked tables and chairs, but the floor was empty and her toes curled as though expecting a sudden attack from out of the darkness.

Scott sat down in front of the duck mural and put his phone on the floor, light pointed upwards, making the ducks look ghostly and demented in the cold light. Margot set the jug down near the phone and pulled out the notebook. She sat down on the tile and set the notebook on the floor in front of her.

“Hang on,” Benji said, and walked in a circle around where they sat, the thing from the kitchen back in his hand. It was a salt shaker. The salt poured out quickly, shimmering a bit as it formed a sparse circle around them.

Margot watched in disbelief, fingers tingling where they touched the edges of the book.

“Overkill,” Scott said.

“I’m just being careful. It’s not like you can pour too much or something.” Benji sat down and Margot looked around at the closed circle of salt, feeling strangely contained, like it might actually be achieving whatever bizarre purpose it was meant to serve.

“Okay,” Benji said, taking a breath and setting his hands lightly on his knees. “I think you should open it.”

She nodded, feeling half ridiculous and half determined. She opened to the first page, read Declan’s note again by the dim light. Then she carefully turned to the next page and the boys leaned in closer to see. They all stared at it for a moment, until she turned to the next page, then the next. She flipped the pages quicker, until she got to the end, then turned back to the beginning.

“What does it mean?” Benji breathed.

She leaned closer to look at the second page again. Scott picked up his phone and shined it on the paper. At first she’d thought every line in the entire notebook had been scribbled out, but under the light Margot could make out a few individual letters but the words themselves were nothing but indecipherable lines and loops. There was so much ink on each thin page that it had bled through in some places, the paper brittle and heavy with it.

“Is it a code or something?” Scott said.

“How would you even solve it if it was? You can’t even read it.”

Margot turned the pages slowly but it was pointless. Every page was the same, a block of black scribbles. Once in a while a blob looked like a might have been a letter, but as a whole it was illegible.

“Why would he leave this?” she said under her breath. She flipped to the beginning. *Outcome 2* was written at the bottom of the first page. What the hell did that mean, Declan?

Scott tapped his fingers against his phone.

“Maybe there’s invisible ink or something? Like we did with the—”

A screech came from the kitchen, and dim gray light appeared under the swinging door.

“Who’s in there?” a voice called.

Benji gasped and slammed the book shut. “Shit. Westfall.”

They boys leapt to their feet before Margot could even process the creak of the kitchen door.

“Bet that old bitch—er, lady across the street called the cops again,” Scott said. Margot got shakily to her feet, the book still open on the floor between them.

“You boys aren’t supposed to be in here. There’s a lock on the door for a reason.” Westfall’s boots scraped against the tile in the kitchen.

Benji went stiff, eyes shooting to Margot. The light flashed off his glasses. He dove for the book, snatching it off the floor, and he took off running towards a door at the back.

“*Wait—*” she hissed.

Scott hesitated for a moment, then grabbed the jug of marbles and ran after Benji, leaving Margot standing there with filthy clothes, a shovel in a circle of salt, and Westfall swinging the kitchen door open. She grabbed her phone out of her bag and turned the light on, walking briskly towards the kitchen door to meet him.

Westfall turned on a flashlight and shined it across the floor, then up to her face.

“Margot Hill? That you?”

She squinted, held her hand up against the bright light.

“Yeah. It’s raining,” she said, hoping this was true. “Sorry. I was walking around. Wanted to get out of it for a minute. I didn’t realize it was locked, the door just opened when I pushed on it.”

He took a few steps closer and lowered the flashlight.

“Couldn’t just sit in your car?” he said. “I’m guessing that’s you in the parking lot? Nobody around here drives a Kia.”

She cast around in the dark for inspiration.

“Whatcha doing in here?” he said.

“Would you believe the duck mural is haunted?” she said. She expected a raised eyebrow or a pity-chuckle, but he shined his flashlight on it in consideration.

“Nah, it was painted in ’98,” he said after a moment, as though this made it ghost proof. “You alone in here? Usually it’s those kids breaking in and causing trouble. Thought I heard little delinquent feet making a run for it.”

“Just me.”

“What’s with the shovel?”

“What shovel?” she said. “Come on, it’s creepy as hell in here.”

And there it was, the raised eyebrow, but he didn’t question it, just followed her out through the kitchen and outside. She’d been right, it was raining heavily now, and she huddled under the eaves as he stomped down the concrete steps after her.

“Well, get going,” he said. “I’m not gonna arrest you just for old-time’s sake.”

She glanced at the rental car, then past it, towards Rob and Lena’s.

She looked up at Westfall, eyes narrowed. “Rob Ackerman told me you found drugs and a gun buried by Declan’s car.”

He sighed heavily. “Goddam kids.” He shook his head. “There’s nothing new to tell you, Margot. We don’t have any suspects, we don’t even have any new theories. The sheriff wasn’t exactly thrilled about reopening the case to begin with, but I—”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I just wanna know what the drugs were.” What had he kept in the vials? She was hoping *what* would lead to *why*.

“You know I can’t tell you anything about—”

“About an open case, I know. But you just said the sheriff doesn’t care about it, no one but you and me cares anymore, not really. How much longer is the case gonna be open this time?”

“Now, that’s not fair. His family—”

“His family just wants to move on. They don’t want all this dragged out again.”

He shook his head and looked around at the rain, drowning the lawn and streaming down the sides of the street towards the gutters. Margot thought she caught a flash of black smiley-face skirt disappearing around the corner of a neighbor’s trailer and out of sight.

Westfall sighed his world-weariest sigh and Margot knew she had him. She stayed quiet, waiting for him to battle it out with himself. He mumbled, shuffled his wet boots, turned back to face her.

“Follow me over to the station, then. I can’t promise anything.”

She nodded, and smiled.

The police station hadn’t changed as long as Margot could remember, still the square block of concrete next to the blinking red light in the middle of town. She parked across the street at the hardware store, stepped barefoot onto the concrete before remembering to put her shoes back on.

There was a new addition after all, she saw as she crossed the street—a metal ramp covering the three steps up to the double doors. It rattled under foot, rain plinking off the handrails. She struggled to keep the sopping, disintegrating shoes on her feet as she went inside. Westfall was already half sitting on his desk, gave her a raised eyebrow in greeting. He was looking over a sheet of paper that he waved in the air.

“Report,” he said. “Says the active ingredient in whatever was in those vials was N...N-allyl noro...I can’t pronounce it. Big long word.”

He turned the paper around so she could see. She didn't recognize it either.

"Looks like some kind of opioid but I can't be sure. Waiting for Bill at County to let me know what all this means. Not really my area."

"Can I take a picture of this?" she said, reaching for her phone.

"No you can not," Westfall said, but didn't take the report away.

She huffed and tried to memorize the word instead, pulled suddenly back to high school chemistry and all the dumb mnemonics Declan used to come up with. She sounded it out, rolled the long word around in her head.

A car door slammed somewhere outside, and Westfall pulled the report away.

"Now shoo, before you get me in trouble."

"What about the gun?" she said.

He took a deep, annoyed breath but she cut him off.

"Anything," she said. "What kind was it, was it loaded, were there bullets with it, were any of them fired, is it registered—?"

"Fine, fine," he held up a hand to get her to stop. "We don't know much, but it was loaded, safety on, full magazine."

"That means...?"

"No shots fired," he said, and shooed her towards the door. She nodded.

"Thank you," she said, backing away, already worried about forgetting the chemical word.

"Seriously."

"Margot," he said, and she turned back. He smiled a crinkled, sad smile. "Good luck. With your show, I mean."

She smiled back, and left.

The word stayed in her head as she hurried back to her car, repeating over and over again, and once inside she pulled out her phone and googled it. All that came up was a bunch of complicated-

looking scholarly articles. Nothing with statistics or a street name. Whatever was in the vials, it wasn't heroin.

She slipped her wet shoes off again, and shook out her wet ponytail before tying it up again. The car was directly in front of the hardware store, the blinking open sign hanging in the door, illuminating the dust and grime.

She thought about calling Jane back, but she had no idea what to say. Her mind was overloaded with information. She took a few, deep breaths. She needed to get the book back from Benji and Scott. She needed to figure out what was in the vials. If it was a to do list it was easier, though even then there was a dark question mark at the end of it.

She was supposed to go home tomorrow. At the very least she needed to call Jane and reschedule her flight. But she didn't move, didn't touch her phone which still displayed the long chemical name. She blinked. *Looks like some kind of opioid*, Westfall said, and she remembered Jack's infamous tackle box, full of the sorts of things that she knew by fun nicknames but that surely had long chemical names too. She started the car and pulled away from the hardware store.

A few days after what had happened in the woods, Hannah showed up at Declan's door. Six months ago it would have been past curfew, but now his parents didn't seem to care that there was a girl on their doorstep so late at night, didn't bat an eye when she and Declan disappeared into his room and closed the door.

"Are you okay?" he said, when she sat down on his bed. Her face was drawn, and there were tears glittering in her eyes. He'd never seen her cry before. Even when her parents pissed her off, even when people at school were terrible, she took it in stride.

"Waldo died," she said, quietly, and Declan wanted to crumble. For a moment he stopped breathing and felt a cold swoop in his stomach, like it was about to happen again. He gripped the metal frame of the bunk bed and it went away, but he was still shocked by the idea that it could happen so far from the area he thought of as The Forest.

"What happened?" he said, dreading her answering, already knowing the truth. It was his fault. Couldn't save Andy, couldn't save Waldo.

She put her face in her hands. "Stupid Chuck," she mumbled. "He let him run around in the woods and he got caught in a wolf trap and lost his front leg." She sniffed and he put an awkward hand on her back. "It got infected and I guess there was nothing they could do so Chuck had him put down. I'm sure he fucked something up, didn't give him his medication or something. He never actually cared about him, he was just a hunting dog."

Declan wondered how much was true, if there'd really been no hope or if Chuck had no use for a three-legged hunting dog. It was Declan's fault Waldo had been hurt, but it was Chuck's fault he didn't get better. He gripped the bed frame tighter, imagined their fight again and thought about how much harder he should have kicked. And how much harder he should have pushed Waldo away from him, how he should have just run out the door instead of standing there frozen in terror.

Hannah sniffed again, and her voice wobbled. "I hate him. I hate all of them."

Declan swallowed his guilt and rubbed her back. He didn't say what he was thinking—that they might be her family but because of them she got to leave.

But he got to stay. The forest had chosen him and he got to stay.

Part of him wanted to tell her everything, ask if she knew what Chuck meant, what he wanted. But there was a look that appeared on the faces around him when he was being weird, the cringe look. It had taken him far too long to notice it, but now that he had he now couldn't stand to see it, and every previously happy memory was clouded by it, by awkward laughs and raised eyebrows at his expense. He was tired of Jack's smirks, Lena's eye-rolls, Amy and Fawn's little glances at each other. He didn't want to see Hannah's version of the cringe look.

She left before midnight and Declan lay alone on the bottom bunk, steeping in his guilt and anger and fear. He wondered if Chuck knew where he lived, and if he would come looking for him, if what had happened in the cabin had been temporary insanity or if he should be scared. If he should tell someone. But he had no one to tell.

He rolled over and stared at the trees outside his window. For a moment the forest pulled at him again, down, down to some new possibility, and he had an idea. No—the boy on the hilltop had an idea, the part of him that was stuck there in that euphoric insanity. He'd asked the forest to send him back again and it had. Maybe he could ask for more, ask for specifics. Maybe he didn't have to see all those cringe looks. Maybe Waldo didn't have to die. Maybe Andy—

He sat up, threw the blankets off and sat on the edge of his bed. He had to stop. He had to be rational. Except his rationality was asleep on the other side of the path through the woods, his rationality wasn't talking to him right now.

He got up and dressed silently, crept outside. He took the Trailblazer and drove to the trailhead, parked in the same spot Andy had parked in, looked out at the dark trees outside. There was no moon. The world was soft around him.

He tried for a moment to imagine that he was Andy. In this version nothing interesting at all was happening in the Trailblazer. Just a guy sitting behind the wheel with a map inside the Altoids tin on the passenger seat instead of other things. Maybe that version could be reality. With that thought, he fell asleep.

Declan woke slowly, like he was dragging himself out of a deep pool, water and sleep still clinging to his ridges. He blinked. He wasn't in the Trailblazer. He was curled up on a hard floor, and in front of him a piece of furniture, dark with mildew. A couch.

He sat up, head foggy. He didn't remember leaving the car. Had he been sleep walking? He was in a house, a living room that had probably once been very pretty, with oil paintings on the walls, and delicate furniture with spindly feet. But now it was grimy with moss and mold, parts of the walls and ceiling rotted away and caving in. He got up and looked around. A shattered chandelier sat in the middle of the room on a collapsed table. A hole in one wall opened into a dark hallway. A grand piano sat in the corner, propped up on its one remaining leg. He felt fuzzy, like part of him wasn't quite in this house, wasn't quite anywhere. He examined his hands for a moment, wondering if he was dreaming. He counted his fingers, examined this whirls of his fingerprints, things he didn't believe would be replicated inside a dream.

Huge windows sat on both sides of the living room, one dark, the trees thick right outside, and the other bright with sunlight. He went to the bright side, but he couldn't see much besides the outline of trees and what looked like a sprawling, overgrown garden. The glass was grimy and warped with age. One pane was cracked into five big slices, a circle in the center like a bullet hole.

He hadn't been in this part of the forest before, he could feel it.

"Why am I here?" He didn't really expect an answer.

He stood in the center of the room. There was a narrow path on the floor, cutting through the dirt and rubble, as though someone had walked through the room many times. As though someone still did.

It wasn't night anymore, but it didn't feel quite like day either.

He wanted to leave, find his way back onto the map and familiar territory. He wanted to stay, follow deeper and deeper until the forest opened every last one of its doors, let him assign meaning to all of its secrets. He wanted to curl up in a ball in the middle of the narrow path on the floor until its maker came along and dealt with him.

He took a deep breath and looked around for a door, but there were only hallways and grimy windows and the dark hole in the wall beside the piano. Through it, a single eye looked back at him. It sat close to the ground, glittered in the low light. A small, gray squirrel. One eye was missing, the area around it heavily scared. Its ears pointed at him, nose twitched.

“Hi,” he whispered, before he could stop himself.

The squirrel twitched its nose again. It took a step into the darkness, then turned its head, the black hole where its eye should have been pointed towards him. He crossed the room and climbed through the hole in the wall, a piece of moldy drywall crumbling when he touched it. The floor gave way a bit under his feet, and for a moment he feared falling through rotting wood before he realized the softness was an ancient carpet runner, mossy and bloated with damp. The squirrel scurried ahead of him.

He took careful steps after it, feet squishing into the carpet, hands reaching out in front of him as they headed further into darkness. He followed. For a moment he was sure he had been here before, it felt so familiar, but then he realized—it had the same feeling as the river did, when the forest rushed him back through time, air caught tight in his chest, body moved along as though in a current. This time, though, he seemed to have a guide. Through the darkness he could just make out the fluffy gray tail.

There were large, white doors on either side of the hallway, all shut and, he knew without trying them, locked. The squirrel stopped in front of a door, indistinguishable from the others, and turned back towards Declan. It sat primly on its back legs, nose twitching, eye focused on nothing.

“Here?” he whispered.

He turned the door handle and stepped carefully over the squirrel and into the room. The feeling intensified and it took him a moment to remember how to breathe. An enormous tree filled up the room, trunk disappearing into the floor, branches punching through the walls. Strips of wallpaper were visible between the branches, painted illustrations of children playing. There was something wrong with the tree. Its leaves were speckled with brown, and something white oozed from a crack in the trunk and dripped from the lower branches to the floor where it spread like paint.

He started climbing it, avoiding the ooze and hoisting himself up into the branches. He wasn't the only thing pulling his body up—it felt like hands were helping him, urging him in a specific direction. He had assumed the upper branches disappeared into the ceiling, obscured by the canopy of leaves, but when he climbed high enough, he realized that the ceiling was missing, that the tree just kept reaching up and up and the light from the small window below grew dim and filtered through the green-brown of the leaves.

He came to a stop at what felt like the center, leaves thick all around him and the branches wide enough to sit comfortably. Though he was so high up he could still make out the wall paper through the leaves, the illustrated children climbing trees, sitting on swings, sledding down hills. He wanted to crawl closer and examine them, but a noise behind him made him start and turn around. There was a gap in the bark in the center of the tree trunk, and something moved inside. He crawled forward on the branch and knocked on the bark, waited for something to come flying out. When nothing did, he leaned forward and peered inside.

The first thing he thought of was of an old viewfinder, the kind you held up to the light and clicked through. There was an image in the tree, hazy at the edges and nearly colorless, but still clear. A man stared at him through the image, with a big beard and holding one end of a long, old-fashioned saw. He looked petrified, eyes huge. Declan blinked and the image started moving—the man looked around wildly, dropping the saw. Another man appeared, trying to calm him down. Declan blinked again and it changed entirely—the forest was on fire, a group of men running away, the man with the saw among them.

It changed rapidly, cycling through things too quickly to see—changing seasons, rain storms, roadkill, a sheet of ice, a swinging axe—but sometimes a view lingered. A metal barrel leaked something into a pool on the ground. A pile of dead fish washed up on the shore, some of them strange and wrong, with too many eyes or not enough. Three men stood around a flooded field, one of them pointing around at the damage. It took Declan a moment to realize it was Chuck Kacy. The other two had their arms crossed, and all three of them looked irritated. In the next, a new-looking house stood beside a lake, at first alone, then another appeared, then another and another until the lake was surrounded.

The last image was of another house, larger and grander than the others. It was this house, he was sure of it. He'd never seen the outside of it, but looking at it now felt like looking at a picture of himself.

He leaned away from the gap in the tree and knelt on the wide branch. It was a request. It was defensive, it wanted to hide. But there was nowhere to go, it was surrounded and there was always another axe, gun, match, house, barrel, car. Declan could feel all of its confusion, fear, helplessness, and it could feel everything from him, too, he was sure of it, like it had its roots in his mind. Like it was merging them together.

He leaned away from the trunk, feeling foggy. Not foggy like the forest was going to send him somewhere, foggy like it was going to erase him and plant itself in his place. He turned carefully

around to lean up against the trunk, and saw the wallpaper again. It had changed. This time he saw two children, a curly-haired boy, a red-haired girl, playing with marbles, and he understood. It wasn't just him. He needed to tell Margot, he had to explain, because she could help, she could—

The tree shivered like it was sitting out in the wind, and the sound of creaking footsteps drifted from below. Someone was downstairs.

Declan climbed down quickly and left the room. The squirrel was gone, but he remembered the direction he had come from and tried not to second guess himself as he walked through near perfect darkness. He climbed back through the hole in the wall and into the living room. It was empty but the footsteps grew louder and closer.

A man burst into the room from the hallway, stomping heavily over the floor. Declan jumped and stood back, trying to think of an excuse for why he was there, but the man didn't look at him. He looked distracted, carrying a large rifle in his arms and looking around wildly, his eyes sliding over Declan like he wasn't there.

The man was tall and balding, with patches of gray in his blond hair. He wore weird, old-fashioned clothes made of rough material that looked like it was rotting away in patches, and he mumbled to himself unintelligibly. He jerkily raised and lowered the barrel of the gun a few times, looked at the ceiling, the fireplace, the hole in the wall. He stumbled closer to Declan and he realized with a jolt—he was the same man painted above the mantel. While the man in the painting looks powerful and sharp, this version looked like he was fraying at the edges.

“Are you okay?” Declan said, holding his hands up to try to calm him, but the man didn't look at him.

He mumbled something that sounded like *where, where*, and swung the gun around again. He jerked towards the big garden window and gasped. He shouted wordlessly and the rifle went off with a bang. Declan expected the window to shatter but it didn't, it looked untouched, like the gun

was unloaded. The man shook his head, still wild-eyed, and kept walking, straight along the dirty path in the carpet until he left down another hallway.

For a moment Declan thought about following him, but he heard another bang and thought better of it. Instead he crept towards the window that hadn't shattered. What had the man seen? The window was dirty so he peered through the empty round hole in the cracked pane. There was nothing outside but trees and a little black fence. He took a step back and realized—the window hadn't shattered because the bullet had traveled perfectly through the hole that had already been there. He looked through it again. There was something outside after all, a wide tree riddled with bullets, their casings in a pile at its roots.

Another bang echoed through the house and Declan jumped. He needed to leave. As soon as he thought it, he spotted the squirrel again, this time twitching its tail near the hallway on the opposite side of the room. He followed it down the hall and into an entrance room, where it waited patiently for him to open the door, then hopped down the painted steps and onto a small rocky pathway. The overgrown garden stood to his left, the bullet-ridden tree just inside the black fence. He followed the squirrel back into the woods and down a path, and by the time he remembered a specific patch of fir trees, he realized the squirrel was gone.

At the beginning of May, Lena made the announcement online—she was pregnant. Rob proposed the same day, and while Declan expected him to grumble, he was completely silent about it, staring out the window on the bus ride home for the next week. Declan didn't know what to do. He didn't know if it mattered that Lena's sweater had been in Chuck's cabin, if it had anything to do with her current situation, if it was information he should share with someone. Technically she was eighteen and could do what she wanted. But Chuck was in his thirties, and married, and sponsor of her tennis team. And he was also maybe deranged and had maybe tried to kill Declan, but he wasn't sure if that was relevant.

He thought about texting her, even had a draft saved in his phone with some *hey, can we talk?* type words—he just hadn't found the courage to press send. Lena liked to play the damsel around Rob and other guys she was interested in, but Declan knew better; she was fiercely protective of her own independence. She would never ask for help, and he didn't know how she would react to him offering it.

A side-effect he was guiltily pleased about was the affect the news had on Margot, whose utter awkwardness in the face of the situation had melted her stony silence around him. She waffled between obvious, frustrated disagreement with Lena's decisions on everything from quitting the tennis team to having the baby in the first place, to hesitant displays of support.

She and Declan didn't exactly carry on conversations like they used to, but at least she was no longer ignoring his existence. One day she wore the t-shirt that he'd gotten her for Christmas, the one with the pouting cactus lifting its little cactus arms with the caption *Hugs?* and it felt like, maybe not forgiveness, but an acknowledgement. Something, where before there was nothing. She'd cackled over that shirt when she'd opened it. No one else thought it was funny.

She still, however, went out of her way to ignore his relationship with Hannah, a relationship that was quickly starting to feel like homework. It was homework he enjoyed, but still homework. In the fall, Hannah was moving across the country and he was not. Neither of them knew what to do with that.

Hannah was so angry with her cousin over what had happened with Waldo that she had started to boycott family functions just to avoid him. It was Mother's Day and she was supposed to be in church with the rest of them, but was with Declan instead, sitting on the swings at the old playground behind the church. Their fingers tangled loosely between them as they swayed next to each other, not quite swinging, and not quite talking. Her parents' thoughts on their relationship had recently shifted from cautious disapproval to active disapproval. The cringe looks that he was used

to had morphed into looks of suspicion, that this trailer park boy with the dead brother and the pregnant sister would corrupt their princess. Hannah didn't seem to see this.

Declan watched a squirrel run across the top of the big concrete tube next to the balance beam that last summer had been the X on Margot's birthday treasure map. They had sat hunched in it and laughed about the generations of misspelled graffiti scrawled on the inside.

Hannah stopped swaying suddenly, planted her feet on the ground. Declan looked round and saw Chuck coming towards them from the church parking lot. Declan had not seen him since the day at the cabin, and his stomach clenched in fear. He dropped Hannah's hand and gripped the chains of the swing with both hands.

He half expected Hannah to get up and walk away—this was Margot's preferred method of dealing with things—but she didn't. She sat still and waited for him to speak, a falsely polite look on her face.

“We missed you in church,” Chuck said, planting himself in the wood chips before them. “You know Grandma likes everyone to be together.”

“I'm sure Grandma would have liked Waldo to be there, too,” Hannah said.

Chuck shook his head. “I already apologized for that and I'm not going to again.”

“You didn't apologize, you said, *I'm sorry that someone left an illegal trap out in the woods*. That's not an apology.”

Chuck planted his hands on his shiny black belt, his hunting clothes traded for church clothes, and Declan realized that attached to that belt was a holster. Declan stared at it, legs going dumb.

“You really need a gun in church?” Hannah said, zeroing in on it too.

Chuck shrugged. “Why not. You never know.”

Hannah couldn't seem to decide what to say to that, so she just rolled her eyes in disgust.

“Why are you over here?” she said.

“Just wanted to check up on you.” He spoke to Hannah but looked at Declan. He unsnapped the holster and snapped it again. Unsnapped it. Snapped it.

“Cool. Thanks,” Hannah said. She got up and grabbed Declan’s hand, pulled him out of his swing and towards the other side of the park, away from Chuck.

Declan could still hear the snap of the holster, echoing around his head like the bangs of that rifle in the house in the woods.

It was dark by the time Margot found the short-cut around the flooded section of Blood Road. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, but it had rained enough earlier to soften the road, little more than a one-way path through the woods. It spat her out a few hundred yards from the end of Blood Road, and she turned towards the dirt turnaround. Jack's driveway was long and though it wasn't paved, it was landscaped with pale gravel. She rounded a corner and stopped abruptly because there was a gate standing in her way. It looked new, shiny black with a little box to one side. She pulled up and shined her phone at the box. It was a keypad, with a sticky note taped underneath with the code. She raised an eyebrow and punched it in. The gate buzzed and slid open, pushing into the underbrush. There was no fence to the sides of the gate, just empty woods.

She followed the winding driveway down to the house. Jack's parents, when they were around, used to keep huge gray curtains drawn over the windows, which Margot liked to throw open whenever she arrived. This time the windows were already uncovered and she had a perfect view into the house. The kitchen light was on though no one was in it. It was also a mess, clutter piled on the counter and boxes obscuring the bottom of the window. The upper floors were dark, and the only other light was a lamp in the center of the house, too dim to make out much of the room. She could see movement, though, a dark shape popping up from the couch as she parked the car. The figure hurried through the house and into the kitchen, then dashed back.

The door flung open as she stepped out of the car and Jack stood on the doorstep, a kitchen knife in one hand. Margot froze. Whatever he had been expecting to see, he seemed more shocked to see her instead. He hid the knife quickly behind his back as though there was some way she hadn't seen it.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

She shut the car door and followed the path to the front door.

“Can’t I come say hi?”

He stood stiffly in the doorway. His hair was longer than she’d ever seen it, half falling out of a messy ponytail. He was thinner, too, his cheeks hollow and the long gray robe he wore propped up on bony shoulders. His perpetual smirk was gone. After a moment he set the knife down on a table beside the door and stood back to let her inside. The door swung close behind her and they looked at each other in the dim light of the foyer.

It felt absurd to be standing here after all this time, and it hit her all at once—Margot had disappeared from Jack’s life just as thoroughly as Declan had disappeared from hers, with barely much more of an explanation. She felt sick with sudden regret at the sight of him, the state of him and his house. They might not have worked out as a couple, maybe, but she could have called, could have made sure he was alright, could have—

She was suddenly very cold and the room spun sickeningly, gravity pulling at her like it wanted to swallow her. She stared at a spot on the floor, trying to keep her body under control.

“Are you alright?” Jack said.

She took a deep breath and the feeling lessened.

“I think I need to ask you that,” she said, looking him up and down.

He laughed humorlessly and turned away, leading her into the house. She followed. It was very dark, but what she could see was just as messy as the kitchen.

“Lena give you the code?” he said.

“Yep.”

Not directly, of course, but Margot assumed the sticky note had been left by Lena. Or maybe Fawn or Amy.

“Yeah,” he said, and bent to switch on a lamp that was sitting on the floor. “The girls weren’t too happy about the gate.”

He sat down on the couch, legs sprawled in front of him. Under the gray robe was a baggy t-shirt and the same highlighter yellow skinny jeans he used to wear in high school, now faded and fraying. She sat down across from him. The layout of the living room hadn’t changed, the two large couches face to face on either side of a glass coffee table, but where they’d once been spotless, they were now stained and smudged and covered in clutter. Something caught Jack’s eye outside and he froze, his body tense. Margot looked, but saw nothing.

“Is the gate new?” she said, carefully.

He didn’t answer, just kept staring outside. He blinked after a moment, and bounced his leg up and down. He’d never been able to sit still for long.

“So,” he said, as though he hadn’t heard her question. “You got bored with Chicago?”

She looked at the floor. Jack had always been good at seeing the worst parts of her. That was why she’d liked him so much. He saw all of it and somehow he liked it. He didn’t look like he liked it now, though. He looked back at her, and his face was more serious than she remembered. Unsmiling. Accusatory.

“I have a question, actually.”

“Yeah? Shoot.”

She pulled out her phone, pulled up the word she had saved in her search bar, and handed it over.

“What does this mean?”

He leaned forward and took it, leg still bouncing. His brow furrowed and he sounded out the word silently. He went still for a moment, eyes roaming the room, then nodded.

“It’s the chemical name for Naloxone.”

“And what’s Naloxone?”

He handed her phone back.

“Why are you asking about this?”

“Whatever Naloxone is, the cops found a bunch of vials of it buried near Declan’s Trailblazer.”

He stared at her, brow furrowed, then sat back against the couch again. His face cycled through emotions more quickly than she could track, and settled on nothing, blankness. He nodded again.

She wondered if she should have started with *how are you*, or *sorry for taking off*, or *what the hell happened to you*, wondered if she had skipped too many steps.

“I’m sorry to just show up like this,” she tried. “I called the other day but—”

“Don’t,” he said, and she went silent. He folded his arms around his skinny chest and clicked his teeth. “Naloxone is an opioid antagonist. Basically, they use it to revive someone who is overdosing.”

Margot looked down at the word on her phone.

“Why would Declan have that?”

Jack shrugged. “Why did Declan do any of the weird shit he did?”

“Where did he even get it? Did you get it for him?”

He glared. “You know I never sold hard stuff. Not to friends, anyway.”

A spark of annoyance at his defensiveness.

“Does that make you feel better?” she said. “That rule of yours?”

He snorted. “Guess you’re a real reporter now, huh? Coming here and asking the hard questions.”

Margot hadn’t exactly imagined this particular reunion, but there was a hostility in the room that she would not have anticipated if she had. It didn’t entirely feel aimed at her, though. It radiated from him, in his posture, his scowl, his hard eyes. Suddenly he lurched forward and leaned his elbows on his knees, put his head in his hands.

“Where’d he get this stuff, then?” Margot said.

Jack sighed and mumbled into his hands. “He was Andy’s brother. He knew people. Is this seriously why you’re here?”

He was rocking slightly, back and forth with the force of his deep breaths. Margot watched him and softened, quashed the sudden impulse to go sit next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. She didn’t know if comfort would be welcome. Especially from her. Despite their relationship, or whatever it had been, Jack had always inspired a coldness within her. She told herself it was aimed at his wealthy family, but it was really his disregard for anything other than the current moment, his utter commitment to The Joke. It was really a defense, she realized now. It was a wall between her not-quite feelings for him and his wild carelessness that stung when provoked.

She remembered the summer in high school that Fawn had developed a cripplingly obvious crush on him, and the casual cruelty of Jack’s disbelieving laugh when he found out. High school

Jack had been untouchable, had greeted every difficulty with a shrug, had no discernible reaction to his parents splitting up, or to graduation, or to Declan's disappearance. Margot had never seen him like this before.

"Are you alright?" she said quietly.

Jack sat up and laughed.

"Oh, so they didn't tell you? Of course they didn't, they don't trust you for shit anymore."

"Tell me what?" She tried not to feel stung about the rest.

He ran a hand through his hair and another lock fell out of the ponytail and into his face.

"They think I'm fucking crazy now. Paranoid, delusional, the whole nine yards." He laughed.

Margot didn't know what to say. "And I know you're sitting there going, well, Jacky boy, you do seem to be holed up in this house that you hate, ready to brandish knives at your guests, which, fair, but to that I say—" he pointed at the window overlooking the lake. "Look out there."

She looked. It was fully dark now. A sliver of moon lit up the sand and reflected off the surface of the water.

"What am I looking at?"

"Exactly. I have no idea. But something's out there. Or a lot of somethings, I don't know. I just know it doesn't like me."

She watched him, waiting for more of an explanation, but none came. He just kept watching the woods like something was about to happen.

"Does Rob come out here too?" Margot said. "Or is it just the others?"

Jack snorted. "You know Rob doesn't give a shit. As soon as he graduated, he decided he was family man now, with family values, and anything 'bad' could go rot. I guess that means me, too."

Plus he's still terrified I'm gonna steal Lena away from him." He laughed again. "Because how could she resist? Look what she's missing!"

The laughter died immediately. Margot looked around the living room at the clutter, the toppled stacks of magazines, books, DVDs, the clothes draped over furniture and lamps, the pile of stained washcloths near the kitchen. A baseball bat was propped next to the sliding glass door that led down to the lake, and next to it lay a golf club and a hammer. Blankets and pillows were heaped on Jack's couch, like he'd been sleeping there, and there was a pile of clothes in a hamper next to the coffee table. They were folded, like someone had cleaned them recently. She did not think Jack was that someone.

She tried not to sound shocked, or pitying, or disturbed when she asked, "What happened, Jack?"

He looked at her. "What do you mean, what happened? Twelve years happened." He stood up abruptly and walked towards the kitchen. "Want anything? I have water and water. I'm apparently not allowed to have alcohol or pop, because Gonzo thinks I'm five years old."

"Water's fine," she said as he disappeared and rustled around in the kitchen. "Is she over here a lot?" It had been Jack's voice on the phone with Amy the other day. Of course it had.

"I guess," he said, slouching back into the room. He tossed her a water bottle and opened one himself. "Her and Lena and Fawn show up every few days and poke around. I tell them not to clean and do my laundry and shit but they keep doing it."

He held the open bottle in his hand, didn't drink from it, just looked out the window. He wasn't lost in thought, he was scanning the landscape, like he was watching for movement. He twitched like he'd been bitten by a mosquito, or like he was trying to expel a bad memory, and

then he caught sight of something out there and his eyes went wide and scared, white all the way around. Margot looked out but again saw nothing but the trees, the lake, and the night.

“Jack, what is it? What do you think is out there?”

He turned back to her abruptly.

“So you work on a supernatural podcast now or something?” he said. “That’s what you do in Chicago?” His eyes were a bit red, and he twitched again like he was trying to dislodge something from his shoulder.

She nodded slowly. He set the water bottle down on the coffee table and cleared his throat.

“Ever hear about the Hunter’s Ghost?” he said, and for a moment he was teasing, smirking Jack again.

“Of course I’ve—”

“I’m gonna tell you a story,” he said, holding a hand up he was doing her a favor.

“Jack—”

“So this guy, this hunter, right?” he said, and scooted to the edge of the couch. “We don’t really know anything about him. He could have been anybody.”

Rose Fenton actually knew quite a bit about him, but Margot didn’t interrupt.

“Maybe he was actually just a hunter, or a farmer or something. Or maybe he was a drug dealer. I dunno, what did they do in 1900, opium or something? Maybe he sold opium. Which was dumb, but he was dumb and lonely and he wanted people to like him, and when he sold opium, they did. He never got in trouble so it never seemed all that bad. And there were other people who sold a lot more opium than he did, so when people got hurt, he told himself that it wasn’t his fault, he wasn’t the bad guy. His people just used it to have fun and forget about things

for a little while. But there was always this weird, sick feeling he had, like something out there was mad at him, something big and existential. He didn't think too much about it. Maybe it was karma or something.

So time passed, and things happened, and he came to his senses and he stopped. But the feeling didn't stop—actually the more time that passed the worse it got. It was like everything hated him, even things that couldn't hate, the trees, the lake, the fucking air hated him. And he started to realize that the people hated him, too, for the things he used to do. He could feel it in their minds and he wished he could talk to them one by one and change their thoughts, alter their memories of him, edit himself out entirely.

But he couldn't, so he stayed home more and more, because what else could he do? He knew something bad would happen if he left, if he went into town or even just into his own backyard. His friends said he was crazy, said they were worried about him but he knew they were lying, because they hated him too, secretly. He knew something wanted him gone, and he knew what would happen if he went into the woods, but he did anyway. Maybe he was lured out there, maybe he needed something, maybe he was just an idiot. He never came out again. He was standing there, maybe looking through the sight at a buck, maybe just breathing in the hateful air, when the forest got its hooks in him and through teeth or claws or just force of will, it took him apart.”

He stopped suddenly, squinting over the table at Margot and she realized with a shock that a few tears were trailing down her face. She brushed them away quickly. Too many things had happened today, too many things that she didn't understand, and this strange twitching version of Jack was one thing too many.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, maybe for Jack to be working for his mom's company, or maybe for him to have moved away years ago, found somewhere better. Or maybe that was just the vague belief she'd held in the back of her mind for so long so she wouldn't have to think about his voice on the phone when she'd told him she wasn't coming back. The cold feeling welled up again and she hugged her arms around herself to will it away.

"Guess it was too scary for you," Jack said.

"Something like that," she said, voice thick.

"Sorry," he said, quietly, and this made the lump in her throat bigger because Jack didn't apologize. It was something their friends would get mad at him about, but Margot had just accepted it, and had never been dumb enough to hope for one, even when it was deserved.

I don't hate you, she wanted to say, but she wasn't sure if it mattered. She might be the one person he didn't care to hear that from.

"He was mad at me, you know. About what happened to Andy. It wasn't directly my fault, but I was still part of the whole thing."

"He never got mad at people," Margot said. She couldn't even picture what anger looked like on Declan's face.

"I know, that's what made it so obvious. I think everyone was mad about it. Eventually."

He looked nervous again, eyeing the window. Margot wondered why he kept all the curtains wide open if he was so scared of the woods.

"Did you see him that night?" she said.

"What night?"

“Graduation. I always thought I remembered you showing up for a minute and talking to you but no one else remembered that. You said you didn’t either, back then.”

He looked at his feet. “Yeah, I saw him. I never sold him any, any substances, but. He did come to me looking for something.”

“They found a gun buried with the vials. Was that from you?”

He nodded, still not looking at her. “He said he just wanted to borrow it. He said he was coming to the party, but then when he showed up, he said he couldn’t stay and just took it and left. He seemed normal, he seemed alright. I didn’t think he’d...”

“What?”

“I guess they never figured out what happened to him, but when someone borrows a gun and then disappears a few hours later... What else am I supposed to think.”

“The gun hadn’t been fired,” she said. “The magazine was full and the safety was on.”

“He didn’t fire it?”

She shook her head and he inhaled sharply, looked at the ceiling and let the breath out shakily.

“Wow,” he said. “Shit. What happened, then?”

She thought of the notebook, currently in Benji and Scott’s possession, and the letter on the first page. Maybe soon she would know, but for now she just shrugged. “That’s the question.”

He kept his eyes on the ceiling, blinking like he was trying to get ahold of himself.

“That whole summer you were going crazy trying to figure it out, and I thought I already knew what happened and I couldn’t tell you. I was going crazy from it, too.”

“Why did you think he wanted it? Back then, I mean.”

“I dunno. The trailer park was sketchy as fuck. I figured it was something like that. He didn’t seemed depressed or, or homicidal or anything.”

He slumped back against the couch, looking like he’d had the air knocked out of him.

“This whole time,” he mumbled. “I thought... This whole time.”

Silence stretched. Margot looked around the mess and wondered how he usually spent his evenings when friends weren’t around, and in the absence of alcohol.

Margot stood up, reached for her bag.

“I should go,” she said. She had no idea what time it was. “There’s a lot I need to do tomorrow.”

“You can’t leave,” he said, and for the first time since she arrived she felt a hint of the fear that kept transforming his face—remembering the kitchen knife, glancing at the various makeshift weapons by the door. But he didn’t look angry or threatening, he looked scared.

“Please,” he said. “It’s way too late, and if you leave now, all I’ll be able to think about is someone finding your body tomorrow.”

“Alright,” she said, after a moment. She’d slept in this house many times. They could camp out on the couches like a sleepover. She set her bag back down and headed for the stairs.

“Don’t leave,” he said again.

“I’m just going to get some blankets,” she said, one foot on the bottom step.

“No, don’t go up there.” He looked at her over the back of the couch.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know what’s up there.”

The dim lamplight made him look both very old and very young, and nothing like himself.

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “If I’m not back in two minutes you can start panicking.”

“Mo,” he hissed, but she was already climbing the stairs.

She turned on her phone light and shined her way through the hallways. The upstairs was dusty and as messy as the rest, clothes strewn everywhere, framed photos and paintings leaning up against the walls, a lamp on its side on the floor. She moved through it all quickly, Jack’s terror infecting her just enough that she was nervous, that her breath caught at shadows and oddly shaped silhouettes. The door to the linen closet next to the bathroom creaked open and she took deep, slow breaths as she grabbed blankets at random, trying not to imagine that a hand was going to emerge from the darkness and lang on her shoulder.

She left the closet door open and hurried back downstairs. Jack was still peering over the top of the couch, like he was hiding from a scary movie.

“See?” she said, a bit breathless. He glanced nervously up at the top of the stairs.

Margot made up the other couch and he pointed out some clothes in the folded pile that she could sleep in.

She tried to use the sink to wash away the remnants of dried mud from her arms and legs, wishing there was a shower in the part of the house Jack had deemed ‘safe’. There was a small square window beside the sink and she looked out at the dark lake, imagined waiting until Jack was asleep, then stepping carefully past his couch and sliding open the glass door, walking silently through the glowing sand. She imagined the cool bite of the lake, swollen with rain, the soft lake bed between her toes, the weeds clutching at her ankles as she glided through the water. She imagined slipping under the surface, letting it swallow her, coming to rest at the bottom. Maybe then, when everything was dark and silent, maybe everything would make sense.

She left the bathroom and stumbled around in the dark back towards the couches. Jack had turned off the lamp and the only light came from the moon.

“Why do you keep the curtains open?” she said, sliding into her couch bed and looking outside.

He chuckled lightly. “That’s what Fawn keeps asking, too.”

“And what do you tell her?”

“Nothing. She closes them and I just open them up again. I’ll tell you, though—I feel like me looking out there is the only thing keeping it away, whatever it is. When the curtains are drawn, all I can think is that it’s got its eyes and hands pressed up against the glass and I have no idea. I just sit there and wait for it to start tapping, testing how it can get in. At least this way I know there’s nothing around that’s close enough to try.”

Margot wondered for a moment why Fawn would be barred from knowing this while she was not, but Jack was a step ahead of her.

“See, Fawn thinks I’m just going through a rough patch, she thinks she can help me, and if I tell her things like that, she won’t want to keep trying because she’ll realize that she can’t. You’re gone, though. Doesn’t matter what you think anymore.”

She deserved this, but it still hurt.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” she said.

“About what?”

“Us. Declan. The woods. Anything.”

He turned over to face her. She couldn’t see his face in the dark.

“Not tonight,” he said. She nodded, though he couldn’t see her either.

“When are you leaving?” he said, very quietly.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. She didn’t anymore.

They lay there in silence and she wondered if there was something creeping towards them in the dark after all, and, when Jack’s breathing turned slow and steady, if the thing was pressing its eyes and hands up against his dreams.