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ASH AND EDDIE

by

Scott E. Carter II

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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Major: Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

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This novel follows two friends with a complicated relationship during the summer after their high school graduation. Desperate for life and everything it can offer, with the wrong ideas about what life is, they struggle to invent themselves as they face the future and deal with their pasts. Shy, insecure Ash lives with his widower father, neither of whom has come to terms with the death of Ash's mother. Eddie's volatile emotions and desires erupt as he deals with new discoveries about his own family, particularly his brother, who died as a newborn under mysterious circumstances. As their relationship frays, Ash and Eddie must confront and come to terms with who they really are, who they will be, and what it is they really need.

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Chapter One

A playground at night in late spring is a good place to feel tragically hopeful.

For Ash Jenkins, sitting on top of the slide in Straub Park, the air was clean and fragrant the way it was when as a child he'd sat in the grass beside Allie Utley's inground pool on summer nights, picking grass off his wet shins and trying to blink away the halos around the yellow porch lights, being nice to her so she'd let him come swim again. They'd wrestled on her trampoline in their bathing suits. He spun her around in the water, and one night he'd kissed her on the nose. Her parents were never around. He would marry her one day in the shallow end.

That's tragic hopefulness. Ash knew it well. Now Allie was popular, achingly beautiful, and had loud pool parties that he could hear faintly through his bedroom window. She looked at Ash, if at all, as if he had a file card taped to his forehead that said, *Whatshisname*. File under: Insignificant. See also: Weirdos.

Straub Park was a playground, a pavilion, and a dirt path that curved through the woods along a small creek. On the other side of the woods was Meadow Vale Lane, where Ash lived with his father. At the park's western border was—he wished—the edge of the world, a cliff whose base was shrouded in space dust, whose spectacular views of nebulae he could enjoy in solitude with a glass of lemonade. Instead were the grounds of Alfred E. Edmonson High School—a few intrepid, littered flowerbeds, squat gray-bricked buildings, a weedy soccer and baseball field, and a bunker-like football stadium with uniformly clipped grass, crisp white lines, and floodlights that on Friday nights in the fall rendered Ash's telescope worthless. (*Oh, that such artificial illumination should damp the flames of the gods*, he'd scrawled, in a fit of passion, on his whiteboard).

At Edmonson, Ash was nobody, skinny and fragile, hand-crafted out of porcelain, a boy with a girl's name—Ashlee—whose hair was almost not a color but closest to brown, a boy who dressed like everyone else but secretly wore a Star Trek pin on the inside of his sleeve, who scowled at the linoleum and sat alone at lunch but failed to look dark and brooding. He combed his hair carefully in a bathroom stall between classes, and while he washed his hands he gave the mirror above the sink a slit-eyed soulful I'm-at-the-beach-and-lonesome stare, imagining this was the look he regularly wore, and that a girl would one day stop in the hallway, struck breathless, touch his cheek, and whisper, "You have the saddest eyes."

He was mute around most people. This started young as a simple shyness, but had over the years flourished into something physical, a dark clot in his chest and throat. The more he didn't talk the more of a stigma it became. His voice sounded strained on the occasions he had to speak to classmates and teachers. It had to fight to the surface through so much muck. His father liked to say his son is just the type of guy who doesn't mind his own company, which Ash supposed is mostly true, though he'd spent a few wakeful nights at his bedroom window anyway, feeling left out and misunderstood. He thought the world assumed there was nothing inside of him, and that feeling made the world seem especially vibrant, he a dust mote, stirred by the commotion yet still just a dust mote.

But here he is on a spring night in Straub Park, rising above all that, school almost over, crickets chirping again in the wet grass and the honeysuckle by the creek exploding over last year's dead leaves. There was no particular reason for him to feel so buoyant, for him to forget all the ways the world would likely conspire against that buoyancy. Just

that suddenly the aluminum slide felt like a rocket, thrumming with secret energy; or maybe this was his body gearing up, rumbling to new life, hatching a plan of escape from the thousand and one disappointments of being the soft virgin pedantic body of Ashlee Jenkins.

He saw a figure emerge from the trees separating the school from the park—Eddie Sacs, Ash’s long-time friend, who he hated in a half-hearted, brotherly way. Earlier that night, Ash had received a text from Eddie while writing in his journal that said “BB.” It meant Eddie wanted to shoot some windows. Neither of them owned a BB gun; it just sounded cooler than airsoft rifle. Roaming around at night with Eddie, the self-named BB Gunner, firing plastic pellets at innocent house fronts, dressed in the black sweat pants and T-shirts Eddie had bought just for these excursions, was humiliating, even if nobody from school caught them. Nevertheless, it secretly made Ash feel dangerous, a man in black loosed in the night, coolly violating curfew and considering his inaugural purchase of cigarettes.

It had never been difficult to sneak out, even when his father, David, fell asleep in the recliner underneath a copy of American History Magazine, as he had that night. Ash had paused in the entrance to the living room on his way to the back door, regarding his father, the way he slept so heavily, exhausted, glasses askew, the flesh of his face pushed into several rolls against his shoulder. He still wore the white shirt and tie—he had an endless row of identical shirts in his closet, with a bright splash of red polo for the weekends—which he wore to work at St. Agnes, a private girls school where he taught history. His mouth hung open and his hair fell in an oily sheaf across his large forehead. He looked alone, no woman to kiss him awake and guide him to bed. Ash was seven

when his mother died, and he remembered little of her now. His father didn't say much on the subject.

David, in fact, found it difficult to speak to his son at all. After Evelyn's wreck, Ash seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, a dumbfounded, startled wisp of a boy who liked clouds way too much, whose high, breezy laugh and brown eyes reminded David of his wife. Evelyn had been talkative and energetic. And possessive of Ash, which suited David, who thought kids were cute in pictures and in theory. Ash and David had rarely been alone together, Evelyn as constant in their lives as the earth she seemed to fly over, brandishing a diaper or a juice box as if she'd just whipped it from a utility belt. When she died, the armature of her family collapsed. David didn't know what to say to his son, and Ash didn't understand what had happened to his mother, or why his father squinted at him when he mentioned the moons of Aleenia. The abandoned kitchen table accumulated mail and clean laundry, the remaining members of the Jenkins family eating frozen dinners in front of the T.V., both looking up from time to time, having briefly sensed a presence in the room, or having caught a phantom heady whiff of the onions and garlic that had wafted from Evelyn's kitchen on many evenings, evenings that seemed richer and fuller the further into memory they receded, even as they lost their immediacy and detail.

Watching his father sleep didn't remind Ash of the many hushed nights they each had spent together, usually with Ash retreating to his room as soon as possible. Those evenings were too much a part of who he was to spark memory, too constant a routine in his life.

What he was reminded of was that his father had once been young, too, had maybe snuck out of his own house to wreck innocent, embarrassing havoc, had blown his allowance in arcades, flew down long hills on his bike, argued with a friend in the horror aisle of the video store before a sleep-over, all things Ash had done himself, and which seemed impossible to attribute to an old history teacher asleep in his recliner. In Ash's limited experience, it seemed the quiet fate of adulthood to spend days at work and nights at home, the T.V. murmuring and the phone silent, and he felt a quiver of fear for the similarity of his own evenings, already, only seventeen.

He wanted to wake his father from sleep and drag him into the night. Would his father's hands recognize the smooth cool feel of an airsoft rifle? Would he fire from the hip at a moving car? Ash would take a pellet to the face if it brought his father a moment's reprieve, if it brought them even one breath closer to words of friendship or solidarity. From his white board: *through foreign tongues we'll know each other at last, we will not be alone, and life will alight again in our bones. Amen.*

Despite this desire, Ash's hopeful, tragic feeling in Straub Park that night grew partly from his relief that he was not his father; he was separate, apart, not old, not asleep. As Eddie approached, Ash threw himself down the slide on his belly, just to feel his hands in the grass at the bottom, his hard ribs bearing the weight of his body against the aluminum, the blood rush to his head.

"Hey, Superman," Eddie said, pointing up with his plastic rifle, "you're supposed to fly into the sky."

Ash looked around, still belly-first on the slide, bracing himself with his scrawny arms. "I'm stuck," he said, and Eddie laughed. "No, seriously, I feel like I might die."

He didn't trust his ability to ease himself down, thinking that if he gave his arms any slack he would face plant and snap his neck. An ignoble end.

Eddie helped him to his feet. Eddie was short and rotund, his cheeks full and his hair a flat lifeless thing sprawled on his head. He grinned so much, at so little, that people thought he was softheaded. Ash wouldn't argue, ashamed as he was to be seen with Eddie in the halls of Edmonson, as if he had some type of reputation to uphold. Eddie talked about everything that nobody cared about, all the mundane details of his life, from the chink in his spoon at breakfast to the sly look the girl on the bus may or may not have given him. He had a penchant for destruction and fuckery, a shooter of roman candles into crowds, a devotee of the Whoopee Cushion, probably the last. He could rarely resist the propulsive potential of ketchup in a squeeze bottle. His parents let their son's antics slide over them. It seemed they'd turned their hopes to Eddie's seven-year-old brother, a child of such beatific grace at the dinner table and on the soccer field that it was easy to imagine Eddie as the spawn of some unholy witchcraft.

Eddie was fond of coming over to Ash's house when Ash least wanted company. They had lived across the park from each other since the first grade, when Eddie showed up in Ash's class after Christmas break. They had first bonded over an X-Men comic book when Ash, as was his occasional habit, snuck into the locker room during gym class, where he intended to make hand puppets out of his shirt, only to find the new kid, Eddie, reading hunched in the corner. Comics always beat out puppets.

Sometimes Ash locked himself in his room with a book or homework when he spied Eddie's dopey face out the window. He felt powerful, withholding himself, but it never seemed to faze Eddie, who spent hours pestering Ash's father, channel-surfing, or

just puttering around like a still spry retired grandfather, looking at all the framed pictures in the house as if for the first time.

Before Ash got his driver's license, they rode their bikes around the neighborhood, aimless, minds numbed by the stupefying rate at which nothing at all was happening in their lives. When Ash turned sixteen his father bought him a car for cheap, a powder blue emasculation machine whose name, his father said, was Herbie Honda. Eddie didn't have a car, and wouldn't until he could pay for the insurance every month, as stipulated by his parents. This would require gainful employment, something he was not ready to pursue. Once Ash could drive, he was constantly telling Eddie no, I will not drive you to Wendy's; no, I will not drive you to the bowling alley; no, I will not drive you to the mall just so you can get a pretzel.

Though sometimes he gave in. He was so bored he'd take Eddie anywhere. He even taught Eddie how to drive, out past the suburbs of Memphis and into Mississippi, where farmland stretched for miles along highway 72. On the road with Eddie hunched at the wheel, flying past the fields—brown and endless in winter, green and full and close in summer—they could almost believe it was enough, what they had, only each other.

Eddie was more excited than usual that night as they followed the sidewalk through the quiet neighborhood. It was just past eleven and Ash's contacts were cloudy and irritating. He was usually asleep by ten, then up early the next morning, sitting with a book in the blue pre-dawn light at the kitchen table and trying to cultivate a love for coffee.

Bats flew overhead. When the occasional car passed, Eddie threw the rifle onto the nearest lawn and shoved his hands into his pockets, whistling with his head tilted toward the moon, the soft fold under his chin briefly gone, fists making two knots each on his thighs through his sweat pants. Then he resumed telling Ash about a field party coming up Saturday night.

“It’s gonna be amazing, we have to go, it’s the last one before summer,” he said. “Beer, girls, bonfires . . . boobs. Yeah. Guaranteed. You have no idea what these girls will do. They dance naked around the fire.” He dove onto a lawn and rolled, came up on one knee, rifle raised, and shot a plastic pellet into the night. They heard it ping against a window. “Naked!” he yelled, and they ran. Sometimes they lingered out of sight to see if someone came to investigate, but it was more fun to imagine a crazed homeowner flying out the front door, wielding a shotgun and a fistful of leashes attached to rabid dogs.

They slowed to a walk. Ash considered the proposition. He’d never been to a party that didn’t feature pointy hats. It seemed like too much of a leap to go from pointy hats to naked girls. There was no transition. He didn’t even know what beer tasted like. And could high school girls even be naked? Wasn’t there a law or something? Couldn’t he be arrested for creeping in the shadows and staring at them? Good God, he felt dizzy, dismayed, terrified. He masked these feelings with scorn and skepticism.

He said, “You just want me to go so I can give you a ride.” The hood of his car was tied down with two bungee cords, crumpled up like a sneer, the result of his first accident several weeks before. He was supposed to get a job to help pay for the repairs,

ha ha. He imagined rolling up to the party in that wreck. It had all the sex appeal of an infomercial.

He followed Eddie around the side of a brick house, and they each squatted in the driveway next to a plastic trash bin. The window above the garage was a yellow square, the curtains drawn back. Ash realized the house belonged to Brittany Harding, a tall cheerleader who had transferred over at the beginning of the year from a private school. She sang soprano in the school chorus. She sang love songs in the hallways, between the lockers. Eddie developed a crush the instant he saw her, a white-hot coal singing up from the center of his dim existence.

“I don’t want just a ride,” Eddie said. “I want a wingman. But fuck, I don’t give a fuck, I’ll go solo, just drop me off and go home.”

“Please don’t cuss. You sound so lame.”

They sat for a moment. Ash relished the slight chill in the air, knowing it would be gone soon, the world turning again into summer. Eddie, unusually silent, watched the window above them. Ash said, “Well, are you gonna shoot it or what? Are you the BB Gun Stalker now?”

“I’m gonna level with you.”

“Why do you always have to talk like you’re in a movie?”

“Will you shut up? I’m trying to tell you why at least you have to give me a ride.” He put down his gun. As he talked he untied and retied his shoes. “Brittany’s supposed to be there. This will be my only chance to talk to her, so I have to go. She’ll be drinking. I hear she drinks, anyway. So we’ll be drinking. And I’ll be able to talk to her.”

“And what will you say?”

“We’ll talk about skiing. She loves it. I hear she goes to Colorado every winter. Remember that time we went skiing in Gatlinburg? So we’ll have something to talk about. An opening.”

“Eddie, I don’t think skiing in Gatlinburg is anything like in Colorado. They have real snow there, for instance.”

“Yeah, but—I don’t know.” He sat back and turned his face again to the yellow light. “It’s all I’ve got.”

“Where do you hear all these things, anyway,” Ash said, and it sounded too bitter. He always felt so much in the dark, while Eddie seemed to wade through a secret tidal pool of gossip and betrayal and myth and love, which Ash knew existed but could never find. “You’re like some kind of super spy,” he added, trying for a lighter tone.

“I listen, that’s all.” Eddie was subdued now, as if realizing dimly that all he’d ever done was stand on the outskirts of things, listening. Ash reminded himself, with relief, that while Eddie might know what was happening among their classmates, he was part of it all only as much as bullying and ridicule would allow.

They sat and watched Brittany Harding’s window, as if waiting to glimpse a spirit purported to appear nightly. Occasionally a shadow drifted across her bedroom ceiling. Eddie squinted, his tongue poked out. Then he shot out his foot and knocked over the trash bin. The hollow bang made Ash jump, but before he could get up to run Eddie grabbed his arm. “Wait, don’t worry, just lay flat,” he said. “She won’t be able to see us.”

Brittany appeared in the window in a white tank top, her brown hair piled up in a messy bun. She cupped her hands and peered through the glass. The boys pressed themselves against the driveway, tiny pebbles digging into their scalps. Neither turned away from the girl, who stood back and looked at herself in the glass. She looked right at them, not seeing them. They saw the loving, satisfied gaze she gave her own reflection, and for a moment they believed they'd been seen, that her gaze was meant only for them, for the doorway that felt wide open in their chests. That countdown to liftoff feeling was back, welling up in Ash. Something told him that these were the important moments, when someone sees inside of you and makes that space feel like home.

There should be more of this. So much more. He was tired of overhearing weekend stories on Mondays, tired of Saturday nights in his bed reading by lamplight, or writing in his journal, making up exploits and triumphs for himself. The silence of his life weighed on him, so vast the turning of a textbook page was profound. It was time to be noticed, to make a dent in the lives of others, to rise reborn into a new social stratum.

When Brittany disappeared into her room, she left them breathless. Each forgot the other until the light went out, and in the sudden darkness they remembered themselves.

One night when Ash was twelve a clear fluid seeped out of his penis. What, what, what? he shouted in his head, staring in disbelief at what his bedside lamp revealed. He touched the stuff and it adhered to his fingertip, which he placed tentatively against his tongue. With a grimace he spat onto the floor, smacking his lips to expel the lingering musky saltiness. I'm not human, he thought, and jumped out of bed with the elastic

waistline of his pajama bottoms clutching his thighs. “Right all along,” he whispered, and thrust the blinds open, looking with anticipatory wonder into the night, filled with the somewhat correct certainty that he was leaking the stuff of manhood, the discharge of his true species, which signaled the end of a cruel but necessary rite of passage on a foreign planet.

Outside his window was no interstellar transport, alight and ready for home. Only his brown lawn, the streetlights spewing their blots of orange, his father’s old car in the driveway, a dispiriting testament to Earth-bound limitation. The sky was as dark and starless as the woods of Straub Park across the street. He leaned his forehead against the glass, the atmosphere bearing down in its familiar, crushing way, a weight against his ribs and skull. He’d always believed the cause of this pressure was his body still adjusting to the planet on which he’d been abandoned, and though he soon, with some embarrassment, disavowed this notion, he would never fully understand the admixture of fear, disappointment and confinement that seemed to alter the composition of the air around him.

The glass fogged under his breath. He shoved open the window and rested on his knees, straining to see beyond the streetlights. “Come on,” he said softly into the hush of October, “I know the truth for sure now. Come back for me.” A chilly wind blew through his hair, carrying no metallic tang or whiff of ozone or static charge. Dejected, he tucked his penis back into his pants.

In the skies over Memphis, throughout his childhood, he had seen seventy-seven unidentified flying objects, recording each in a logbook he’d brought back from Space Camp in Huntsville, noting the date, time and place above a description of the

phenomenon, hoping to discern a pattern. He also included musings on the true nature of his physical appearance, and whether or not he would instantly recognize, from a suppressed memory, the streak of lights belonging to a ship of his own species. He left the logbook on the kitchen table or in his father's chair, hoping his father would peel it open and read its contents with a furrowed brow, then sigh and call for his son to come sit down to hear the truth, something he should have heard a long time ago.

Ash couldn't directly ask his father if he was an alien. The thought of his father looking at him, eyes narrowed and lips pursed in the manner of a man trying to solve an equation that he suspects is unsolvable, the look Ash tried to ignore when so often it was directed his way, was too much to bear. He was afraid that his father looked at him already and saw a being born under an alien star. Whether it was true or not, Ash wanted to look and feel human.

Most of David's interactions with Ash were filtered through history and sports. David, through some quirk of circumstance or personality that no one had been able to figure out, was a John Quincy Adams buff, so much so that his son was born Ashlee Quincy Jenkins. ("Why not John Quincy?" Ash asked once. "Why not Quincy Adams? Or Boo Bear? Why not anything at all but Ashlee?" "Your mother and I liked Ashlee," David said. "Say John Quincy Jenkins out loud and tell me it doesn't sound ridiculous." "John Quincy Jenkins," Ash said. "Has a nice ring to it.") Father and son watched the History Channel together. David told Ash about early America instead of early adulthood, so that Ash was ignorant of sex, drugs, women, small talk, and self-esteem, but by God he knew that Longfellow didn't know shit about Paul Revere's ride.

There was a disastrous foray into athletics. Ash threw a baseball as if someone had just shoved a cattle prod against his back, his whole body jerking forward and the ball landing in the grass before it crossed the yard. He ran with his arms stiff at his sides, fingers splayed and palms parallel to the ground.

This concerned David on a deeper level than proper base running technique. “Son,” he asked one Saturday during a commercial break, “tell me about the girls you like.” His son spent a lot of time with Eddie Sacs and no time at all with girls.

“Huh?” Ash was thirteen. His upper lip, covered in a film of black hair, protruded slightly from braces that he tried to conceal as much as possible by crumpling his smile down to a small upward twitch of the lips. Glasses sat crooked on his nose because his ears were uneven. He didn’t think much about girls. They were like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, pictures of which he’d come across online and had saved to Favorites—beautiful but impossible to touch and understand. Yet he believed a girl might miraculously take an interest in him if he just sat back and put out vibes. Even if he felt like he belonged on another planet (though by thirteen he had accepted that he was destined to a life on Earth), he was capable of great flights of hope that one day he’d feel at home here.

He thought he was handsome at certain angles, unaware that he actually looked like a timid small-time crook, that his half smile was not cute, but rather suggested the contemplation of lewd misdeeds. If his nascent moustache were alive it would have laughed bitterly at the prospect of embracing some girl’s delicate peach fuzz.

“Do you like any girls at school?” David asked.

“No.”

“Do you like any guys?”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

Had an extraterrestrial, well-versed in human psychology and possessing the right scientific instruments, ever actually entered and surveyed Ash's room when he was a young boy, when he believed he belonged in another galaxy, it would have inferred, in a way the boy and his father could not, from the blank walls, the clutter of pages containing abandoned fantasy epics, the books discarded halfway through, and the clothes on the floor collecting wrinkles, dust, and crumbs, that this was the living space of a being who was dissatisfied with living, who was ready to move on, ready for his real life to begin.

Waving a humming metal wand over the sleeping child's head, the E.T. would feel in its own mind the rush of the child's thoughts. The crackling image of a dead mother, alive in the past and smiling down at him as he burrows against her on a cold night. The father doing push-ups on the carpet, imploring the child to sit on his back and collapsing with a laugh as soon as the boy obeyed. The scratchy feel of the mother's legs as the child lay across them watching TV. The lilt of her voice in the rooms of his very early life, a voice which came still to him from a great distance, unrecognizable for what it was yet stirring and calming, a wet leaf clinging to hot skin, unnoticed. The plunge through cold air that was dissatisfaction, a rudimentary but powerful conviction that even the people you loved were not the people you were meant to love, that every good moment was an imitation of someone else's better moments. The dizzying burst of flight through worlds that only existed in movies and books, which in great hunger the child had consumed and stored away, whose mountains and valleys he often traveled. The

elation, boredom, and bittersweet loneliness of endless summer days. The thick tingling residue in the mouth of juice and flavored ice with too much sugar. The burst of flame from darkness that was the companionship of another boy.

Inside the child the E.T. would find a volatile mix of the usual human emotions and ways of being, all the hope and despair and love, the named things, but also, always, something else brewing, primitive, both beneath and suffusing everything else. What is that? Undetermined—beyond the ability of the machine to measure.

Chapter Two

Eddie had been to parties before, with mixed results and confused definitions of what it meant to actually *go* to a party. His freshman year, he'd slipped through Allie Utley's back gate twice. The first time, he hauled a three-step ladder to the edge of the enclosed back porch with aspirations to ascend like Robin Hood to the sill of Allie's bedroom window, through which, he was sure, he'd watch the attendees of her slumber party drink alcohol and do somersaults off the bed into a pile a blankets, wearing only nightgowns susceptible to scroll-backs or slip-downs from secret thighs and chests. He stood on his ladder in the glare of the motion sensor light he'd set off and reached for the lip of the flat roof over the patio. He was too short. Panicked by this wrinkle in his plan, along with his need to crouch in the dark and look at girls, he leapt. The gutter gave way under his weight, tearing with a screech, toppling Eddie and his step ladder into the Utley's flowerbed. He abandoned the ladder and ran.

The second time, months later, was during an afternoon pool party. He dove into the pool unnoticed and held his breath as long as he could at the bottom of the deep end, eyes squeezed shut. When he shot to the surface his head rammed square into the butt cheeks of Paul McConnell. After his sputtered apologies and the questions from several swimmers regarding his presence there, Eddie drifted over to an unused raft, threw an arm around it, donned the goggles and snorkel he'd been clutching, and sank up to his eyes so that he could see both the smiling faces and pale legs of his classmates, listen to the hollow plink of water and the bright peals of laughter. Eventually he noticed people

staring at him. He climbed the steps out of the pool. All conversations seemed to have ceased.

“I forgot my towel,” he said. No one answered. “Ok. I’ll just get one out of the house.”

Mrs. Utley invited him inside, and he stood dripping in the kitchen until she provided him with a soft white towel. He spent a shirtless hour playing in the living room with Reeses, the Utley’s brown and black cat, eating homemade cookies and discussing his aspirations with Allie’s mother. At the time, he couldn’t decide between math, science, history, and economics, unaware yet of anything more specific. Mrs. Utley complimented his open-mindedness and politely asked when his parents were expecting him home.

Eddie was under the mistaken assumption that his presence at a party indicated his acceptance. Or at least that his presence would lead to acceptance. He prowled the neighborhood some weekends, looking for cars on the street, following every heartbeat of bass in the distance, looking for a blazing house, a knot of girls outside an open garage. He found these on occasion. He tried to blend in, to talk to the people he’d grown up with, tell a joke, lean against a fireplace mantle and tilt his chin in greeting to those who came through the door. The smallest slivers of warmth would blossom so briefly in his belly that he felt desperate to grab them somehow, these strange flowers, hold them open and peer into their cozy bright centers.

But each instance of derision, whether a look, a word, or a hand in the shape of a fist, broke down, in increments or great collapses, the illusion that Eddie was as good as them, all the beautiful, normal, funny, athletic kids of the world. Inevitably, standing in

an unfamiliar house or backyard or garage, holding a cup of someone else's unfinished beer because he was afraid, unconsciously, to approach the fridge or the keg, trying or having just failed to insinuate himself into a conversation, Eddie would catch a glimpse of his true self. Not the taller, thinner, more handsome self he tried to project, the suave self saying sweet or profound things to a beautiful girl, but the fat, awkward self, standing alone with an idiotic, hopeful grin, the self which in black moments he hated, whose large belly he squeezed in frustration in front of the bathroom mirror until the flesh was bright red, whose various black eyes, whether received at a crashed party or the park or the school, failed to elicit pride or an aura of toughness.

Recovering from these moments was a quick process, on the surface, simply a matter of hasty burial. He had spent his whole life building himself up, struggling for every morsel of self-worth he could conjure. You can only take so much abuse before you either believe you deserve it or believe that everybody's just jealous, screw 'em.

This field party would change things. He would talk to Brittany Harding, charm her, and she would make him new. He went to school that Friday determined to unveil its location. Facebook yielded no clues. He had hundreds of Facebook friends, but they were mostly people he'd never met or had met once, with a lot of aunts obsessed with FarmVille and cousins from out of town. The friend requests he sent to classmates were usually rejected, but sometimes curiosity prevailed, and someone would come to school in possession of the nuggets Eddie posted about himself on the newsfeed: 'I called a random number and it was a hot girl.' 'I have trouble keeping liver down. Gross.' 'I wanna rap the pledge of allegiance in the morning. Who's with me?' He posted constantly, under the impression that a whimsical, fun personality shown through in a

way that was pure and unencumbered by his physical presence. Ash had told him not to post so much, but Eddie couldn't resist. His voice carried online. Someone was out there who would take note and listen.

After first period, he took a stroll behind the portables, where he knew a group of three track runners, tall and bony and nervous, smoked every morning.

"Hey boys," he said, and their heads shot up. "Mind if I bum a smoke?"

"Crap, keep your voice down, you idiot." Brice Thomas peeked around the side of the portable.

"You smoke, Sacs?" Jason Conway said.

"Been known to."

"Bullshit."

"Just give him one," Brice said. "Stop talking so loud."

Keith Mayfield offered his pack to Eddie, who, surprised, slipped a cigarette out and put it behind his ear. He'd only smoked once before. A coughing fit would undermine his objective. "For later," he said. "My lady doesn't like the smell."

The runners grinned. Only Eddie believed his lies—spiritual belief, a hopeful yearning for the possible. "I hear there's a party tomorrow."

"Sure," Keith said, "lots of parties."

"I'm talking about the big one, the field party. I just got my invitation."

"Your what?"

Jason said, "Did you get the one with the balloons or the confetti?"

Eddie sensed he'd made a mistake. Didn't people send out invitations anymore? No, that's middle school birthday parties, stupid. This is the big leagues. He needed a good line now, a zinger.

"Fuck you, man," he said. "I've got all day."

"All day for what?"

"I mean, I don't, I don't have all day. People to see, and all that."

"So go see them."

During lunch, having gathered no intel, Eddie consulted with Ash, perched on the hard red stools bolted to the tables in Edmondson's cafeteria. "This operation is tanking," he said around a mouthful of Doritos. "What have you got for me?"

"Chest pain," Ash said. "I can feel this burger-product killing me."

"Have my chicken sandwich."

"No, I'll just suffer. I always think these burgers will be good, and then they taste like congealed grease."

"You should throw it at somebody."

"Joe Powell?"

"Yes. Throw that shit at Joe fucking Powell."

Joe sat two tables over, slender but lean, all muscle, with the countenance of a future assault and battery convict. Eddie could see the back of his shaved head. Recently Joe had stolen Eddie's underwear in the locker room after gym and spread the word. The rest of the day people had called out, "How they hangin', Sacs?"

Ash picked up his burger as if to throw it. Eddie knew he wouldn't, but it sent a thrill through him anyway, that brief and elusive warmth. Ash listened to him. Even if

he responded with scorn, it was not like anyone else's scorn. If he responded with laughter, it was not like anyone else's laughter. Around Ash it was enough just to live. If that feeling could only last. Could he hope, beyond the short span of months he was capable of shaping in his mind, that one day he'd be able to sink with a sigh into his life as if it were a hot tub and say, "Ah, so this is it"?

At that moment anything seemed possible. He ate his chicken sandwich in four happy bites. The white cinder block walls of the cafeteria gleamed. Voices from a hundred students blended into one murmuring mass. Somewhere within that mass floated the field party and its location, some star-bright field in the woods alight with fires and littered with kegs, and somewhere in that mass was Brittany Harding, singing love songs, and Allie Utley, reminiscing and building bright summer plans; and heat lamps humming over grease-burgers, plastic trays clattering against tables; laughter and whispers and groans; and beneath it all the thump-thump of a hundred hearts, Eddie's one of them, beating the same rhythm, aching for a new one.

Walking back to class, Ash produced two yellow cards from his back pocket and handed one to Eddie. "By the way," he said, "our presence is requested."

The card was decorated with seashells, sandals, and beach balls. It advertised a pool party with refreshments that night at seven o'clock. It promised "friends, fun and sun." Eddie stopped in the middle of the hallway, holding the invitation in both hands. "Holy shite," he said. "Whose party is this?"

"Well." Ash shoved his hands into his pockets and looked away. "Chelsa Clark's. But still."

“But still nothing. This is the real deal.” He ran his hand over the cardstock. Raised lettering. Sweet lord.

“Don’t stand there drooling over it. Put it away. Act like a normal person for once.”

Chelsa had been cleaning Ash’s house one day a week for the past year; his father had seen her advertisement for babysitting and house cleaning services on a cork board at St. Agnes the previous spring. Eddie saw her sometimes in the hallway, carrying a red plastic Care Bears lunch box, hunched under an enormous neon green backpack, or out on the football field, springing into handstands and cartwheels instead of walking laps on the track—the punishment for not dressing out for gym. She held her dirty blonde hair back with butterfly barrettes so that her large forehead shone, blemished at times with pimples, sitting atop bushy mounds of eyebrow.

Eddie thought she was beautiful. But he loved every girl he saw, every girl he touched, even if he only stepped on a toe. He wondered if he would be able to feel her braces through her lips when, inevitably, he kissed her that night, in an air pocket under an inflatable boat, something slow on the stereo, something string-heavy and heart-breaking. Maybe he should save his first kiss for someone with straight teeth. Brittany Harding had two rows of white dental perfection behind her incredible smile. But he could learn how to kiss with Chelsa, and then just kill it with Brittany on Saturday, make her whole body shudder with pleasure from the work of his deft tongue and plying lips. The key was to remember breath mints, review those “How To Kiss” YouTube videos he’d saved on his laptop, lose twenty pounds in six hours, and, above all but most difficult, to feign nonchalance.

“Cool invitation,” he said, and slid it into the nearest trashcan.

Two Fridays a month, the Sacs family had Ash and his father over for dinner, a tradition Evelyn had started years ago, shortly after Ash made friends with Eddie. The families took turns hosting, then. The women were great friends. Now Eddie’s mother, Kathy, always cooked, while Ash and Eddie killed time upstairs, trying to avoid Eddie’s brother Charlie. Their fathers sat on the back patio when the weather permitted, smoking cigars and trying to remember something interesting to relate about their lives. Each felt he was inventing himself on the spot, putting on a show, and still they ended up talking about things neither really cared about. The only time they spent together were the two allotted Friday evenings.

They all sat down in Kathy’s dining room at six, Eddie already wearing his swim trunks. He also wore a black Slayer T-shirt, which he planned to glower in at the lip of the pool before whipping it off and diving into the water and Chelsea’s heart. He and Ash were both anxious to get going, but it was useless to eat quickly, (Eddie had two helpings of everything, barely giving his impending shirtlessness any thought), since they had to stay in their seats for a full hour during these meals. Usually they enjoyed their time at the table, exasperation merely for show as they fielded questions that, it seemed to them, were lobbed from the sidelines—desperate parents, benched by time, wistful and itching for news and playing conditions.

“So how was school today?” Eddie’s father, Robert, asked.

Eddie groaned. “Lamest question. Ask me something different. Ask me why Godzilla hated Japan.”

“Why did he?”

“How should I know? Convenience, I guess. School was fine. I took this history test? And . . .” He tuned out his own story, the one billionth ramble of his life, a skill he developed through years of strenuous talking, a kind of cushion protecting his ego from himself. Too much self-awareness would be devastating, would reveal too much vapid fluff. Too many words flitting like bats in empty echoing rooms. Words would never fill these rooms, but what else was there?

“You know,” David said when Eddie took a breath. “I’d like to take a history test.” Everyone looked at him. Eddie had veered from the subject of history. David had a habit of making people wonder where he’d been the last few minutes. “I mean, I make them up for other people to take, but I’d like someone to make one for me, a really challenging one. Obscure history of 1925, or something.”

Charlie placed his fork aside and said, “When English people invented soccer, except they called it football, they were kicking around severed heads.”

“My God,” Kathy said.

“Why would you even know that?” Eddie asked.

“The internet.”

“The internet,” David said, “is destroying the world.”

Ash said, “You can find a ton of history quizzes on the internet.”

“Really? Which websites?” David took a pen and a tiny notebook from his shirt pocket.

“Charlie is a sick freak,” Eddie said.

“Nu-uh. All I did was google interesting facts. I’m innocent.”

Yes, Charlie was innocent. How could Eddie forget. At seven, Charlie had yet to develop sarcasm, angst, pimples, innuendo, destructive sexual frustration, the expectation of acquiring a job, or the need to stash copies of Playboy in seemingly impenetrable bedroom brambles where they were inevitably discovered. Charlie would be able to kick a soccer ball through a maze of shin guards even if the ball was replaced by a rotten lopped-off head. He got straight A's and won spelling bees. He helped with the dishes and the laundry while Eddie sulked and thought about pitching in but decided against it for fear of revealing actual concern about being upstaged by a third grader. Charlie liked The Beatles and Bread, not Slayer and Metallica. Charlie could bake cupcakes, draw realistic dragons, and multiply in his head. He could probably fly, too.

“Charlie,” Kathy said. “You know better. Don’t google anything without asking me first. Especially anything *interesting*. Lord knows what people on the internet find interesting these days.”

“Sex. Death,” Eddie said. “Herpes.”

“Son, don’t say ‘herpes’ at the dinner table,” Robert said around a mouthful of peas.

“Herpes falls under sex anyway,” Ash said.

“It’s redundant,” David said, eager as ever to mold young minds. “Charlie, do you know what ‘redundant’ is?”

“I know what herpes is. The itch and shame of lovemaking.”

Ash and Eddie snorted. David frowned.

“Charlie!” Twin blooms of blood marked Kathy’s cheeks. She was a thin, pale woman with dark hair, whose frequent blushes blazed. Charlie got his sharp features,

blue eyes, and heart-shaped face from her. Eddie got his general roundness from his father, who was a bank manager and resembled the stereotypes of his ilk depicted in newspaper strips—bald, bespectacled, short and pot-bellied.

“From a TV preacher,” Charlie said before his mother could ask. “He yelled a lot.”

“Too bad you’ve never actually made love,” Eddie said, sitting back and throwing a worldly arm over the back of his chair. His parents ignored him.

Kathy said, “Don’t ever listen to anything said about God outside of a church. You listen to Pastor Rick.”

“What’s lovemaking, anyway?” Charlie asked.

“Uh-oh. Time to pack up and head to the caves,” Robert said, his standard response when the world posed an innocuous threat.

“Ash,” David said. “Tell everyone about your new hobby.”

“Oh!” Kathy leaned forward and put her chin in her hands, happy for the distraction. “That sounds exciting.”

“You haven’t even heard what it is,” Eddie said. “It’s photographing paint. There, now you feel stupid.”

“Eddie.” His mother glared at him and then turned to Charlie. “Don’t say people are stupid, Charlie. It makes you look stupid.”

“Yes, m’am,” Charlie said. Eddie scowled. His parents mostly ignored his quips unless Charlie was around. Eddie was good fodder for life lessons and examples of squandered potential.

“Ash plays guitar now,” David said.

“Well, you can’t call it playing,” Ash said. “I don’t actually know what I’m doing. I can’t play anything.”

“What can you play?” Robert asked.

“Dad, he just said—never mind.”

“I can only do the harmonics. You know, like when you just touch a string in a certain place without having to hold it down. I need to build calluses on my fingers.”

Ash was blushing and further mashing his mashed potatoes.

“He can really play those harmonics, though,” Eddie said. “It sounds better than Bread, that’s for sure.” He wanted Ash to be impressive, wanted to associate with someone who had talent. If he couldn’t be talented and handsome, he wanted at least to be associated with someone who was. Ash loomed large in his life, a boy attributed with virtues that he didn’t actually possess. Ash wasn’t handsome—his face drooped into a weak chin, his shoulders slumped, and he carried himself too carefully, almost prissily—but neither was he ugly. He at least had clear skin, a neat part in his hair, and a flat stomach. He seemed calm and in control, even if secretly he was a constant coil of haywire electric cable. He wrote poetry, song lyrics, and science fiction/fantasy stories that Eddie loved. One such poem he had taped to the wall above his bed: From soaring dreams I’m awake again/ The same mistake begins/ Out of bed into life/ Oh well, at least I’m alive.

“Ash, can you teach me how to play guitar?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Eddie said. “Do not teach him.” Eddie had tried to learn himself during the first week of Ash’s venture. A guitar felt like a hunk of driftwood in his hands.

Robert said, “Maybe for now you should stick with that harmonica we gave you, Charlie.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, standing and pushing in his chair. “Speaking of painful listening experiences, our hour here is up. It’s been real, but me and Ash have a swanky pool party that’s already started.”

“The party won’t start ‘til we get there,” Ash said.

Eddie beamed. “He’ll be here all week, folks.” As he left the kitchen, he called back, “Hey Charlie, lovemaking is when you jab a vagina repeatedly with your erect penis.”

Chapter Three

Three months after his mother's accident, Ash decided he'd waited long enough for her to visit him from the spirit world. His understanding of death was that it never wholly subtracted anything from the world. Leaves returned in the spring, animals became soil, stars became dust, and people became blue and white ghosts.

In his room some nights he sat up in bed, propped against the wall. He closed his eyes, placed a hand over his heart, and directed every thought toward an image of his mother, the strongest he possessed, which had lodged inside of him and would stand for all the lost ones, become, as he grew older and further from her, the sum total of his mother on the earth.

She sits in the darkened living room, on the couch by the fireplace, where a fire burns low and the wood his father purchased pops in the heat. She is wearing a slate blue sweatshirt that bunches around her wrists and hangs nearly to her knees. This is the Sweater Monster sweatshirt, Ash's mortal wintertime enemy: his mother chasing him, whipping the sleeves that fall so far past her fingers. But now is not that time. Now his mother reads a book, her entire body consumed in the shirt except her hands and her head. Her blonde hair is in a loose ponytail, her skin bronzed by the firelight, and when she looks up and sees him, standing there in the entrance to the room and clutching his stuffed Duck-Duck, his body shaky from a nightmare, she smiles, and her eyes are dark yet shining liquid. He goes to sit with her, burrows beneath her arm, and pretends to read. He doesn't understand the words in her book, but he likes their shapes, their

orderly march, and he thinks his mother must be discovering in them the secrets of the universe. How else to explain her power to both diminish its terror and inflate its joy?

Sitting up in his bed, trying to conjure her ghost, he whispered “I believe,” as if inviting the Holy Spirit into his heart. He could see his mother clearly in memory, in the firelight, smiling down at him as he lay against her belly. But she did not appear in his room. He opened his eyes and it was only darkness.

A séance was in order.

As far as he knew, the power of a séance to summon the dead came from lighting candles in a dark room, calling to the spirit world in a ghostly voice, and buying a Ouija board (ten dollars on Dad’s credit card from Amazon.com). You couldn’t do it alone—more people gave the spirit more mediums—so Ash recruited Eddie one Saturday night.

They placed the Ouija board on Ash’s overturned *Star Wars* trash can and a plastic bin of roughly the same height, which held in its three stacked drawers Ash’s comic books. Eddie had brought four long stemmed candles from home, which now were lit and leaning in clear drinking glasses on the floor, a paper towel under each to catch the wax. He’d also brought a red silk shirt from his father’s closet, which cascaded from his shoulders like an elegant poncho.

“Why are you wearing that?” Ash had asked.

“Duh.” Eddie said. “Haven’t you ever seen those spirit-calling people? I should have jewelry, too, but my mom caught me taking some.”

Ash wore his mother’s oversized sweatshirt. The sleeves were held at each wrist by a rubber band in a fat bubble of blue fabric. The hem reached nearly to his ankles.

“You look like a blueberry,” Eddie said. “Will the spirits mind? Maybe you should find a more spiritual shirt from your dad. Or maybe, did your mom love blueberries or something?”

Ash thought maybe he shouldn't have invited Eddie. But he needed to share the experience, needed a witness. Who would believe him otherwise, if he saw his mother? Who would save him if an inter-dimensional doorway tore his room in half?

The light thrown by the candles wavered on the walls. The action figures on the windowsill and dresser seemed to move in tiny increments. The Ouija board was a dark square before them. Ash felt they had appropriately set the scene. He could practically feel the spirit world pressing against the feeble flames or welling up out of the shimmering orange and red depths of the drinking glasses. The room was no longer in a suburb of Memphis, but in some dark urban alleyway, maybe in Gotham, maybe in Hollywood.

Ash picked up one of the glasses along with its paper towel and placed them on the edge of the plastic bin. The orange glow revealed the board, parchment brown, with two rows of gothic letters above a row of numbers. Along the edges were swirls of stars, a sun and moon with moustaches and smug grins, and a host of strange symbols that conveyed the ancient mystery and power of Ash's new novelty shop product. The planchette was white plastic in the shape of an inverted heart, with a clear window at the tip.

“Wow,” Eddie breathed.

“Shh. Be quiet. We mustn't scare off the spirits.” Ash sat straight up, shoulders thrown back, chin high. “We must open our minds. Open them like doors.”

“How?”

“Just . . . open them. It helps to close your eyes and breathe heavy.”

With his eyes shut, Ash took a deep breath and cleared everything from his mind except the memory of his mother smiling down at him.

Eddie was panting. Ash cracked open an eye. “No, no. Just breathe in real big and hold it a minute, then let it all go out. And try to think about my mom.”

“Oh, sorry.” Eddie inhaled, and on his exhale said, “Ohmmmm.”

Ash allowed it, even joined in. It felt right. He placed the first two fingers of each hand against his thumbs and rested his wrists on his knees. He searched the darkness against his eyelids for any glimmer of the spirit world, casting his mind out, imagining a roiling sea of blue-white ectoplasm, the sea of the dead, vast and many fathoms deep. His mother would swim to him on a guiding current, her path preordained. He was a beacon over those darkly glowing waters. How could she miss him, her one son? Impossible. A mother and son could always find each other. A son couldn't be without a mother. He came from her, every part of him. He is her. She is him. So what is death? It's nothing, a door to step through, which separates but does not take away.

“Is she coming?” Eddie whispered.

Ash opened his eyes. “I think I can feel her.”

Eddie leaned forward. “What does it feel like?”

“It feels like . . . tingles. And flutters.”

“Wow.” Eddie left his mouth hanging open. His round face hovered over the board, eyes boring into Ash. “Let's see if she talks to us.”

“Spirit of my mother,” Ash intoned. “If you are here, show us a sign.”

The boys looked around the room. At each other. The walls rippled and Eddie's shirt shimmered in the candlelight. A sign from the spirits. Ash had imagined a bang from the attic or a creak from the hinges of the closet door. But now, something in him was convinced of more. He had spoken the truth; he could feel his mother in the room. Her life had not yet receded from the places she'd moved through. The room seemed to swell with her presence, her touches, the toys she'd bought for him, the blankets she'd folded back and then tucked under him, the dresser with the tarnished brass knobs, in whose drawers, beneath the sloppy work of his father, were still shirts and shorts folded into her crisp lines, which Ash had not yet moved. How could he? His mother had been hurt badly, badly enough to kill her—how could he wrinkle those smooth, neat planes she'd created for him? How could he go about the work of further dismantling her? She was more than her physical self, and he understood it now in some dim way, her moreness, and that confirmed the lunacy of the funeral. To a boy of seven, a funeral is only one more boring adult ceremony requiring a tie and a pair of too-snug dress socks. Ash had been expecting his mother's return ever since.

He placed the tips of his fingers on the planchette and instructed Eddie to do the same. "Momma," he said, almost a whisper. His voice had lost its clairvoyant timbre.

"Are you here?" The planchette quivered slightly.

"Your hands are shaking it," Ash said.

"That's you! You're as scared as me."

"We're losing focus. Are you still thinking about her?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking of her in the kitchen, cooking stuff." Something about Eddie's eager expression, his wide-open earnestness and the way he leaned forward as if

anticipating a boogeyman from a horror film, made Ash nervous. Somehow Eddie made everything seem cheap.

“Ok, well, don’t stop. Close your eyes and don’t open them.”

Ash closed his own eyes. He imagined his mother standing across the room, blue and translucent, with her hands clasped at her chest as if begging for him to be able to see her there.

“Momma, are you here?” Nothing.

“Ask her what it’s like,” Eddie said.

“Shh, shut up. Mom? Can you tell us what it’s like? To be, you know.” Afraid he’d offended her, he rushed on. “Tell us anything. Anything you want to say, say it.”

The planchette started to slide. “Quit moving it!” Ash opened his eyes to see Eddie’s grin drop into a frown of concentration. “This isn’t playtime. This is serious.” He could feel himself blushing, feel the prickling sensation of imminent tears. He wanted to lodge the planchette in Eddie’s skull. The room felt too hot, his skin prickly and sweaty underneath the Sweater Monster sweatshirt.

Eddie said, “Well sorry for trying to make things exciting.”

“It’s not supposed to be *exciting*. This is my Mom we’re talking about.”

They sat there a long time. Ash could almost hear the candle flames. In the touch of blue fabric across his chest and down his arms was his mother’s embrace. The very air seemed heavy with her. Yet she didn’t speak. Her voice was lost. Maybe this was death’s prize, not the body but the voice.

As the minutes passed, Ash’s need to receive a message grew along with the conviction that he would not receive one. Make it say ‘I love you’. The thought, as he

repeated it, passed from his own consciousness and became a voice somewhere outside of himself, repeating until it seemed a directive and not merely a desire. Make it say 'I love you'. His mother was in the room. Make it say 'I love you.' The planchette moved. This was the work of his fingers and yet it wasn't. If he opened his eyes he would see her. Yes. He would see his mother. If he opened his eyes he would see. Open your eyes, said the voice. See your mother.

Chapter Four

Chelsa Clark lived across Straub Park from Eddie's house, three blocks away from Ash's. Her house was set back from the road, a brown sagging lump surrounded by oaks and sycamores. Next door, separated by a tall wooden fence and a line of trees, was the abandoned Electric Light Grill. It had opened a few years back for only six months, an oddity, built on a woodlot far from any other commercial enterprise, strings of white lights brightening its back patio. As far as Ash knew, no one had ever eaten there. He'd imagined it as a front for drug trafficking, a den of thieves in a secret basement. Maybe the back bar revolved to reveal rows of guns. The windows were boarded up now, but during the brief nights of its run they had blazed with yellow light. Ash had never seen anyone inside. Only rich brown, glossy tables, the gleaming metal barstools, and cream-colored walls, each of which held a single painting that looked as if a child had thrown his plate of spaghetti at a blank canvas.

Once the place closed, Ash had found a ladder bolted to the side of the building, halfway up, which he could reach by standing on a nearby window sill. His weak arms and his fear of injury couldn't trump his desire for sanctuary. He'd spent many evenings since alone on the flat roof, gazing at the small patch of sky visible through the trees, listening as cars passed below him, an approaching then lingering sigh of tires and wind. Somehow the world sounds different from a secret place. The ordinary swish of cars becomes something fantastic and apart from your life, taking on a quality of mystery, like the empty hum from a coiled sea shell. The birds in the trees sound excited or alarmed,

as if they've never seen anything like you before. Ash often fell asleep on that warm tar and gravel roof, dreaming of a life lived in secret.

Approaching Chelsa's house with Eddie, a blue beach towel draped across his shoulders, he could see through tangles of vegetation to the ladder on the side of the Electric Light Grill. He wanted to climb it, spread out his towel, and wait for twilight to deepen around him, lightning bugs drifting through his private vista of tree limbs and late spring constellations. But a clutch of red balloons bobbed above Chelsa's mailbox, tethered by purple ribbons, beckoning and full of promise. A sign on the front door directed everyone around back for fun and sun. The sun would be gone within an hour, but for now, as Ash opened the back gate, it slanted through the trees in deep orange swaths across the grass, caught and refracted itself in a thousand places within the shimmering water of the pool, and bronzed the pale skin of four guys picking at trays of food on a folding table, lending them a sultry air of sex on the terrace and tennis in the mornings. They seemed at home in their bodies, gracefully slouching, reaching for drinks, as if each muscle held the life-long memory of privilege and ease.

If the earth would only stop, everyone would stay beautiful. But the earth spun closer to night, and Ash and Eddie approached the table. These were no gods. A Katy Perry song issued meekly from the iPod dock on the table. Everyone, all boys, tried to look caught up in the music, some even experimenting with a head nod, trying to find the beat over the crunch of chips in their teeth. No one spoke. Chelsa was nowhere. At least Ash could count on Eddie to break an awkward silence.

“Hey party people,” he cried. “Where's the party?”

“It’s right here,” Alex Huxley said, confused. He had big ears and a small head. That’s how people knew Alex Huxley. The guy with the big ears and the small head. He held a can of Dr. Pepper in both hands. Like everyone else, he hadn’t yet taken off his shirt.

“No. This is not a party. The music’s too low, the pool’s too empty, there’s no girls, no booze. Is there booze? Is there alcohol in that cooler?”

“Chelsa’s parents are here,” Alex said. “They bought the food. And they bought sodas. See?” He held out his can. “None of us are twenty-one.”

“Unbelievable. And where are the ladies?” Eddie looked around, betrayed by the promise of friends, fun and sun, which he’d roughly translated to girls, girls and girls.

The back door squealed and everyone turned. “Well hel-lo,” Eddie said as Chelsa emerged from the house, carrying a plate of brownies and trailed by her friend Melissa, or Mel-Mel, or Big ol ‘Lissa, depending on who you asked. Chelsa wore a bright yellow one-piece that seemed to absorb the colors around it, so that at first glance she looked like a figure in a child’s coloring book, bland but for the exuberance of the colored-in swimsuit, her hair a washed-out white, pinned back, as always, by a pair of butterfly barrettes. But looking closer—not many bothered—you could sense something emerging from her, not only at this moment standing on her patio with brownies, but always. You could glimpse the future here, if you allowed yourself—the intelligence, humor, and confidence in those brown eyes, held back still by the teenage body she found so strange, the crushing mores of her suburban high school. In a few years, finally unafraid, she would shed the last of her youthful awkwardness and open herself to herself the way some never do. You could feel this in her, the way she was plowing through her

confusion, and it was startling to recognize for a moment the beautiful future self of someone seemingly so plain.

Ash hardly glanced at her. He turned to the table of food and started shoving chips into his mouth. He and Chelsa devoted all of their time together to avoidance. When she made her weekly visit to clean the house, he stayed in his room where it was safe. She usually came on Thursdays around 4 o'clock, so Ash knew when to ensconce himself behind his door with a book and every single pair of underwear he owned, bladder emptied and stomach full in case she stayed longer than the usual hour. He hoped he seemed more mysterious than terrified. Sometimes he got strange erections, and he would crack his door and listen to her movements downstairs, the swishes and hums of her, a girl in his house, mopping or sweeping, stirring the air. He walked the rooms once she left, buzzing with an obscure excitement, as if somehow he was trespassing in his own home. The place was altered in some way that went beyond the spotless counter and table tops, the clean lemon tang he could almost taste. The feeling didn't last long; the rooms would reclaim their quieter history.

Chelsa wedged the brownies into an empty spot on the table. "Hi, Eddie. Hi, Ash." She gave them each a high five, then shouted, "Ok, people!" and clapped her hands as if the party needed to quiet down. "To the pool!"

Eddie was the only one to move. He stepped to the edge of the deep end, peeled off his shirt, and tossed it aside. "Who wants to see my patented back flip?" he said. Ash knew what was coming. He and Eddie used to practice botching ways to enter a pool. Eddie bent over and grabbed the backs of his knees, then grimaced, frozen in place. "My back," he rasped. "Oh, my fucking old decrepit back." Then he tilted backwards into the

water. He surfaced and looked hopefully at Chelsa, who was looking at Ash, who followed Eddie's gaze. He and Chelsa looked at each other for a perilous moment.

"Hi," she said.

He found himself in the shade at the edge of the yard, sitting at a picnic table with Tyler Giles and Alex Huxley. Tyler had come to the party in crusty boots and camo pants. He had a wide, lumpy mole in the bristles just above the hairline of his shaved head. The mole's name was Gus and was famous for teaching the Giles' hound dogs to hunt people and for smoking cigars while Tyler slept. If you looked at Gus long enough it was said he'd flip you the bird. It took Tyler several confusing days to figure this out. Legend had it that Gus loved the attention and wouldn't let Tyler's hair grow.

The boys sat in silence, watching the others hit a beach ball around the pool, until Tyler leaned in and said, "Ya'll want to hear what Chelsa told me?" He looked over his shoulder, at the fence. "She's bi."

"Bi?" Alex said.

"Sexual," said Tyler.

There was a moment of reverent silence. Ash was only vaguely aware of the implications, but he knew enough to make his heart pound. Tyler told of how he'd found an enormous bra in the park one morning. A big white bra there in the dirt of the woods. He picked it up and scanned the trees, hoping for something good, a sight he would never forget. Nothing. Then, laughter. Chelsa and Melissa came around a bend in the path and saw him standing there with a fist in each bra cup.

"Uh-oh, looks like he found your bra, Mel-Mel," Chelsa said.

“I told you we shouldn’t have just left it there.” Melissa plucked it from his hands as she and Chelsa passed, batting her eyelashes. His arms stayed where they were for several seconds, as if waiting for something new to drape itself there with the same warmth. The girls disappeared, laughing.

I’ve got to get to the bottom of this, he thought, and could think of little else all day. At school he sat down across from her in the cafeteria, where she ate her bagged lunch at one of the sparsely populated tables near the registers. “I’ve got to know,” he said, “what that bra was doing in the park.”

“The bra in the park? Isn’t it obvious what the bra was doing in the park?”

He ached for it to be obvious, for revelation to strike him, to release him from the agonizing mystery of two girls complicit in a bra’s presence in the woods of a neighborhood park.

“It is definitely obvious,” he said. “For sure. I guess what I’m getting at is why?”

“Why?” She put down her sandwich. “Well Tyler, I guess it’s all the love I have to give. Bras just explode off breasts when I’m around. You never noticed?”

“So, like, you take them off?”

“I’ve been taking bras off my whole life.”

“Whose bras?”

“Everybody’s I can get my hands on.”

At the party, Tyler sat back in his chair, grinning.

“So she never said she was bi,” Alex said.

“Might as well have.”

“I think she was being metaphorical,” Ash said.

“So, when she says bra she means love?” Alex asked. “Or oppression or something?”

“Bullshit,” Tyler said.

“Yeah.” Alex nodded and stroked his chin. “I like a bra to be a bra. We should make the best of what we’ve got here.”

Ash looked at Gus, fat brown and triumphant on Tyler’s head. He wondered if Gus was a metaphor for stupidity. He yawned, wondering what other people were talking about as they gathered in groups across the city for the start of the weekend, how many real bras were coming unstrapped. He felt too safe. He wanted a meteor to strike, a shark fin to slice the surface of the blue water.

He sat on the second step of the pool, and within minutes she swam over to him, her hair dark with water. His chest was pale and bony under five sad little hairs, his nipples pink and rude, so he slouched until his chin hit the waterline. She crouched before him, waving her arms. The others were either playing a game in the deep-end or scarfing food around the table, everyone faintly glowing in the blue air, the treetops golden with the last of the sun.

So it comes to this, Ash thought.

“You always hide from me,” she said.

“What?”

“You know what I think of people who say ‘what’ when it’s obvious they’ve heard with perfect clarity?” Ash shook his head. “I think a few things of those people, depending on who it is. So, for instance, I could look at you and think hmm, he is

awfully persnickety. Meaning you didn't think what I said was appropriate. You like things to be done a certain way. You wanted something else, something easier and less messy, like 'Hi, thanks for coming to my party. Did you like my brownies?' You'd know how to respond to that. Or I could look at you and think you are a very unsure person. You don't trust yourself, so you couldn't possibly have heard me correctly. Or maybe you're too quick to please. You don't know what to say, but you want to say something quickly to gratify my need for a response. You look confused."

"Maybe I'm not any of those things," Ash said. "Maybe you just think too much."

"Mom says I don't think enough. Before I speak, I mean. What do you think?"

"I'm having a hard time of it right now."

"You know what type of person I think you are?" She was close to him, her chin in the water like his and her skin a soft blue green, aglow in that particular hue of summer twilight which he'd nearly forgotten about over the long winter. She was beautiful in that moment; he had to look away. "I think you're scared of everything under the sun. I think you always fear the worst."

"That's not true," he said, but he could feel the truth in it. One of the central pillars of his self, as he saw it, was that if circumstances required a hero he would shed his clothes and let his cape fly, he would become what was required of him. But he was not a boy who would rescue girls from thugs in dark alleys; nothing at all ever seemed required of him. Chelsea, who knew nothing, seemed to know so much. It made him feel bold. Nowhere to go but up.

He kissed her. His body moved through the water before he was even aware of those things as elements in the universe—his body, the water—before he was aware of this as a moment in his life, happening now and unspooling a new thread to grasp or throw away. He tasted her chlorine lips and then realized he was tasting them. He withdrew, feeling clinically sexy. There was no blood in it, though his heart was pounding. If anything, he was turned on by his own forthrightness. He had become the meteor, the shark.

They looked at each other for a moment—her eyes wide, mouth dropped open; yes, he'd shown her just how much he feared under the sun—and then he said, "Let's go up to your room," because that was the next step.

She made him wait in the dark hallway while she straightened up. He stood shivering in his damp trunks, a towel draped over his T-shirt, trying to figure out the kind of person he would be in a girl's bedroom, sensing obscurely that this doorway would open on a shrieking downward grade. He should tumble headlong through it, make a wild, passionate rush for her. The house, somehow, was silent around him. This was wilderness, the far reaches. He stood there and breathed.

Finally, she invited him in. She started to smile, but her lips wouldn't part. "Well, this is where I live," she said, and made a nervous laughing sound, like the honk of a goose. "Welcome welcome. My raft and sanctuary."

"It's nice," he said, standing neither wildly nor passionately just across the threshold.

“Let me introduce you to myself,” she said. “Since until recently you’ve made it a point to avoid me.”

He felt meek and beside the point now, looking into her room, at her standing there in the space she had created for herself. As she showed him around she expanded rapidly in the world, filling with a thousand complications. He could never hide from her again. She was becoming someone more than the phantom girl who cleaned his house.

The walls were a soft lavender, the ceiling plastered with glow-in-the-dark stars, which were bright green in the center but grew fainter as they spiraled toward the dark corners and into the dim light emanating from two red lampshades, which topped odd, S shaped stands on either side of the room.

“It’s like a twin sunset,” she told him. “I have my own constellations up there. I’ll show you in a minute.”

On the wall above her bed was a large watercolor painting in a cheap wooden frame, which featured a crude depiction of a lopsided cruise ship sailing for a pink and orange horizon. Trailing from the ship to the bottom of the frame were two ropes pulled taut.

“This is my Ship of Good Fortune, tugging me along,” she said. “It’s supposed to suggest that the ropes are tied to my bed. I did this a few years ago.”

“It’s, uh, awesome.”

“Ash.” She crossed her arms, golden-red in the lamplight. The towel she had wrapped around herself squeezed out little bulges of flesh around her armpits. “Be honest. You think this painting is awesome?”

“It’s really cool.” He could feel the wrongness of what he was saying, and blushed.

“Do you have cataracts?”

“My contacts are bothering me.”

“The Ship of Good Fortune looks like a bath toy that got stepped on. It looks like a melting cake in an oven, on a severely funky blue baking sheet.”

“It’s ironic,” he said desperately. “Good fortune takes a lickin but keeps on kickin.” He felt like a malfunctioning robot spouting nonsense.

“Nice try. I wasn’t going for irony. I’m not cool enough. Now come on, you have to be honest.” She put a hand on his back and pushed him forward. “Sit on the bed, right here at the end. Lean against the rail there. Now look at that painting. Stare at it for like twenty seconds, just thinking whatever. Then I’m gonna have you do something after. Ok? And don’t look anywhere else, don’t even blink. The painting is your whole universe. Ok? Go.”

At first he tried to experience the painting the way she seemed to want him to. He looked at the smear of blue meant as water and imagined it moving, rocking the bed where he sat. He was in the wake of good fortune, sailing into endless possibility. But he wasn’t feeling it. This was a universe made for her.

He started thinking about her, a few years younger, laboring over this scene for hours, pale hair awry, painting alone in her room until she felt she had the scene as close to right as possible, the colors vibrant, the lines crooked but serviceable, then hanging the canvas on this wall and laying back as the dark brown ropes did their work and took her away.

Thinking these things made him want to love her.

“Ok,” she said. “Listen to what I say and don’t think. Say the first thing that comes to your mind. Ready? Here goes. In one word, describe this painting.”

Love lonesome sad. “Hopeful,” he said.

“Hopeful.” She sat next to him. “I like it. I keep thinking I should take it down, though.”

“Why?”

“I was fifteen and melodramatic and wistful and suicidal and all that stuff.”

“Why were you suicidal?”

“Because I was melodramatic and wistful.”

“And you’re not anymore?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m not suicidal. It doesn’t seem romantic anymore.”

“Killing yourself?”

“Yeah, you know. There you are dead in the bathtub or something, a sad song playing, a note somewhere tragically showing what a brilliant, doomed soul you were, how your bright future was cut short because no one understood you, blah blah. I still have a suicide note I wrote once, actually. Want to see it?”

“Sure.”

“You weren’t supposed to say yes. Geez. You want to read my suicide note?”

“Nope.”

She laughed. She went to her desk, above which hung a long strip of butcher paper. Her name was written in large looping letters across it, along with several scribbles that appeared to be signatures, but overlapping these were bits of paper,

magazine covers, newspaper articles, a fuzzy pink slipper, a baseball cap, and other odds and ends. She came back with a scrap of computer paper and a red marker. "Write your own suicide note," she said. "I want to put it on my visitor wall."

"But I'm not gonna kill myself."

"Imagine this was your last chance to say anything. What would you say?"

He began writing without any idea of what he was saying. He wrote:

Dear cruel world, I write today to formally announce my disappointment in you and because of this my demise by my own hand. There should have been more explosions.

He'd hoped his message would be funnier, or more profound, but this seemed to be all he had to say. He handed her the note and she folded it, explaining that she would read it upon his death, and then found a spot on her visitor wall to tack it. She said that everyone who came into her room had to contribute in some way to the wall. Signatures were acceptable only if the person had nothing better to contribute. This made him happy. He was more than a signature; he was a suicide note.

"Can I read the wall?"

"Some other time. Maybe tomorrow night?"

"Ok, yeah. Actually, I have a party to go to." He could feel himself blushing with pride and embarrassment, as if he'd just spoken a line of poetry in flawless French. He had a party to go to. He was all booked up and she would have to work around his schedule.

He felt like a fraud.

"Oh, a fancy soiree," she said.

“It’s gonna be huge,” he said, hating himself. “It’s a field party.”

“Ugh. At Beth Caldwell’s? You’re actually going to that nonsense?”

There it was, the location of the party, but the look on Chelsea’s face cut through his ridiculous sense of superiority, down to the deeper inner self that he was trying to disavow, who had always scoffed at the idea of crazy, drunken nights. At school, when he’d overhear complaints of pounding, aching hangovers, he’d felt such prim self-satisfaction at his clear-headedness on Sunday mornings, when he liked to take a long bath, which set the tone for a torpid afternoon. Once, he’d listened as a classmate gleefully told of how he’d pulled out and ejaculated all over a girl’s back, and how pissed she’d been. To Ash this had sounded like a horrifying way to spend an evening. Naked, sweaty, a lowlife covering some sweet girl in the same stuff he grimly and with embarrassment shot into a sock every few days. When he thought of parties he pictured two people who didn’t even like each other making out.

These things weren’t for him, but why, lately, had he come to hate that he was the type of person who took baths on Saturday nights?

“Well,” he said. “I kind of have to. I have to give Eddie a ride. I might only drop him off though. I might not, you know, stick around. If its lame.”

“You’re too cool for those people. Here.” She turned to her desk and picked up a pen. “It’s my number,” she said, handing him a scrap of red construction paper. Her handwriting was small and spiky. The A in her name was a heart. “Call me and we’ll hang out instead.”

“I don’t have a pocket,” was all he could think to say. She used a marker to write the digits on his hand, in the webbing between his thumb and index finger.

“Now come on. I want to show you my night sky. Oh. Does that sound dirty?”

“Does what?”

“Nothing. Please don’t listen to me when I talk. Lay down on the floor and I’ll turn off the lights. Geez, again.” She shook her head, moving for the lamps. “Keep your clothes on and everything. We’re just looking at the ceiling.”

He was happy to follow orders, happy to glide along, no pressure to act, only obey. He was in her hands. Sprawled out on the carpet, he watched as her stars emerged brightly from the darkness in great clusters and spirals and columns, maybe a hundred of them up there, casting down an ethereal green light. She moved across the room, a dark swishing shape, and lay beside him. Her arm touched his for a moment. What a thrill, to be here with her, to be nervous and excited and thought of enough to elicit those same feelings in her (it seemed he had at least, he hoped for it), Chelsa the ghost girl, who left the rooms of his house transformed by her movements through them.

“See those lines?” she said. “I found some iridescent paint and I just barely, barely outlined the shapes.”

He noticed them, faint blue-green, but he couldn’t discern their patterns. They looked to him like interstellar highways connecting civilizations across the void. She named her constellations, pointing in the direction of each one, but most of them he couldn’t see the way she did. Some he could make out. Memphis, USA was a cluster roughly shaped in the outline of the United States, with a star near the bottom right for Memphis. Eternal Bloom looked like an S entwined with an X. There was also Gretchen the Sea-Beast, Steven Tyler’s Lips, and more metaphysical ones like Fiercely Spent and Beyond Redemption. In the corner above her bed was a large spiral, inside of which

were a few smudges and streaks of sparkling paint. “That’s the Eventide galaxy,” she said. “Look closer and there’s hundreds of tiny dots inside. Stars a long ways off. I like looking up there at night. Stare long enough, it starts to look infinite. It starts to look like somewhere life could be hiding, like you’re a god or something and you’re floating over your little lost galaxy that you misplaced a long time ago and wondering what the heck’s going on in there. Does that make any sense?”

“Yes.” It did. Only he didn’t want to hover remotely over a galaxy; he wanted to tear through its asteroid belts, spin the planets on his fingers. He felt a chill. The longer he looked, the more like a real night sky her ceiling became, the plaster now light years of space, so many miles beyond her room, the plastic stars now churning with hydrogen and helium. Something moved within him, he couldn’t tell what. He remembered what it had been like as a child to look up at night, the yearning, lost boy who felt abandoned under that foreign sky. He could still feel that boy in him, aching to take off for some truer place. But this could be his, this new sky, intimate already, the stars of home.

“Hey,” she said. “Do you think I’m, like, weird?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay, do you think I’m ugly?”

“No.”

“Then why do you hide from me? Was I right? Are you scared?”

“I don’t know.” She was forcing him back into himself, relinquishing her hold. He wanted only to lie there, rubbing his heels into the soft carpet, watching the fake sky become real, wanted even for her to disappear, yet also, desperately, he wanted for her to

take his hand. He had left it strategically open on the floor next to her. Stop talking about me. I'm nobody.

"I feel bad when you do it," she said. "Too many people are like that. We should all just be available to each other."

"I'm available now," he said, shocked again at how with her he could act in ways that until an hour ago he'd suspected himself incapable. He rolled onto his side and stretched out his arm. It landed on her breasts, small bumps beneath the soft threads of the towel. He quickly moved his hand to her belly, which also felt wrong, so he withdrew altogether as he leaned in to kiss her. His lips landed on the side of her nose, and she made a high breathy noise like "unh," and turned away just before he found the side of her mouth. He moved and found her lips. This was different from the first kiss; he was screwing something up. A terrible, desperate joy seized him. His fingertips felt prickly, his chest and head full, as if all his blood was surging there, to his streaming brain and heart. He moved his tongue around, sure that tongue was essential, that tongue would save him, but she kept her lips closed, and she began to pull further away from him. The power he had felt in the pool was not evident here. For a moment, he hated her, could already feel the weight of impending humiliation as she turned her head completely and left him lying against her, like something unsavory washed up on a beach.

"You can't just kiss me whenever you feel like it," she said. "Do you kiss everything else you want to avoid?"

He stood, confused and a little dizzy, his vision fuzzy at the edges. As Chelsea sat up, he shuffled through the unfamiliar terrain of her room with his arms out before him,

closing the door as he stepped into the hallway. Downstairs, he slipped past the den, where a TV murmured, where Chelsea's parents presumably sat in comfortable chairs, blissfully not thinking about a boy creeping through their house with the impression of their daughter's lips still tingling on his own. He stood at the kitchen door for a moment, watching through one of the window panels as the pool light in the backyard slowly faded from red to green to purple. Dark shapes bobbed in the water. If only he could walk like a shadow to the picnic table to retrieve his shoes.

He was halfway there when Eddie called, "Hey, Ash! Did you get in her pants?"

Melissa called for him to shut up. Ash sat and quickly tied his shoes. He strode across the yard, seething with embarrassment and rage. He was only crossing concrete and grass, but for a bewildering moment he seemed to lose track of where he was, so that when he came to the gate it was as if he'd been stopped short by an ancient wall in otherwise open wilderness. For a moment he could only stare at the black latch, which he knew he should reach for, which he knew would release him, if only from Chelsea's backyard.

Chapter Five

Eddie didn't want to go inside yet. He lingered on his porch until Ash disappeared at the end of the street, becoming as formless as the dread Eddie felt in the pit of his stomach, then vanishing, bound for home with his secrets. Eddie had followed him from the party, hoping for news of what had happened in Chelsea's bedroom. Ash had only said, "We hung around."

"Let's do something irresponsible," Eddie had said when they reached his street, but Ash kept walking, saying, "It's my bedtime." "I have eggs," Eddie said, and Ash responded, "I'm not throwing eggs," as if it was deplorable. "I have popcorn, too. We could watch that killer croc movie." But Ash had waved him off. Eddie had called, "Goodnight!" and in an odd rush of panic he repeated the word. "Goodnight, goodnight, goodnight!" Then he was left alone, and he felt silly, as if he'd addressed no one and nothing but the night itself. He continued to praise the night in a lower voice, changing the inflection—*good* night—as if speaking to a compliant dog, as if by speaking in such a way he might cajole the night to lay down and wait for his command, to wait and see what he required of it.

The night would never comply. It was only itself, indifferent to his hopes, but he couldn't abandon it yet. He felt a disquieting flutter at the thought of being alone in his room, in the dark house before him, something about the sight of the blank windows, his parents' cars, the meager porch light. He couldn't quite yet face the give of the locks at his turning of the key, the door swinging open into the entryway where a table and vase

waited to assault him with their aggressive, boring insistence of their necessity; he couldn't yet face the stairs, carpeted, well-vacuumed, absorbing gratefully each footstep and then erasing it; and then the hallway, where, like every suburban hallway he'd ever passed through, framed pictures of his family hung, frozen as their past selves; and then his room: he could not be in that place right now, that place which was both a refuge and a cell, where posters covered his walls, The Avengers leaping above his headboard, Batman glowering beside the window, Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart looking constipated on his closet door, a penis crafted in black ink across Pattinson's forehead and a moustache twirling from Stewart's upper lip; where scraps of Ash's poetry were pinned to the corkboard and the walls, some of which given, some stolen, and a few manuscripts in the desk drawers in which Ash had rewritten Eddie as a powerful sorcerer or a noble warrior or a marauding alien stud who was doomed and conquered by the love of an Earth woman—these things, these ordinary objects and facts of his life, he loved them, truly, but in a confused, boiling way that could feel oppressive, like now, could veer to hatred and resentment.

He thought suddenly of bringing Brittany Harding into his bedroom. What unbearable shame he would feel. For a moment she seemed hopelessly unattainable, but in the next moment he was lying again in her driveway, a desperado with a pounding heart as she gazed down from her window and yearned for him to take her away.

He leapt off the porch, happy to have attained this image of himself. He could hold onto it for awhile at least, parade it through that indifferent night. He wandered through the gate into the backyard, relishing the role of lovelorn outlaw and its tough, clawing melancholy, and relishing the way the moon threw its light across his brother's

swing set and the shed and the dogwood tree as if showing him what was his. He had not gotten what he wanted tonight, but what specifically that was eluded him. He had wanted to kiss Chelsa, but even he knew there had to be more. More what? If he found himself lip-locked with Brittany Harding Saturday night, what difference would it make? What flood or wind could such a small act whip into frenzy?

He passed his parents' bedroom window and noticed it was open a few inches for the breeze, the blinds cracked and glowing red from the bedside lamp his mother liked to read by. He crouched beneath the sill, thinking he might scare them somehow, and peaked into the room. He could tell immediately they were arguing. His father sat nearest the window, against the headboard in a white T-shirt, one hand raised as if waiting to make a point. His mother said, "Oh, we've lived such a *good* life, haven't we?" Eddie could see the shape of her under the comforter, facing away from his father, one bare shoulder visible. The scene was too intimate: the soft light, his parents undressed and in bed, the familiar clutter of the dresser and piles of clothes made strange by the air of hostility, by the vantage point through the window, as if Eddie really were an outlaw; he sat down in the grass, his back on the bricks, and listened.

Robert said, "Darn right. Darned good life."

"You're happy with me."

"Yes."

"With your sons."

"Yes. Of course."

"What exactly makes you so happy?"

"What do you mean?"

“Cause you don’t act happy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tell me,” Kathy said, “exactly, specifically, what you love about me.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t seem happy.”

“You can’t give me a single reason, can you? It’s such a simple thing. A million things you could say. Here’s one. ‘Kathy, I love you for . . .’”

“Well?” Robert said. “What, you can’t think of anything, either, even for yourself?”

“It’s different. And you just said ‘either.’ So you really can’t think of a single thing.”

“Honestly, at this point, right now, I could only say what I *did* love about you.”

Silence followed. Eddie watched the way the grass moved in and out of shadow beneath the trees.

Finally, Kathy said, “Want to hear something I’ve never told you?” Robert didn’t answer. “Something I’ve never told you is that after what happened to the baby I couldn’t stand the sight of you. You or Eddie. Especially Eddie.”

Eddie’s skin prickled, a wave of heat spread through him, of shame and guilt, but he didn’t know why, exactly. He knew what baby his mother was referring to. Benjamin. He remembered Benjamin, his first brother, barely, but not how he died. No one ever talked about it. One of Eddie’s earliest memories was of him holding the baby and an older woman, the babysitter, taking it from him.

His mother had hated the very sight of him? And now?

Doesn’t matter. I’m just an outlaw, passing through.

David said, "I don't want to talk about this."

"I know. You never did. And now you say you could only talk about the ways you used to love me? Whose fault is that? Who made me go talk to a therapist so he wouldn't have to deal with his wife? Who shuts himself up in his office for hours every night?"

"You couldn't stand the sight of your own son?" David said.

"Don't you dare," Kathy said. She was crying. "Don't you dare."

A long silence followed. Eddie peaked through the window and saw his father lying on the bed and holding his mother. Eddie sat back against the house. He seemed to have new eyes, which looked beyond what his old eyes could see, and he was seeing himself, moving through life, his mother turning from him, her ugly son, each time he approached. His mother, like all the rest.

"Tell me," he heard her say.

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me the ways you used to love me."

"Kath, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Just tell me. I want to try and be that way again."

Eddie could no longer listen. He left them, talking about old love. Nothing to do with him.

He awoke to an empty house. His parents were at Charlie's soccer game, where Charlie was probably leaping the field in single bounds. Eddie didn't move for a long

time. Batman glared at nothing from the wall, and Eddie felt a surge of love for him, the Dark Knight, tortured and heroic. Dammit, he thought. I love you all, even you R-Pats.

It didn't take long to remove all the posters. When it was done he sat in his desk chair with his fingers steepled, trying to feel as changed as his bedroom walls, trying to figure out how a boy his age would decorate. Ash had his own room painted a bloody orange. It's like living in the sunset, he said. The only adornment was a mysterious Polaroid taped above the desk, which seemed to depict either a spider web or a wisp of hair.

Eddie stood and pulled the Batman poster out of the pile on his floor. He rolled it up and slid it under his bed, then gathered the others in his arms, a great crackling mass, and took them out to the garbage bin. When he banged the lid closed, he paused for a moment, waiting to feel the overwhelming sense of loss that would compel him to plunge into the high, sweet-smelling rot of the bin to retrieve his posters. He felt only the sun warming his neck and scalp, and a rumble of hunger in his belly.

The woods of Straub Park were full of myth, though they were so small you could stand at one end in winter and see all the way through to the other side. The creek was little more than a shallow depression shaped by the outflow from a large drainage pipe, which loomed from a small, steep embankment of weeds and loose rock. There were legends of goblins, witches, madmen, mutated children, and thirty-foot snakes. Unspeakable things crept from the pipe at night to claim the lives of those foolish enough to wander through woods. Eddie himself had started a rumor years ago that the pipe was a doorway to other worlds. He claimed to have ventured deep into its long passage until

he discovered its four hidden chambers, each of which featured a heavy wooden door inscribed with strange markings. He claimed to have heard unearthly roars beyond the first one, a howling wind beyond the second, the pounding of waves beyond the third, and tormented screams beyond the fourth. This last claim morphed over time into talk of a doorway to Hell beneath the neighborhood, which had pleased Eddie when he first heard two younger boys discussing it on the playground. He wondered why he hadn't thought of that. In truth, he had only made it four or five yards into the pipe before turning back, afraid that a slight swelling in the trickle of water at his feet meant he was about to drown in a sudden, massive surge.

The creek ended at a large, swampy puddle full of mosquitoes, water bugs, and (of course) rumors of huge snakes and mud people. Mossy, rotten whiffs of the swamp drifted across the park all spring and summer.

Eddie stood at the edge of the black water for a moment as he passed by on this warm Saturday in May, hoping to spot one of the members of his defunct entomology club out among the reeds and stunted trees, having decided not to give up after all, sloshing through the muck in one of the pairs of rubber boots Eddie had purchased for the group. In early April he'd recruited two eighth-graders who often hung around in the park to join him in pursuit of the great banded Congo beetle, imported by mistake from the jungle depths, six inches long with two-inch pinchers, gold-striped, poisonous, completely fictional. It only took two expeditions for the eighth-graders to lose faith in both the elusive beetle and the effectiveness of their bug spray. They hadn't fully believed in the beetle anyway. A senior was paying attention to them, and their vague

hope was that they'd be able to squeeze a little more out of this venture than a near-death experience with a bug.

Eddie had simply wanted companionship for those empty hours when Ash needed solitude. It never occurred to him to attempt an honest friendship with the eighth-graders. He was a boy who instinctively believed in the power of myth, and in the necessity of myth. Alone, he wasn't enough.

He continued along the path through the woods, sweating already. He was a notorious sweater. A few years earlier he'd rolled antiperspirant across his forehead before school, an innovation that had caused itchiness, flaking, a nearly instantaneous crop of pimples, and as a result of these effects, naturally, sweating. He carried deodorant in his backpack to apply under his arms during school, but his sweat always found a way out.

He sat now on a bench in the shade of the tree line, trying to visualize all the tiny globes of moisture on his skin, seeing them tremble fatly, then break into streams and roll through the hairs of his legs, arms, armpits, then suddenly evaporate, or slide back up into beads for a moment before retreating completely into his pores, leaving him dry and cool as the sloping sides of one of his mother's many leather purses.

He didn't want to think about his mother. Or his father. Or anything, really. There were moments when this was possible, when he could hold a single image in his mind and forget everything else. He could lie in scorched summer grass and think only of the grass, feel only the scratch of dry bristles. Closing his eyes in a classroom, he could let the hum of the overhead projector obliterate everything he'd ever learned.

This extreme focus wasn't entirely an escape tactic. Sometimes during his night journeys across the neighborhood, he would pause for minutes at a time and contemplate the astonishing fact of his existence on this very spot—standing on the sidewalk by the Baker's hedges, lying under a row of crape myrtles, sitting on the drainage pipe in Straub Park—how there were billions of people and billions of places and billions of galaxies and here he was smelling blooming flowers in the infinitesimal space he occupied in the southwest corner of Tennessee. Here he was picking up a stone, curling his toes, grimacing as his belly wrestled with half a pound of salami. He suspected that many people felt this way, but he didn't want them to, didn't want to give this to anyone. He was a profound element of the universe, undiscovered as yet by science. He was no isolated, insignificant speck, but a speck intricately important and made large by its essential role in the expanding universe.

No one would understand this about him (he hardly understood it himself), how he was part of flood and famine and fission and photosynthesis, how he was the true center of things, so it remained a secret he would never share. It gave him strength. He couldn't remember a time when he'd been considered normal.

When he was three, and his family still lived in New Canaan, on the Tennessee River, his mother had come across him eating grass in the backyard. Kathy, pregnant with the baby who would live such a brief life, waddled outside, scooped Eddie up, plucked a few green blades from his lips, and made him drink a glass of water at the kitchen table.

“Why on earth would you eat grass, Eddie?” She put her hands on her hips and looked down at him as he drew swirls in the condensation on his glass.

“Everybody eats grass,” he said.

“They certainly do not. Have you ever seen me eat grass?”

“It tastes funny. But animals eat it.”

“It tastes funny to you because you’re a person. You’re a little boy.”

“Nuh-uh, I’m a animal.” He leapt from his chair and ran around the table, growling. He grabbed her hand and snapped his teeth near her skin.

Kathy didn’t know what to do with her son. He was so unlike the boy she’d imagined. She came from a line of solemn, obedient children who’d grown up to have more of the same. She hadn’t wanted that kind of family, necessarily; her occasionally overbearing cheeriness was an attempt to leave behind the cold silences of her childhood, yet she couldn’t bring herself to feel grateful that Eddie was further separating her from what she’d always known of the world—that it was polite and subdued, despite the headlines, that people got along fine through tactful neglect.

Eddie needed constant attention, and not just to keep him out of trouble—to keep him from eating dog food and lint, or from running off down the block—but to simply keep him. He was so full of energy, odd interests, odd speeches, that it seemed at any moment, if left to his own devices, he might catch fire and shoot his volatile atoms back into the fabric of space.

Had Eddie been born to parents other than Kathy and Robert Sacs, his behavior may not have become so stigmatized. A monologue from Eddie about the fuzz on the skin of a peach, and the possible origins of the fuzz (disease, bunnies rubbing against them), leading to the conclusion that peaches were actually baby aliens, whose hair was beginning to grow right when humans brutally ate them alive, leading to the rescue of a

peach by quarantine in a plastic baggie under his bed, leading to a funeral for the dead and rotting alien in the backyard—had these events taken place in another household, the child might be considered precocious, or, at worst, overly sensitive. As things stood, Eddie had to sit through a lecture from his father about where fruit came from, starting with the book of Geneses.

Robert's bible was enormous and floppy, bound in soft brown leather, its pages gilt edged, thinned to near translucence and cool to the touch. Eddie liked to lug the bible around at church for his father. He liked its flimsy heft, and the satisfying whump! it made against other kid's heads. One Sunday, behind the maintenance shed after church, he'd seen a teenager smack another guy so hard with a hardback bible that the victim's glasses flew over a fence and the victim went down to his hands and knees. This inspired Eddie more than any sermon. Carrying the word of God had never felt more empowering and necessary.

When Robert spotted his son playfully bopping the good kids of 1st Baptist with his own bible, he forbade Eddie to ever touch it again. Robert was a fastidious man wary of rambunctiousness and anything unseemly. Not much passed for seemly in his esteem, certainly not books without a religious bent, movies without loud, heart-welling swells from the orchestra, TV shows without contestants, meat without animals, or women without bras. The world as a whole baffled him. He held willful misconceptions about iPods and Facebook and mobile GPS, generally giving in to fears about Big Brother. He'd never gotten much into music, but he liked church hymns, and, guiltily, Green Day. He liked to putter around the house, hacking at the air as if he were a passionate chief conductor, though he never listened to classical music. When Eddie was a boy and they

still lived in New Canaan, Robert sometimes drove him out to Burkehill Road—the legendary “Hill Road” that he and his friends had hurtled down years ago—and he would punch the car up to sixty-five, flying over the series of small hills that sent your stomach to the moon. He told Eddie this was a secret to keep from Mom, and he felt like a badass.

Eddie had never idolized his father, or felt intensely proud of him, or invested him with any heroic qualities. Or if he had, those feelings were scrubbed clean at the sight, when Eddie was very young, of his father scrambling naked up the stairs, stumbling once to a knee, then quickly up again and out of sight. Eddie never forgot the sight of those white, white legs and feet and buttocks, the sag of love handles. What in God’s holy name had happened here? The circumstances were lost to memory; only the naked assent remained, and Eddie never inquired.

His life was full of other mysteries. There was his brother, Benjamin, who died and became like a dream. Then there was leaving New Canaan.

His father moved to Memphis the autumn Eddie turned six, to take up a management position at SunTrust, while Eddie and his mother stayed behind until December to ease his transition between schools. Eddie never forgot the moment his father left.

The day before his departure, a warm Friday in October, Eddie had been surprised after school to find his father’s car idling at the curb. Usually his mother picked him up and drove straight home, where she helped with his homework and then set him loose so she could cook dinner before his father arrived from work, but that day as he approached the car he saw both of his parents smiling at him through the windshield.

They took him to McDonald's, where he asked for and received two Happy Meals, each with a different toy. He slurped a quarter of his father's chocolate shake too fast and then careened into the PlayPlace, his brain sparkling with sugar and chemicals and the bright prospect of adventure in plastic tunnels. His parents sat together on a bench next to the shoe caddy, and Eddie put on a show for them, clinging to the netting around the ball pit and throwing himself back with all his might, running over and bopping his father on the knee, then taunting him from relative safety to give chase, but Robert only smiled and mimed firing a laser pistol, the *phew phew phew!* noises ringing in Eddie's head, though his father wasn't making them, only moving his lips.

Next they went to a video store that was going out of business and selling their inventory. "Two movies," his father said, and Eddie resisted his first impulse. He pretended to be interested in a row of colorful cartoons until the coast was clear, then he stuffed his hands into his pockets and strolled innocently into the Horror aisle. He even dropped his jaw and froze for a moment, as if shocked to find himself unexpectedly subjected to images of blades and blood, but nobody was looking.

He had one video under his arm, and was contemplating two more in his hands, when Robert found him. Eddie thought his father might present him with some goofy video about following your dreams or doing your chores during a song and dance routine, but Robert was empty-handed. Eddie was willing to fight for the bloody deaths he could soon witness.

"What do you have there?" Robert said.

Eddie showed him the two movies he couldn't decide between, gushing desperately about their merits before his father could disapprove. It was all confused in

his mind, but he was trying to convey, basically, that films of this caliber were rare treats, that he, Eddie, was woefully undernourished, and that he might die if he didn't see them.

Robert rubbed his chin. "Hm. Gotta tell ya, I like ghosts more than psychos."

Until that moment, he'd seemed to like neither. Eddie, living in a house where horror movies were forbidden, though he managed to find them on TV anyway, was shocked by this endorsement. He'd been leaning toward the psycho, but he went with the ghost.

In the checkout line, when Kathy asked about the movies Robert held securely in the crook of his arm, he'd said, with a wink in Eddie's direction, "Oh, just some kiddie flicks. Right, son?"

"Right," Eddie said, overjoyed. "Kiddie flicks, kiddie flicks. Crazy, crazy kiddie flicks! Kiddie flicks!"

"All right. Hush now," Kathy said.

At home, Eddie sat between his parents on the sofa, watching the ghost movie. The recliner was already at the new house in Memphis, along with most of the contents of Robert's office and other items he would need during his two months alone there. Eddie hadn't yet seen the house. He couldn't imagine it; every time he tried he saw his own home, maybe with a tree in the yard, or vines up one wall, but essentially the same place, different only in ways that wouldn't matter.

The bowl of popcorn his mother provided lasted until the first screech of music, when Eddie, a little belatedly, threw it into the air. His mother turned off the movie and demanded that he clean up the mess, but there was so much popcorn strewn across the floor that all three of them pitched in.

“Why would you do that?” Kathy said.

“I was scared,” Eddie lied. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I knew this was a bad idea.” Kathy looked at his father, hunched near the TV and scooping up popcorn by the handful. “He’s too young for scary movies, Robert.”

“Nuh-uh!” Eddie cried, eager to deny such a heinous accusation. “I wasn’t scared at all. I was just messin’ around. I promise!” But now he really was scared, scared and angry. In some unfathomable way, this had less to do with whether or not he could handle the movie, and more to do with the way his mother had just glared at his father.

“I think he was just acting out,” Robert said.

“You shouldn’t have bought that movie.”

“The movie’s got nothing to do with this.”

Eddie picked miserably at the popcorn under the couch.

“Kiddie flicks,” Kathy said. “*Wink wink.*”

“Let’s just drop it.”

“Can we still watch the movie?” Eddie said.

“No,” Kathy said.

“Daddy? Can we?”

“Well.”

“No movie,” Kathy said.

“Come on, I’m leaving tomorrow,” Robert said. “Let’s be a happy family!”

Somehow this sentiment made everything worse. Even Eddie could feel it draining color out of the room.

“I don’t see any reason,” Kathy said, “any reason at all, to suddenly let our son watch this trash just because you’re leaving.”

“Well, son,” Robert said, his eyes bright, “that settles it. No movie.”

Eddie threw a fit. He cried and stomped through the house. He said he hated them and wished they were dead. He slammed the door to his bedroom and kicked the walls. Eventually he lay down in bed, curled up at the very foot, squeezed into the smallest shape possible on top of the covers, pretending to be asleep, waiting for someone to check on him and see his suffering, to feel sorry for him and regret denying him. Though his tantrum mostly sprang from simple petulance and disappointment, there ran within it a current of true sorrow. He remembered the way his father had rubbed his chin thoughtfully in the video store.

Sometime later that night Robert nudged him awake. “Hey Eddie,” he said. “Can you keep a secret?”

They watched the rest of the movie with the lights off and the volume almost all the way down. Robert ate a pickle, and Eddie breathed in the vinegar and sweat of him. The room was blue and unfamiliar in the TV glow. It was strange how the whole room and everything in it, even his father, even now, months early, seemed to no longer belong to him. His father was part of the house. Eddie was sure for a moment that he and his mother were the ones leaving tomorrow, that his father would remain on the sofa forever in his boxer shorts and V-neck, a museum piece. Eddie struggled to stay awake, afraid that everything would be gone in the morning, but he dozed off on the floor before the ghost in the film was put to rest.

He awoke in sunlight, tucked into bed and dressed in his pajamas. He could smell bacon frying, and he remembered that his mother was making a big breakfast for his father's sendoff. Usually the smell of bacon would lure him immediately to the kitchen, where he'd sneak still- sizzling pieces from the paper towel. But that morning he didn't want bacon, or biscuits, or anything. He wanted nothing at all to do with the daylight streaming through the window.

His bedroom door creaked open and Kathy called that his food was ready from the hallway as she passed. He didn't move. A few minutes later she poked her head into the room, looking puffy-eyed and exasperated. "Come on, Eddie. Daddy's already eaten and he's leaving soon." Eddie pulled the blankets over his head. His stomach hurt. It was a strange hurt, not quite physical, like something new was getting ready to sprout and spread through his guts.

After a few minutes in the stuffy darkness, listening to his parents' muffled voices, the screen door opening and slapping back against the frame as his father loaded the last of his things into the car, Eddie decided he would hide in the closet. It would be fun. His parents would fly the whole Earth looking for him, and he'd be right there the whole time, nestled in a pile of clothes, reading comic books and subsisting on the odd orphan Oreo or Fruit Loop.

But the floor of his closet was full of toys, not clothes. He managed to squeeze himself gingerly between a broken bass drum and several remote controlled cars. It wasn't ideal, but it would do. The door was open, barely, and he stared at the slim line of light. He moved his fingers through it. He pretended he was a mummy in a cracked tomb. A mummy wouldn't remember light, or homes, or fathers.

His parents moved in and out of his room. They called his name.

“Maybe he’s in the backyard,” Robert said.

“Is his bike still in the garage?” Kathy asked.

Eventually the closet door swung open, and there his father stood, wearing a billowy white button-down and jeans. “Eddie!” he cried. “What in Sam Hill are you doing in there?”

Eddie smiled, embarrassed. He squirmed further into his uncomfortable burrow.

“I saved you some bacon, you know,” Robert said. “Come on, let’s go get some. I had Momma make it extra crispy for you.” He extended his hand.

Eddie knew he was supposed to take it. He was supposed to eat breakfast at the kitchen table while his father sipped coffee in the chair closest to the old-fashioned newspaper rack. He was supposed to stand in the driveway and hold his mother’s hand and wave as his father’s car moved toward the intersection, where it would go either left or right or forward, or would vaporize into hyperspace, or explode, anything but turn back.

“Come on out of there,” Robert said.

He knelt and took hold of Eddie’s arm, but Eddie jerked away, smiling. “I’m a mummy!” he cried. “I’ll break apart if you try and move me!”

“Oh, you’re a mummy, huh? Well I’m a world-renowned archaeologist, and I can pick up mummies with my bare hands.” Robert reached again into the closet, but Eddie pulled away.

“I’m a world-re . . . rewound mummy, and I can escape anything.”

“Yeah? Let’s see you escape this.” Robert stood and closed the door.

Eddie sat in the darkness, his heart racing. He decided he would never leave the closet. He could feel his father crouched out there, or maybe hunkered down in the hallway, could feel the grin on his father's lips. These things made Eddie sad.

The door opened again. "Hey mister mummy. I do have to get going, you know. I have to get our new house ready for you and Mom. We're painting your new room red, remember? Just like you wanted."

Eddie had found his new room already. This closet, until the end of time.

"Come on out and hug me bye."

"No," Eddie said.

"Why?"

"I don't wanna."

"Why not? Don't you want to say bye to me?"

When Eddie didn't answer, Robert reached for him again. Eddie felt his father's big, warm hands on his shoulders, pulling him up, but he resisted, squirming and twisting until he was free. Robert reached for him again, imploring and angry, and again Eddie dug himself further into the closet.

Robert dropped his hands to his sides and remained there on his knees for a moment, then he left. Kathy came in and attempted to coax Eddie out, then she left, too. Eddie could hear them talking somewhere in the house. Were they yelling?

He was playing some inscrutable game. He hoped desperately that his parents would figure it out for him.

Robert returned with a white mug of coffee and sat on the bed. Eddie could feel his father's eyes on him, but he kept his own focused on the ragged hole in his bass drum.

Robert sipped from the mug. He glanced at his watch. "It's time for me to go," he said, but didn't move.

Eddie's face burned. Something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out how to fix it. Sunlight glinted off a button on the cuff of one of his shirts. All his clothes were dark and shadowy. Looking at them from below, the whole bunched up streak of them, the clothes he'd worn in bright places, made the closet seem like something he could get lost in. He stared at the button until it was all he could see, until the sun seemed to stream from within its glossy plastic finish, until it was a sun itself.

Robert stood and placed his mug on Eddie's nightstand. "All right, say bye to me."

Eddie looked and his father was gone. His pulse quickened. How long had he been staring at the button? His father seemed to have only just now spoken, yet the house felt irrevocably empty, an emptiness that was both a relief and a terror. "Momma!" he cried, sure that she had vanished too, that she'd gone with his father far away. He tumbled from the closet as Kathy rushed into the room. She was smoky with the breakfast he'd refused to eat. She gathered him into her arms as he cried. "Where's Daddy?" he said.

"He left, baby."

The thing was growing now in his guts, whatever it was, squirmy and quick.

In the following weeks, the thing took root. It sent signals through his blood. It moved in shudders through his nerves. He missed school for a week with a fever and nausea, and when the doctor said it was just a bug, the thing lapped up the sides of Eddie's heart.

It seemed that he had upended the entire world along with that bowl of popcorn.

His mother was kind, but she lacked some essential quality that would've soothed Eddie. She didn't say much to him; she seemed not to listen when he spoke. Sometimes he would leap out at her just so she would look at him. With fear, yes, from the fright he'd just given her, but with recognition as well. Robert was cheerful on the phone, but Eddie had difficulty believing his father could exist somewhere else. His father had become a voice.

He couldn't speak to his father without thinking of the day he left. That day, after Eddie had calmed down and suffered through reprimands for his behavior, and after his mother had shut her bedroom door for a nap, he had mounted his bike and set off for the edge of town along the only route he knew.

The weather had turned colder overnight. Great heaps of clouds cluttered the horizon, but over New Canaan the world went up and up and never ended. Most of the trees were still full of green leaves, but flashes of yellow and red flitted through like birds as Eddie whizzed past. Or maybe those flashes were birds. The birds could take up his coat sleeves in their beaks and he would no longer have need of a bike, or legs. He would see the Pyramid in Memphis, hazy and small but not too far away, and the river winding into oblivion. He pedaled faster. The cold wind made his body feel clean.

He stopped on the tiny bridge that crossed the unnamed creek. Kids called it Crud Creek. He looked into the shaded black water as he tried to catch his breath. The road stretched before him, fallow cornfields on either side, a line of trees where the creek curved. His breath and his blood were so loud. There was nothing of Memphis in the air. It might not even exist. His father had said you could hear blues music on the streets

downtown. Eddie strained to hear it, but he hadn't come far enough, not nearly, and all the fields gave him was their silence.

On the bench in Straub Park, Eddie had given up trying to will the sweat off his body. He sat there wet and steaming, watching two boys on the tiny swing set, each trying to jump further than the last from the hard plastic seats. It occurred to him that he could saunter over and demand some money, or belittle their ability, or tell them that every year at least one kid breaks his neck on those very swings, victim of ancient curse rituals performed on the spot by the Chickasaw.

Eddie knew the allure of bullying. One day in the fifth grade, he'd passed a drinking fountain at school being used by a third grader in tight, creased jeans. The pants didn't quite reach his ankles, and he looked so needy there, hunched over and lapping up water. Eddie's jaw clenched, and as he passed, he shoved down on the back of the kid's head.

There was also the time he shoved a holly bush branch down another boy's pants, and the time he sat on a much skinnier kid for most of recess, out of the teachers' view.

He recalled now the savage pleasure of these acts, and then the guilt. Did Joe Powell ever feel guilty? It was hard to imagine Joe Powell feeling anything at all besides bloodlust. Maybe Eddie could be that way.

He approached the swing set and stood to the side with his arms crossed. His shadow before him looked menacing and muscular. Once he was certain that both boys had noticed him, and that his presence had generated an appropriate amount of dread in

their little fourth grade hearts, he cut in front of one of them as the kid headed back to the swing he'd just leapt from. Eddie took a seat and grinned. "Is this one taken?" he said.

The other boy jumped and landed on his feet. They looked reproachfully at Eddie for a moment before sulking off into the woods. Now the park was empty. Now his shadow looked like a fat kid on a swing. A car passed on Meadowvale and he strained without luck to see if he knew anybody inside it.

There was Ash's house across the street, sitting in the sun beyond a slightly overgrown lawn. Ash hated to mow; Eddie did it for him occasionally in exchange for a ride to the mall, but often Ash would drop him off and leave, coming back grudgingly or not at all, and Eddie would have to call his mother and dive into her car when she pulled up, shouting "Step on it! Go, go, go!" and hoping no one noticed the middle aged woman in the driver's seat.

For the first time he could remember, as he twirled around in the swing, he didn't want to go over to Ash's house. Ash had kept secret whatever happened in Chelsea's room, the way he sometimes kept himself a secret. For so long this reticence didn't matter. For so long he could say anything to Ash, and had depended on it, on the way Ash would listen without comment, or would rag him in a way that Eddie was no longer sure conveyed an easy friendship. If he went over there today and was shunned, as he often had been, he was afraid that it would be for the final time.

And if he was welcomed, how could he say, My mother hates me. How could he say, I'm as big as the universe, I will never cut your lawn again.

Approaching his own house after leaving the park, Eddie felt none of the dread he had the previous night. Here was the house that he once couldn't imagine, now so ordinary. When he'd first moved here, though his father had already started its transition into a home by putting familiar pictures on the walls and by partially filling some of the rooms with furniture, it still echoed with its former emptiness. For weeks Eddie had felt like he was merely visiting a place which he was relieved to discover was not a rumor.

Now he went up to his room, and though he'd known what to expect, the blank walls gave him a start, as if he'd been robbed. He kicked off his shoes and fell across the bed, his sweat turning cold under the air conditioning. The dull edge of a headache pushed against his left temple, and it would sink into his skull if he didn't take some aspirin soon, but for now it felt good, an excuse for his anger.

He did feel robbed. Not simply of his posters, but of a way of life, a way of being normal. And he was the thief. Always it had been him.

He got up and paced the room, grunting heavy metal riffs and shredding an air guitar, then thrashing around as if at the center of a mosh pit. Eventually he put on real music, which, if assaultive enough, could break down all thought and convert it to blood. He cranked the volume up on his iPod dock and gave himself over to the helicopter thump of double bass. Randy Blythe screamed about desolation and paradise lost, and Eddie Sacs careened across the floor, sweating again, head pulsing with pain and music and nothing else.

Two songs in, he collapsed, sprawled on his back. His chest hurt and his heart raced and his leg muscles quivered. He felt pure, fully spent, and into this emptiness tumbled a thought for his dead brother, Benjamin: Where are you, you left me.

With the music still pounding, Eddie went into the guest bedroom at the end of the hallway, where his Aunt Sandra slept when she visited from New Canaan. She always complained of the draft from the attic door. Eddie opened it, flipped the light switch, and ascended the sturdy wooden stairs. The attic smelled of dust and freshly cut wood, a scent that evoked ancient memories beyond his understanding, of both hope and loss. The space was spare, a few stacks of cardboard boxes and blue plastic storage bins, a bulky exercise bike, and a plastic tree with pink leaves which, according to Kathy, had stood beside her mother's bed for thirty years.

Eddie had never gone through the boxes, but ever since overhearing his parents' conversation the night before, the image in his head of holding the baby, bright and clear for the first time in years, the lost dark hair and red skin, had been leading to a new image, of his mother on the floor putting Benjamin's belongings into a box, and though he didn't quite trust the way the memory seemed conjured from the ether, it felt true. It felt true even though his parents weren't the type to hold on to things. He hoped but didn't expect to find the last of his brother up here among the dust.

Yet there it was, a red shoebox, lidless at the bottom of a blue bin that smelled deeply of camphor and old paper and, somehow, New Canaan, which didn't have a distinctive smell but whose fields and clapboard buildings, dusty pickups and heaps of clothes at yard sales and skies full of church steeples this scent called up it rose from the Sacs family's dresses, jeans, and yellowed documents.

The shoebox contained thick rubber teething rings, yellow, green, and red; a stuffed giraffe; a pacifier, whose brown bulb Eddie squeezed between his fingers, then

placed in his mouth, tasting its dry bitterness; a bib with yellow, pink, and blue blocks and the name Benjamin in tiny cursive script; and a small white photo album.

There was his brother, red and swollen on the day he was born, a single close-up of his face and his curled hands, with brand new eyes that seemed to know already the quick journey ahead. The hospital bracelet said Benjamin Ryan Sacs.

Eddie slipped the photo out of its sleeve and held it in both hands. “She couldn’t stand the sight of me,” he said. It felt, here, okay to say this, a relief. Couldn’t, or can’t?

Benjamin’s gaze was dark and morose. He seemed unhappy to be alive.

Chapter Six

Ash waited on the porch step for Eddie, who showed up on time at ten o'clock, carrying a plastic sack. One look at him and the subsequent image of showing up at the field party by his side made Ash want to crawl under his bed.

Eddie had apparently lost his mind with a tube of styling gel in hand, gobs of it holding his hair in rigid spikes. His clothes were obviously brand new: tight jeans, a brown beaded necklace, and a red polo molded to his breasts and belly, whose sleeves clutched at his biceps, squeezing out excess skin. The kicker: his shoes, the same pair of battered dirty-white high-topped sneakers he'd worn all year. His pant cuffs bunched on top of them like the forlorn rolls of a Shar-Pei.

All this except the shoes would be fine on most kids, but on Eddie they reeked of fraudulence and bad taste. Ash only said, "What's in the sack?" as they hurried into the car before his dad could pop out and ask a scrutinizing question. Both their parents thought they were meeting up with friends at the movies. Ash had thought they were laying it on too thick, mentioning other friends.

In the car, Eddie produced from the sack a bottle of mustard, a package of bologna, and one lumpy potato. He placed the items on the dashboard and they stared at them.

"So," Ash said. "I'm not hungry. Are you?"

"You don't know what these are used for?" He made it seem ghastly.

"I would say food. But what do I know?"

"You can vandalize a car with this stuff. The potato goes in the tailpipe. It jacks something up once you try to drive. The mustard messes up the car's paint somehow,

and the bologna's supposed to stick to the mustard. Be on the lookout for a black Mustang. That's our target. Joe fucking Powell." He smacked his fist into his palm.

"I'm so sick of the way everybody loves that thing. It's just a car."

"Eddie, if anybody catches you you'll be murdered."

"I'll be stealthy." He put everything back in the sack and placed it on the floor between his ratty sneakers. "They'll have alcohol there, right? We don't have to bring our own?"

"How should I know?"

Eddie picked at his nails. "I'm sure it's like a free-for-all kind of thing. Everybody shares." He was quiet a moment. "I'm gonna get wasted. How about you?"

"No." Ash was afraid of alcohol. He'd never had any, never had the opportunity, but he thought vaguely that people lost something of themselves when they got drunk, something important. "And I don't think you should either," he said.

"Why?" Eddie looked over, eyes wide. His hair leapt toward the car's roof in turrets and spires. In the confined space of the car, his cologne was overpowering, a musty chemical explosion, the scent of a 40-year-old man on his way to an anniversary dinner. Ash imagined Eddie's father beaming proudly and hosing his son down with the stuff in the garage.

"You'll make a fool of yourself," Ash said, thinking of movies he'd seen. "You'll be sloppy. You shouldn't be more drunk than the girl you're trying to get with. That way you'll have the edge."

Eddie considered it. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

They drove in silence. Ash wanted to roll down the windows to dispel the stench emanating from Eddie's prep clothes, but his hair was meticulously placed, and the wind would wreak havoc. The natural state of his hair was an inadequate and tangled mess. He was nervous enough. He wasn't plotting misdeeds and romance, but you never knew. He could already feel the eyes on him, burning, everybody wondering what the quiet guy is doing at a field party, wandering around with that joke Eddie Sacs.

His stomach cramped as he turned onto the wooded two-lane road that led to Beth Caldwell's place. She lived near the Mississippi state line, on several acres of land. He knew this because they were in the same study group earlier in the semester, and the group went over to her house one day to practice an inane skit about the founding fathers for history class. Ash had nearly thrown up on her cat, who sat purring in his lap—a combination of nerves, summer sausage, and ineptitude with animals.

“Do I look okay?” Eddie said. “I don't look stupid, do I?”

“You look fine.” Ash glanced at Eddie's man-boobs, wrapped with his red polo in victorious clarity, like two unwanted gifts.

“I feel like maybe I overdid it,” he said.

Ash passed the driveway on purpose. A little ways past it there was a grassy strip between the pavement and the woods where several cars were parked, which he also passed. He finally pulled over further down the road and parked on a narrow strip, flush up against the woods on Eddie's side.

“Why are you parking so far away? I can't even get out.”

“Because I don't want to be seen in this freaking trash heap of a car.”

Eddie crawled over and got out on the driver's side. He left his bag of goodies and said he'd come back to get them after he found Joe Powell's Mustang. Ash turned his keys over so Eddie could make the extraction at the appropriate time, then they walked along the road and up the long driveway, feet crunching on gravel. A slight breeze brought the smell of hay and newly cut grass, and they could hear the rumble of music up ahead, throbbing in the night, rock and hip-hop competing from different sources, blending into a groove then pulling apart again into a jumble. Ash avoided eye contact, but Eddie looked into every face they passed, grinning. They moved through a maze of parked cars and stood at the edge of the field. A huge bonfire roared at its center, casting a sinful, shifting red-orange glow and suffusing the air with the smell of wood smoke. People were sitting in lawn chairs or standing around in small groups, drinking from red plastic cups or cans of beer, the ground littered with cigarette butts and empties, particularly around the metal barrels meant to hold them. A few smaller fires guttered out in the darkness, and Ash could see shadows sitting or dancing around them. He couldn't help but wonder if the figures were female and in some stage of undress. The house was off to the left, a brightly lit porch wrapped around a dark hulk and stuffed full of exploding teenagers.

Ash wasn't sure what to do, so he started walking, hands in his pockets, head up as if he had a destination in mind and no sick sense of dread knotted into the fiber of his being. Eddie followed, head darting toward everything that moved. It was only a matter of time—Eddie's excitement was about to burst from his mouth in a noxious spew of nonsense. Ash would never survive the night with his dignity intact if he didn't get away from Eddie Sacs.

“Slow down,” Eddie said. “Where are you going, anyway? Holy hell, look at this.” He stopped and pulled from the grass a plastic bottle with a half inch of clear liquid sloshing at the bottom. “McCormick vodka,” he read. “Quadruple distilled from American grain. Sweet.” He unscrewed the cap.

“You’re just gonna drink it right out of the bottle like that?”

“It’s quadruple distilled! Wouldn’t want it to go to waste.” He threw back his head, squeezed his eyes shut, chugged, brought the bottle down, said “Ack,” brought the bottle up, chugged, threw the bottle aside, stuck his tongue out, gagged, put his hands on his knees, shook his head, gagged, said “Aaaagghh ack ack,” straightened, grimaced, wiped his mouth, shuddered, and said, “Tasty.”

They set off again. Eddie wondered out loud if he would puke in Brittany Harding’s mouth. Ash said not unless it was a stream of projectile vomit the accuracy and range of which had never been seen. Eddie asked for gum, which Ash pretended he didn’t have.

They reached the porch of the house without quite realizing it, and now they stared up at what they’d almost walked into: half a dozen guys they recognized from school crowded around an aluminum keg. The guys looked down at them. Ash knew Eddie was not held in high esteem among these particular gentlemen.

“Well, well, well. Lookey here.” Someone vaulted over the wooden porch railing, landed in a crouch, sprang up on the balls of his feet, and shot out a steady hand to grab Ash’s shoulder. His name was Mitch, and his eyes were bright and watery. For a moment Ash thought that he was the one being addressed, but once Mitch was

solidly planted he turned to Eddie and gave him a big smile. “It’s Eddie Sacs, everybody!”

Everybody called out an enthusiastic greeting. Ash saw the look of surprise emerge from the wary facade Eddie had been trying to assemble. Mitch threw an arm around his shoulders.

“Eddie Sacs, you sack of shit!” He gave Eddie a good-natured shake. “You drunk yet?”

Eddie said no and flashed his crooked smile. Ash could practically see the tight coil of unease release within Eddie’s body, unfurl with the promise of alcohol for himself and at the congenial effect it’d already had on his usual tormentors. Arm in arm, Mitch and Eddie ascended the porch steps, leaving Ash behind.

“We’re gonna get you good and drunk, Eduardo.”

The other guys chimed in: “Eddie, you ever done a keg stand before?” “Hey, where’d you get your hair done?” “Eddie man, can I borrow that shirt?” “Somebody show him how to do a keg stand.” “Dude, you have to do one.”

A crowd had gathered, with Eddie at its center. He looked dazed under the yellow porch lights. The guys peppered him with tips on how to execute a keg stand while Mitch tried to recruit someone to demonstrate. Ash stood in the dark, reading the earnestness on Eddie’s face as Eddie listened to shouted advice, nodding his head and leaning in to hear among the chaos of the gathering group.

Then Joe Powell stepped forward, shirtless, red-faced, a plastic cup in each hand. He shouted for somebody to hold his drinks, he shouted for spotters, then he just shouted, a hillbilly wail chilling in its alcohol lust. He gripped the sides of the keg, his spotters

lifted him by the legs, and someone put the nozzle into his mouth. He chugged. His eyes bulged. After what seemed like a very long time, the spotters lowered him, and he stood upright and tossed his head back and wailed, arms spread, muscles popping up in vein-fused knots. The crowd shouted. Someone slung the beer from his cup into Joe's face, and a few others follow suit. Joe was drenched in sweat and beer. He shoved the guy next to him, and the guy shoved back. They were shouting something out of themselves. It was pent up and wild and it was in Ash, too, he could feel it swell inside him, some savage need. He could dash up the porch steps, shout for his turn. He could show up for his own life.

But then they vaulted Eddie up, upside down, hands white on the tarnished silver rim of the keg, shirt unraveling from the hasty tuck he hadn't quite managed and revealing his white belly, the yellow band of his boxers. Mitch grabbed the hose, took careful aim, and sprayed a stream of foamy beer into Eddie's face, bypassing his supplicant mouth and drenching his hair, his squinched eyes, his red ears. Eddie raised an arm but the spotters held tight to his squirming legs. Someone pumped the handle of the keg to keep it flowing.

Then Joe stepped up and shoved the spotters apart so that Eddie's legs were splayed. Now everyone was pouring their drinks onto Eddie. One girl threw a wine glass that bounced off his shoulder, its red contents erupting as it shattered against the railing. Eddie cried out for them to stop, turning his head away. Joe reared back and punched him squarely in the groin. The crowd cheered. Eddie shook violently, too much for the spotters, who lost their grip. He tumbled to the floor, curled into himself like a pill bug. Joe placed his foot on Eddie's side and raised his arms. His grin revealed crooked teeth,

a broken picket fence. When he stepped back, Ash saw that his shoe left a muddy footprint on Eddie's shirt.

Ash hadn't moved. If only he could. He stood in the shadows, watched immobile as Eddie finally staggered to his feet, leapt down the steps with a grimace, and, arms wrapped around his abdomen, glancing briefly at Ash, stumbled out into the shifting orange dark.

The party on the porch continued unabated, perhaps elevated. Ash wanted to be those people even as he hated them. He watched—he watched watched watched, as always, a lifetime of it—but his blood flowed in an altered course. He would go up and grab a drink and stand shoulder to shoulder and tell jokes and have gossip imparted to him and brush up against the soft fall of a girl's hair, inhale her perfume, talk to her, have her really look at him and take him in and know that he wasn't just a mute husk tumbling through the periphery of her life but a man, damn it, and one who could let loose and have a good time and show her things she didn't know.

He took one step toward the house, stopped, turned, and walked across the field to the far tree line. He sat in the grass. He caught fireflies that drifted near and let them crawl across his fingers until they were ready to fly away. People danced around the fires. He could be a god, watching over them. They were his beautiful creations. They didn't know where he was, no one did, no one in the world. It was lonely to be a god, better to be created. He thought of Eddie, somewhere out there, and he cried silently.

When a pair of bodies materialized out of the dark, he pretended to study a stick in the grass, hoping they wouldn't notice him. He made a conscious effort not to suck

back the snot bubbling at his left nostril. But somebody said, “What’re you doing, dude?” and Ash said, “Stick.” He held it up for inspection. The beam of a flashlight stabbed the grass and swept quickly up to his face. He turned away and wiped at his nose, but not before one of them said, “Dude, tissue,” and the other laughed as they moved past him and stepped into the woods at a gap in the vegetation Ash hadn’t noticed before. Looking closely now, he could see the flicker of a campfire through swaying leaves. He thought about following them, maybe bashing that guy over the head with the stick. Then he could look down at the blood and say, “Dude, tissue.”

Instead, he fell onto his back and looked up into the emptiest, most soothing part of the world he could name. There on the state line, void of city glare, the sky between the stars looked like the silky black fabric of nothing itself.

A voice in the dark startled him. “Hey man, you all right?” Someone leaned over him and offered a hand. He had an earnest face, childlike and just shy of pudgy. His hair was wavy and black and tousled in an effortless, aloof way that made Ash instantly envious.

“I’m fine.” He brushed off the seat of his pants and tossed the stick away. The sound of applause and cheers came from the woods. “What’s going on in there?” Ash nodded towards the path.

“Shit. It’s King X. He’s already started.” The guy swayed on his feet. “Whoa, Nelly. Come on. This’ll be good. I’m Sean, by the way.”

In a clearing, a handful of people sat around a small campfire and listened silently to a squat black guy with a long head and heavy brow, dressed in an enormous black and gold T-shirt and denim shorts long enough to be jeans. He leaned forward on the edge of

a lawn chair as he spoke, his hand gyrating with the rhythm and his eyes roaming the rapt circle around him.

“Free ya mind, it’s all in due time, and when I bust this rhyme I’ma elevate ya to another clime,” he said.

Ash looked around but nobody laughed. Everyone stared at the rapper or into the fire. A curly-headed blonde sat next to King X, chin in palm, body tilted in close to him and her expression transfixed in a way that made Ash think she’d been hypnotized. One guy swayed and moaned, his head in his arms. The only other object of the group’s attention was a joint making the rounds.

Ash and Sean sat down in the grass between two guys. One of them looked like a half-dead hippie. His vapid face was streaked with ash from the fire, as was the white cap he wore backwards over his long tangled hair. The other one passed the joint to Sean, who took a hit and passed it to Ash, who passed it to the hippie. This seemed to be a grave violation.

“You’re not gonna take a hit?” Sean whispered.

“No. Sorry. So who is this guy?”

“That’s King X. He’s a poet of the streets.”

The hippie leaned in and offered, “He spends rhymes like dimes.” He smelled like a vegetable rotting in a cellar. Ash scooted away from him.

And the poet said, “I heard it said thou shalt not have gods before me, but bitch you owe me, now get down on ya knees and praise me. I’ll give you the world and the stars in the sky. All you gotta do bitch is let me ride.”

Ash tuned him out. He tried not to, but he couldn't keep from imagining all the places Eddie might have ended up: dead under the wheels of a car after stumbling morosely into the street; in a tree spying on dancing topless girls and masturbating furiously; lying bloody in a ditch, having been intercepted with the grocery sack on his mission to vandalize a thirty-thousand dollar vehicle. Then Ash realized that Eddie still had his keys. The roads were Eddie's, the city wide open for a distraught teenager with a vendetta, no license, and poor decision-making skills. Ash nearly stood, ready to sprint for the place where he'd parked his car.

Then he saw her, across the little fire. She sat with her back against a cooler, her arms wrapped around her knees and her hands clasped at each delicate wrist. She faced slightly away from the group, as if she'd only stopped by for a moment and would soon be leaving. She stared into the night, and her profile was soft and round, leading off with a small, elegant nose and punctuated by a black ponytail. Her skin was golden in the firelight (he'd read books that described golden skin in firelight—it always meant sex, sooner or later), her slim neck and shoulders bare except for a darkly layered necklace. Her feet were gilded stones in the grass next to her discarded heels. She looked small and vulnerable, wistful, enthralling and devastating.

Ash was instantly in love, for the hundredth time. His body tensed with the need to touch her, to feel warm skin not his own.

King X took a break. Sean jabbed Ash with his elbow.

“Hey,” he said. “Is that guy dead?”

Ash looked and saw the hippie sprawled on his back, limbs spread, eyes closed and mouth open. He drew a phlegm-filled breath.

“No, just asleep. Do you think he’s all right?”

“I cannot, in all honesty, vouch for the man’s health. I don’t even know who he is. I’m Sean by the way.”

“You mentioned it.”

“So who are you?”

“I’m Ash.”

“Ash?”

“Ash.”

“That’s like a nickname?”

“So what’s up with this King X? He trying to make it big or something? Is there like a field party gangster rap circuit?”

“There oughta be.” Sean turned his attention to the rapper, who was having a heart to heart with the fawning blonde. His hand was on her knee. You couldn’t slide a Bible through the space between their foreheads. “Yeah,” he said. “That is definitely not his girlfriend. I think the girl he’s dating is over there, against the cooler.” He nodded towards the girl Ash wanted to marry, or have sex with, or absorb into his marrow.

“Well, what’s he doing then?”

“Oh, X gets around. Believe me.”

“But his girlfriend is *right there*.”

“So what? King X does what he wants.”

“Do you know her name?”

“I believe its Bertram.”

“What?”

“No, I don’t know what her name is.”

Before Ash could say anything else, he heard shouts out in the field. He and several of King X’s fans turned. He caught a flash of blue light through the trees.

“Cops are here,” Sean said.

The field party detonated. People screamed. They ran, pouring through the woods around the clearing. Their faces in the dim light were scared, excited, serene, confused. Some tried desperately to drain their drinks as they went. Someone darted past Ash in his underwear; a pair of jeans clung to one foot, trailed behind him like a possessed snake. The hippie slept.

“Time to vamoose, partner,” Sean said.

Ash followed him at a sprint down a narrow dirt lane leading through the woods away from the field. He tried to catch sight of the girl in all the confusion, but all he saw were blurred trees and goofy assholes like himself running through them. Then, just as his neglected leg muscles started to burn and the stitch in his side grew painful, they emerged into a dirt lot choked with cars. A dust cloud hung in the air, stabbed through by headlights and swirled by rushing bodies eluding the law.

“This way.” Sean grabbed Ash’s shirt sleeve and hauled him through the melee. He opened the rear door of a car and shoved Ash in, who scooted onto the middle seat to make room for Sean, scattering a bunch of papers and sitting squarely on a Wendy’s cup that busted open to soak the butt of his pants. A girl sat to his right, and there were two people up front. The driver started the car, and a rib cracking blast of bass-heavy hip-hop exploded out of the speakers. Sean sat forward and grabbed the headrest of the seat in front of him.

“Step on it X,” he shouted. “Let’s ride, baby.”

Ash looked over in dismay at the girl next to him. It was her, arms crossed and leaning against the door. She looked out the window as if nothing was happening, as if she’d been there all along and hadn’t just ran what felt to Ash like a half mile through the woods.

X shouted something from the driver’s seat and the Lincoln shot forward, squeezed through the space between two cars, and came to an abrupt halt just short of taking the lives of two deer-like students exposed in the headlights. X shouted and gestured for them to move, which they finally did with comic suddenness, and then the car flew into the path of a pickup truck with an outrageous lift and sinister mud tires. In a move that was equal parts grace and reckless abandon, X spun the wheel so that they veered out of its path, a narrow inch from the brush guard, and then, with apparent disdain for brakes and human life, sending his backseat passengers tumbling together, he propelled the Lincoln around a group of scrambling kids, through another tight gap between cars, across a patch of grass, around a tree stump and a speed limit sign, onto a paved road, and into the night while most everybody else was still stuck in a drunken snarl in the lot. He howled with triumph, in unison with Sean and the curly-headed blonde in the front passenger seat.

The girl next to Ash remained silent, her face set in a scowl. He was wild to kiss her on the mouth, thrilled by the daring escape and the rough, innocent body contact it had caused.

X rolled his window down and commanded everyone to do the same. Sean and the blonde obliged. The girl sat unmoved, and the warm wind played with her hair. Sean had said something.

“What?” Ash shouted.

“I said, ‘Did I ever mention that X was a total bad-ass?’”

The bad-ass was furiously rapping along with a song that assaulted Ash’s body in ways that music never had before. Ash sat back amid fluttering pages and let the wind mess up his hair. He was very aware of the proximity of his thigh to the girl’s. She wore a short black skirt, and her heels sat like broken toys in her lap. He was glad for the music, despite his health concerns. She did not know him yet. He could be anybody.

The wooded road eventually gave way to the bright lights of a car dealership next to the Interstate. X darted up the ramp and headed west, toward the city. No one seemed to be concerned about the destination, and Ash wondered where he would find himself when the sun rose. He tried to think of pleasant scenarios, and not to worry about his car or his wrecked curfew or the fate of Eddie Sacs.

He imagined waking up stiff on someone’s couch, and someone’s father staring at him over the rims of his reading glasses from the recliner across the room, in a spill of sunshine, a newspaper spread across his lap and a knowing smile on his lips, and it wouldn’t be creepy at all, just a moment of solidarity. Or maybe they would find themselves at another party, and at some point he would look up in a fit of laughter from a joke and see pink on the horizon, and turn to Sean to inform him that he had just achieved his first all-nighter. And this girl next to him, maybe he could find a way to

charm her, show her that Ash Jenkins is not inclined to engage in freestyle rap sessions, death-defying stunts in old cars, or the art of seduction when already spoken for.

At some point, X had produced a silver flask, which made the rounds several times, everyone except Ash and the girl taking long pulls. The flask stayed with X the longest. After an extra long swig, he appeared to be seized by a great thought.

“Hey,” he shouted. “Y’all think I can knock it up to a hundred?”

Sean leaned forward. “You can do anything, X. You’re a total and complete bad-ass.” He was having a grand old time. He leaned forward and bopped to the music and shouted indiscernible sentences at Ash.

The Lincoln picked up speed. They had all three lanes mostly to themselves, thank you Jesus, but Ash kept a lookout for cop cars as X barreled along, merrily disregarding the speed limit, the lanes, his seatbelt, his blinker, his inebriation, and the lives he was haphazardly transporting.

Suddenly X stopped the music. He said, “Fuck this shit,” and told the blonde, who he called Bailey, to put in the Three Six. Now there was no sound but the wind, and into the muted quiet, as Bailey changed out the CDs, Ash said, “Hey, you should be careful. You don’t want to get a DUI.”

X shot a murderous look in the rearview mirror, and Ash’s goofy grin congealed on his lips. “Hey,” he said, “who the fuck is this dude.” He looked over at Bailey, who said she didn’t know. He turned his head and addressed the girl, “Hey bitch, you know this man?”

“Don’t call me bitch, ass,” she said, and Ash’s heart leapt.

“Don’t call me ass, skank,” X said.

“Oh, *I’m* the skank. Did you hear that Bailey? He called *me* a skank.”

Bailey turned in her seat, her curls in alarming disarray, her eyes flung open in surprise.

“I’m Ash,” Ash said to X. “Nice to meet you.”

“What are you saying?” Bailey asked the girl.

“Isn’t it obvious? You know what a skank looks like, right? You do have mirrors?”

Bailey’s mouth dropped open, and Sean said, “Oh, snap!” and Ash said, “It’s actually not a big deal. Um, screw the cops,” and X said, at the same time, “Y’all need to cut that shit out.”

The girl said, “You need to cut *that* shit out. That King X, gangster pimp crap. I can’t stand it.” She slammed her fists into the headrest in front of her and added, “You have zero talent, anyway. FYI, little man.”

They were all jolted forward as X slammed on the brakes and veered over to the shoulder. The girl’s warm body fell against Ash, and he fell against Sean. His nose either planted itself into Sean’s armpit, or Sean smelled like an armpit. Ash managed to feel some concern for the way he smelled to the girl before X demanded that everyone get out of the car, now.

“But not you, baby,” he said to Bailey. He brushed the hair off her forehead and cupped her neck in his hand. “You stay here with me.”

The girl unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped sprightly out of the car. She stood on the shoulder and strapped on her heels, brushing off each foot first. X sent another homicidal vibe bouncing through the rearview and Ash scooted out the open door,

trampling over all the loose paper, which he found out later were flyers for an upcoming performance of X's.

“Come on X,” Sean said. “I thought we were tight, dawg.”

“I don't even know you, man.”

“But what are we supposed to do?”

“That's on you. Now step out the vehicle.”

Sean got out and shut the door. With a squeal of tires and a farewell blast of hip-hop, the Lincoln shot off down the road, leaving them standing on the shoulder at the mouth of an exit ramp. Ash watched the girl as she pulled a cell phone out of her purse and started pushing buttons.

“Well that was interesting,” Sean said. He put his hands in his pockets and swayed a bit in the breeze. “But I'm both drunk and high, so I'm going to have to ask, what exactly just happened?”

The girl ignored him, phone to her ear, and Ash didn't know what to say, so they stood in silence for a bit. Ash thought he should apologize for speaking, but he was afraid to speak again. Then the girl sighed and put her phone away.

“Nobody's answering,” she said. “What about y'all? Anybody you can call?”

Ash shook his head. Eddie was his only option, and that wasn't an option he wanted to think about.

“Let's call a taxi,” Sean said. “It's always been a dream of mine.”

“That doesn't make any sense, but ok,” she said. She pulled her phone back out. They stood around and looked at each other. Sean wore a serene smile, then seemed to realize something was expected of him.

“Oh,” he said. “The number? Yeah. Hey, let’s not call yet. I’m starving. How about we see what the night has to offer? I’m Sean by the way.”

“I’m Holly. You think there’s a bar around here we can get into? I’m too sober for abandonment.”

They found a bar in a gravel lot just off the interstate, next to a fire station. They cut across a field where the last hunks of brick from a razed building rose through the grass. The bricks were alien monoliths under the moonlight and the faint burnish of arc-sodiums. Under the sun they would be only bricks. Ash was grateful for the way they stayed the same yet didn’t. He wanted to sit in the dark field with them and be strange and remarkable until daylight uncovered him. But here was a bar, a small building of dark windows and blue neon. In the bar he could be dangerous; he could be unhinged, suave, romantic. The bar would invest him with something. He could break hearts; he was wild with the desire to break hearts. The painted sign above the door, illuminated by a single overhanging halogen lamp, had been so saturated with graffiti that only the word ‘Feliz’ remained legible.

“I’m so feliz to be here,” Sean said. He stumbled against one of the four cars parked out front. Holly strode across the lot and through the door as if it had been her habit for years. Ash and Sean watched her go, and Sean said, “I love her.” He rested his cheek against the roof of the car. “I’ve always loved her. I always will love her. What’s her name again?”

“Bertram.”

“Ah, Bertram.” He raised an arm above his head and gazed longingly at his fingers. “We’ll find you my love. I just need to take a whiz real quick.”

Sean insisted they stand with their backs together behind a tree, take three steps, and fire. Ash followed him around a large oak, then ran back to the parking lot and waited. When they pushed through the heavy wooden door, they found that the place was nearly empty and smelled like urine and cigarettes. Holly was leaning over the bar at the back of the room when they entered. She gestured for them to sit in one of the booths against the wall. Ash guided Sean to the nearest one and slid into the seat across from him. The bartender, a small man with a thick mustache, poured drinks in front of Holly. Two men sat silently on their stools, several feet apart, and a third played pool by himself across the room under a hazy cone of light. So this was a place where men came to be alone. He’d heard of these places. Was this where boys ended up? There were so many better, more secret, ways to be alone.

Holly came over with a server’s tray. She put onto the table two beers, two shots, and a glass of orange juice.

“You didn’t get carded?” Ash asked.

“Of course not.” She returned the tray to the bar and sat down next to Sean. There was grim new energy in her, in the way she patted Sean’s cheeks—whap whap whap!—and said buck up soldier! and slid Ash a beer and a shot, gathered the same for herself, and planted the orange juice in front of Sean. In the dark light she seemed to glow.

“What is this shit?” Sean said, leaning over and peering into the glass as if something in there would answer.

“It’s a screwdriver.” Holly winked at Ash.

“Tastes like orange juice. Tastes like freaking Florida sun kissed motherfucking orange juice.”

“You feel more than taste the vodka. Don’t you feel the vodka?”

Sean furrowed his brow and cocked his head. “Hmmm.” He stroked his chin. “I do feel it. In my gut. I feel it in my head, too, my mouth. When I’m drunk . . . when I’m drunk I feel like impossible things are happening.”

“Like what? Give me impossibilities.”

“Ok. I will, shut up, I will. How about this? Some dude in Mongolia somewhere, right now, is sitting next to a goat in a barn. Right? Can you see him? Clothed in wool or fucking moss and grateful for that goat’s company. All around him outside of that barn is nothing. I mean vast Mongolian wastes. He’s never even seen a computer, right? Or anything more beautiful than . . . that ugly goat. And here I am sitting next the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.”

Holly said, “That’s not impossible, that’s a fact.” She winked again at Ash.

“Why is that a fact? Is what I’m saying. I could be that dude in Mongolia, but instead I’m here, and I’m the only one here, in this spot at this time.”

“What’s he talking about?” Holly asked Ash.

With her eyes on him, he felt shrunken, inadequate, dirty, but suffused with a bright undercurrent of something propulsive that could take him away. Soon, now. Excited, he said, “Sean’s talking about the impossibility of inevitability.” Her grin went sideways. “Or maybe the inevitability of impossibility.” *What are you saying? Shut up!* “He’s also assuming a lot about Mongolians.”

“What I’m talking about,” Sean said, “is fate.”

Holly raised her shot glass. “Well then, let’s drink to the impossible inevitability of our fates.” Sean raised his orange juice. Ash looked at his glass, brimming with ominous dark liquid. It seemed to offer what the night offered the bricks outside in the field. He did not have to be what he was. He raised the glass carefully, clinked it against Holly’s, and drank.

Another shot and the bar sank into a strange current, thicker than air. Ash swayed in the supple rush. His blood felt full with the need to push up through his pores. It would flow from him in a long stream and lead him somewhere new. That would be weird. What would he find there? What good could possibly come from following a blood trail?

Sean had downed another orange juice. “This magic, feely vodka makes me more alert,” he said. “I’m all bright-eyed now. See?” He leaned into Holly with his eyes bugging out. She laughed and said, “You’re hilarious.” He said, “Nope. Just drunk. I’m dull as a post sober. Call me tomorrow and I’ll tell you all about my antique toys.”

“Holly,” Ash said. Her name issued from his mouth like a flag unfurling in a high wind. “Holly.” There were no more useful words, yet it seemed he was still speaking. He and Holly looked at each other, and he told her a thousand things in a single second, a hundred shades of desire, two hundred of loneliness, so many more unnamable, things he hoped she understood in some grand way that was beyond judgment or pity, things which were confused in words but made so clear in a glance, this glance, things which were felt in the way Sean felt his vodka. But Ash blinked and knew that, like the vodka, this

understanding was a lie. Holly saw only a drunk kid with a sloping face staring at her, another one, a dope like all the other boys in her lifetime who felt such tragic hopefulness when she looked their way.

She said, “You sure know how to hold your liquor, don’t you?”

“Tell me about your life,” he said. “Start from the beginning.”

“Well, I was born in a hospital, then a bunch of stuff that doesn’t matter happened, then I was left at the side of the road with two strangers by a fake rapper, and now here I am. Those are the highlights.”

“That’s impossible, that’s impossible. Every minute of your life . . . every bright . . . shining . . .” He closed his eyes and shook his head and the Earth seemed to heave across the universe. Where were the words? He looked at her, desperate to convey something good.

“What’s this about a fake rapper?” Sean said. “X is for real.”

Holly raised her beer. “Yeah, sure. To King X. Or should I say Kenneth, from Collierville, the whitest of white suburbs, who would piss his pants if his car broke down in Orange Mound.” She drained the bottle.

Sean dismissed this with a wave. “That’s so predictable. Who cares? Dude can flow.”

“It’s the act that gets on my nerves. Just last weekend we were at this stupid CD release party for one of his friends—Lil Dupe? Yeah, you’ll never hear of him, but anyway, we were there, and all night he had these two skanks on each arm. He calls it ‘accessorizing.’ All those guys at this place did the same thing. The more women they can collect, the better. I wandered up and down the street for awhile. It’s so upsetting

when he acts like that because that's not who he really is. He cooked for me once, picked flowers for the table and everything."

"That's part of the act," Ash said. "It's easy to do something like that once."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Holly said, and Ash, ashamed, could have combusted from the rush of prickly heat to his face and down his torso.

"Anyway," Holly went on, "he's usually a sweet guy. Kenneth is, at least. King X is an ass. He left me there that night. He said later that I was bringing him down. I had to get a ride home with some giant guy who kept touching my leg and asking me to model in a commercial for his cousin's store."

"Did you do it?" Sean asked.

"Hell no. It was probably a porno. Or would have turned into one."

"But you could've been famous."

"That's not how I want to get famous."

"Oh no, you're not an aspiring actress, are you? Because that, also, is so predictable.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"You're not going to run away to L.A. are you? Waitress between auditions?"

Holly pressed her lips together. "Maybe Brad Pitt will discover me. He'll be walking by and I'll be pouring coffee the way a future movie star would." Ash wanted to tell her that it wasn't stupid, crossing the country to be an actress in L.A.

"How would a movie star pour coffee?" Sean asked.

"With grace and style," Ash answered. Holly smiled at him, but it wasn't her full smile.

“I’m not trying to make fun of you,” Sean said. “I just don’t see you in a diner. You belong somewhere better, like a big-time theater, or Air Force One, or the greenest stretch of ocean on the planet. For someone like you, a diner’s just too ordinary.”

Her smile this time was real, and Ash wanted to peel it from her face, slap Sean across the face with it, and slip it into his pocket.

Sean scooted closer to Holly and draped an arm across her lovely bare shoulders. *Don’t you dare say something romantic*, Ash thought, glaring for a moment before forcing himself to look away. The bar was empty now except for the bartender, who leaned against the shelves of bottles with his arms crossed and stared at them. Ash spoke to him silently: *We’re underage children. Why are you letting all this happen?* But Holly removed Sean’s arm and stood. “I’ll get the tab. Be right back,” she said, and went over to speak to the man. Ash pulled out his phone and pretended to conduct important business.

“So how often do you masturbate?” Sean asked.

“How often do you ask people that?”

“Too often, probably.”

Holly returned with a glass of water. She stood by the table, grinning. Sean said, “Hey darlin’,” and Holly said, “Hey hotshot, time to cool off,” and leaned forward and dumped the water onto his head. He sat for a moment with his mouth open, hair hanging in his eyes, then he bounded out of the booth after Holly, who took off across the room at a perilous pace for a girl in heels. They ended up circling the pool table, eyeing each other and faking left or right. The sex scene would come next, her fingers tangled in his wet hair. Ash leapt from his seat.

“Ash! Get this man away from me!” Holly called.

“Don’t listen to her Ash. Bring me a glass of water. No, a pitcher!”

Ash stood there, thinking he should try to tackle Sean but concerned that his lack of muscle and experience in roughhousing would make it appear that he was merely trying to undress the guy, or force a piggyback ride. He decided to pick up a pool cue and do something threatening with it. He tore one from the rack on the wall; it felt good in his hands—he’d bought a bow staff years ago and spent a whole summer as the world’s deadliest ninja. “Let the lady pass,” he said, twirled the stick once, and pointed it at Sean’s throat. But Sean was already running around him without a glance. Holly headed for the door.

“Sorry for the mess, Emilio!” she said in the bartender’s direction. Sean ran through the door after her. They seemed to suck all noise from the room. The bartender hadn’t moved. He stared at Ash, his mouth hidden in mustache shadow. It suddenly felt very stupid to be a ninja. Ash put the cue back in its rack—*snick!*—and ran for the door.

He stumbled through the field. Laughter seemed to emanate from the Earth, but everywhere he looked there was only long grass and piles of brick. Someone shouted, maybe Sean. Maybe far off, maybe close. He tripped over a cement block and went down hard, expecting to slice his hands open on sharp pieces of scrap, landing instead on a soft pile of dirt. He sunk his fingers in; it was like slipping into another world, subterranean and cool, a respite from the humidity that was only beginning to smother the city, which would soon become thick and heavy and unrelenting. He wanted to bury himself completely, but he thought that was just the kind of thing an amateur would do

when drunk. He tried to think of what the old hands usually did, but that mostly seemed to involve funny hats, homicide, or nudity.

Then Holly was next to him. Her arm slid across his chest and she pulled herself close. She whispered into his ear, “Ash, will you protect me? I think someone’s after me.” She bit his earlobe. Sean shouted somewhere behind them and Holly tensed, her eyes full of water and night sky and beautiful, vulnerable mock fear. She gasped. She said, “Oh no, that’s him. What will we do?”

“Follow me,” Ash said. He took her hand and led her through the grass toward the rectangles of white light beaming from the firehouse windows. “I’ll take you to a place that can save us both.” He didn’t know what this meant, but he knew he wasn’t talking about Sean. There seemed to be some giant burgeoning fiery mass within his body, which left unchecked would consume him. Maybe it was in Holly, too.

They ran for the windows, trailing plumes of dust. Ash looked back and saw Sean closing in. “Enemy alert!” he cried. They tried to pull up short in front of the glass but ended up crashing into it. The thud shook its way through Ash, a pleasant confirmation of bone and muscle through his numb drunkenness. They rolled and stumbled along the building until they reached the doors. Sean was whooping as if he’d just escaped the mental ward.

Ash pushed through the doors and pulled Holly in behind him, her heels clacking on linoleum tiles. They stood in a large area buffeted by black plastic-looking couches and an old, bulky big-screen TV. A young man with red hair and bulging freckled biceps entered through a doorway carrying a coffee mug.

“Um, hello,” he said. He took a sip from the mug. Dressed in a regulation navy blue T-shirt tucked into khakis, standing under the sober overhead light with the white MFD logo blazing from his breast, an amused smile on his lips, he exuded adult calm and good sense.

“Save us,” Ash said, breathless.

“Pardon?”

Sean burst through the door growling and tackled Ash. They rolled across the floor. Ash managed one impotent elbow jab before Sean had him in a headlock. “What ho,” Sean said in a corpulent British accent. “I’ve got you now, old boy!”

“Where are all the shirtless firefighters?” Holly asked the redhead, who had set his mug down and was picking up Sean by the waist. Ash was lifted by the neck until the man pulled Sean’s arms away. He let Sean go and Sean went reeling into Holly. They both collapsed onto a couch. Ash fell back, gasping.

“You all right, man?” The guy pulled Ash to his feet.

“Shirtless firefighters, please!” Holly yelled.

“Quiet,” the guy said. “You’ll wake everybody up.”

Ash said, “Let them wake up. We have fires in our hearts. We have fires burning. We’re burning up.” Was he shouting? When had he last shouted? There was a ringing in his ears. The room spun. His heart raced. Sean and Holly had laughter in their faces, but he couldn’t hear it, only that piercing ringing, which wasn’t in his ears at all, but out in the world, coming from the walls. The redhead was gone. There were men moving through the room now, none of them shirtless, looking at him but not stopping. He sat back down on the floor. A deeper sound filled the air, like an air horn. Through

the windows came the pulse of red lights, the passage of something large moving off into the night, perhaps to save someone else. That was all right; he laid back and closed his eyes, happy for now to burn.

Chapter Seven

Just before waking, Eddie drifted through the events of the previous night. The memories came in fragments, elusive as minnows in murky water and then suddenly so clear. He awoke slowly, face down, forehead in the crook of his arm and his nose buried in something fragrant and earthy. He rolled over and found himself beside a chain-link fence and beneath a row of young pine trees, whose drooping branches created a dim canopy around him. The dead needles on the ground were a rich cinnamon color where the sun broke through. Elsewhere the world was gray, and in the moments before he felt fully awake, before he noticed the sun and the fragments of blue sky overhead, he frantically tried to remember what catastrophe had befallen the world that would make it so dim and quiet and compel him to sleep in hiding under the trees. As it dawned on him where he was, the fear and confusion mellowed into something more pleasing, so that he allowed himself a few seconds more to contemplate the end of the old world, nestled safely as he was, in a world that felt, as of this morning, to have only just begun.

He was in the tree cave—a line of five stunted pines in Ash’s backyard, which Ash’s father had planted too close together several years prior. The boys had often retreated here to read comics, especially *Blade* and *Sandman*, where the wind through the branches or the caw of a crow could lend an otherworldly ambiance. In fact, Eddie recalled, they had designated this place as the rendezvous point during an apocalypse, figuring their hopeless parents would be killed instantly by the hideous disease outbreak, the nuclear fallout, or—best case scenario—the zombie attack. At one point, Eddie had almost buried twelve bottles of water and a decommissioned grenade beneath the trees. He had bought the grenade online and figured all it would require to blow a zombie apart

was a pinch of gunpowder. It ended up under his bed after he realized that he didn't feel like digging a hole.

No apocalypse had occurred. The world would be the same when he crawled out into it, but he didn't want it to be. As he became aware of his dry lips, parched throat, and pulsing head, of the prospect of facing his parents after not returning home, of facing Ash, of showing up at school on Monday, he wanted to retreat back to the world of the previous night. After the horror of the field party, he'd gone to another party. The last thing he remembered was wandering around Straub Park; he didn't remember coming here, to the tree cave.

As he stumbled off the porch last night, Eddie had glimpsed Ash standing to the side, staring. The pain in his abdomen from Joe's kick was dull yet sharp, and through it a deeper pain stabbed him when he caught Ash's gaze. He lurched into the dark, ashamed and furious. He knelt behind a car and took deep breaths, punched the grass, grabbed up soft handfuls. A group of laughing girls rushed passed without seeing him. He wanted to go back to the house and kick over the speakers blasting music, kick over the keg, kill Joe Powell, kill them all. But how could he go back?

He wanted Ash to come over to him. He couldn't face Ash a moment ago, but now he wanted to share his rage, to be validated, reassured—reassured that this humiliation, this pain, was caused only by forces outside of his control and not by some flaw in himself. This could not be all on him, there in the dark on his hands and knees.

He could forgive Ash for standing by if only Ash would come now and comfort him. But he didn't come.

Eddie stood and ran for the driveway, down to the street. He discovered the address painted in white on the mailbox and used his cell phone to inform the police of the underage drinking and loud music at 133 State Line Way.

He set out for Ash's car, thinking he might drive it into the river. But when he passed the grassy parking area, he noticed what he hadn't before: a black mustang, *the* black mustang, gleaming like a gift set unto his path by God.

He stood and looked over the near-famous prized possession, the smooth, spotless surface. He reached into his pocket and touched the photo of Benjamin, then he selected a key out of Ash's key ring and went to work on the car with the barely restrained passion of an artist. He made complex patterns on the hood, intricate designs along the sides, long, elegant loops and short, sharp hacks. He got so lost in the throes of passion that when he felt the car was sufficiently marred, he tried to slash the tires with the keys. With the failure of this endeavor came the desire to inflict greater harm. He grabbed a hunk of stone from a crumbling wall at the edge of the woods and heaved it into Joe Powell's perfect windshield. The thud of the rock and the crack of the glass were deeply satisfying, so he repeated the procedure until there was penetration, until his stone broke through and in a rain of safety glass tumbled into the car.

He admired his work from atop the stone wall and waited to see what would happen. He wondered if Joe would be arrested when the cops arrived, or if he'd escape and discover the destruction while Eddie watched from the trees. Eddie thought about it and decided he'd rather see Joe seized by agony and fling himself over the car, weeping, calling out the name of his beloved.

But Joe's reaction was not of heartbreak. It was of wrath, a drunken redneck rage. Eddie watched from behind the wall as Joe, having just emerged from the night at full tilt with several other party-goers, stood with his hands and eyelids flung wide, frozen in disbelief. Someone bumped into Joe—Mitch, who hadn't noticed anything in his hurry to escape the cops, and who called back to Joe for him to hurry up. Joe did not hurry; Joe cursed, so long and loud and with such force that Eddie became afraid. Joe stalked around the car like a scarecrow brought to life. Eddie thought Joe would see the stone on the seat of his mustang and come raging over to the wall to investigate.

He took stock of his life and realized he still valued it, so he crept away along the edge of the woods until he was out of earshot, and then ran to Ash's car, laughing. He didn't stop laughing until he pulled out onto the street, where he fell in behind a Volkswagen Beetle that appeared to be full of girls, way more girls than a Beetle should've been capable of holding.

He decided to follow them. His first major crime and the subsequent adrenaline rush had clouded his judgment, had made him feel dangerous and sexy, the way his first cigarette had when he leaned against Ash's car and smoked it one night at Sonic (having found the crumpled pack in the parking lot at school). The way he eyed the girls around them and tried not to be sick is about the same way he tailed the Bug, trying desperately to hold on to his illicitness.

The girls led him to a house party in Germantown. The house was bright and packed, so he felt he could successfully blend in. He watched the girls pile out of the Beetle, an impossible tide of heartache, and make their way to the house as an unsteady, giggling group. He made his way alone, quickly, afraid of being turned away but at the

same time trying to look confident, as if he didn't reek of stale beer, as if he was merely in a hurry to catch up on everybody else with his drinking. Which really, he was. He knew no one, and no one knew him, and no one was sober but him. He fell in with a group of guys who were passing around shots, and when his soberness became evident, they demanded he take two shots for every one of theirs.

Drunk, his chest and belly warm with whiskey, he felt a heightened sense of the sexiness that violence had bestowed upon him. He became a debonair gentleman, chatting with girls and charming them with his cool wit. When they laughed at him or scooted away, he smiled to show them that yes, he understood, he was just too damn sexy for their ordinary lives.

Eventually his sexiness led him to the deck out back, where people were dancing under strings of colored lights and where several pairs were making out along the sides. He decided he wanted to do a little of both and insinuated himself into a group of girls, which quickly thinned until only one, the drunkest, remained. This otherwise unremarkable girl became, at the moment of their embrace, and as their lips locked, the girl he would always remember as his first kiss. She would shine in his memory through the haze of that night, the haze into which she separated from him and disappeared, and through which he wandered down to the pool to sit in a chair and smile up at the stars. He had a long conversation with a guy next to him about astrology, which he knew nothing about, and he ate two cold hot dogs from a platter, and later a girl plopped into his lap and rubbed the nape of his neck, her fingers long and cool and gentle, before realizing he wasn't her boyfriend.

The party quieted down. A few people still murmured on the deck while Eddie sat alone in the glow of the green light from the pool. He hadn't talked to Brittany Harding, but she no longer mattered. She could be a dream he had. Now he wanted nothing more than for the night to keep giving itself to him, to keep the stars out and the pool light on.

Someone approached from the house. She had blonde hair and dark skin, such long bands of dark skin pouring from her tank top and shorts. In the wavering light she seemed ethereal, another offering from the night. "It's time to go home," she said.

"I'll go anywhere with you."

"I'm not going anywhere. You need to go home."

He felt afraid, suddenly. He didn't want to leave this place. "Is this your house?" he said. "Can I sleep here?"

"Don't you have a ride?"

"You could take me home. Tuck me in."

"Can you stand up?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

He stood. "Ta-dah." He spread his arms and took a step that turned into four, sending him for the pool, but the girl grabbed his shirt. When he swayed further she pulled him to her chest and wrapped her arms around him.

"Easy now, big boy." She guided him back to the chair.

"There is great power in me," he said.

"Can you fly home with it?"

“I want this to be my home.”

“Do you know anyone here?”

“I know you. All my life I’ve known.”

“What’s your name?”

“Everything.”

“Huh?”

“Just everything. You know. Everything.” He swept his arm through the air and opened his hand. For a moment he expected something to fly from his grip, a spray of confetti or a bird.

She left him, but he sensed that she’d return. He fell asleep slouched in the chair, his head wedged between two of the rubber slats, and was roused by the girl. Her face hovered over him. She smiled, and the smile seemed to expand inside his body as it grew on her lips.

“Your cab is here,” she said.

In the next moment he was at the curb, leaned against the cab next to its open door with his hands wrapped tightly around the girl’s wrists. “Please don’t send me home,” he said. He noticed a guy behind her smoking a cigarette and glaring at the scene Eddie was causing. He felt certain this guy was trying to take her from him. This guy would put an arm around her shoulders and watch smugly as Eddie sailed down the street, alone in a cab. He could already feel himself falling away, but the girl gripped his wrists and pulled him up. “Take me home,” he said, relieved, but she was pulling him toward the dark hole in the side of the cab, not back across the yard to her house. “I’m not going,” he said. “Why are you doing this?” The girl was leaning against him. He

had his hands braced at the edges of the hole. He realized he was holding some money which she had given him.

“All right bud,” a voice said. The girl was gone, suddenly, and a large pair of hands grabbed his shoulders and pressed down. The hands sent a careening streak of loss and violation through him. He fought against them, looking around for the girl. All he saw was the guy’s face, the cigarette clenched in his jaw.

“This is all your fault,” Eddie shouted. “Fuck you!” He kept shouting as the guy wrestled him into the cab. Eddie scrambled across the backseat. He was opening the other door when the guy flew around the trunk and slammed it back. Now the girl was kneeling in the other doorway.

“Hey,” she said. “Settle down.”

Her voice was so calm. He clinched his fists and rubbed his thumbs across his fingers, struggling not to cry. “You try it,” he said. “You try it, if you were me.”

“We’re not sending you over a cliff,” she said.

The cabdriver had been sitting patiently, watching the meter run. Now he turned and said, “It’s time to go now. Where are you going?”

Eddie closed his eyes. He heard the girl ask for his address. He decided to tell her. He wanted to give her something.

As the cab approached Straub Park, Eddie leaned forward and told the driver to drop him there. He paid, and soon he was alone on the street. The breeze in the woods beckoned. He stumbled across the grass, nearly falling at the swings, but he grabbed hold of a chain and dangled a moment, a slowly spinning pendant, as the whole apparatus

groaned and squeaked. In the woods, he touched the trees. He peeled bark off the sycamores. The only sound in the world was the wind. He himself almost wasn't even there. He shouted, just to be there. He wasn't afraid of the goblins that lurked in the darkness. They could scurry through the brush right up to him, the shouting boy. He shouted again, and realized that to anyone on the street, he would be the goblin. He was the lurching figure glimpsed through the trees. His shout was the one the wind carried to a child's window. The child would hear him and know him, and be afraid.

He rolled out from underneath the tree cave and checked his phone. Five missed calls from Ash. In his other pocket were Ash's keys. He checked his back pocket, panicked for a moment, but it was still there, the photo of Benjamin, which he'd brought along with hardly a thought.

He used the keys to let himself into the kitchen through the back door, where he discovered Ash, hair sticking straight out in the back, slouched at the counter wearing his ripped black running shorts and his bright purple Shaquille O'Neal T-shirt. He glanced at Eddie then went back to buttering bread at the counter.

"I could've been naked," he said.

"I knew you'd be wearing that stupid shirt." Ash had bought it on a Goodwill raid around the same time Eddie had found a green polyester suit, which he wore around the house when he was alone, shouting verses from his father's giant bible.

"I could've been pants-less," Ash said.

"Your weenie whistle's too small to see anyway." Eddie sat at the kitchen table, picking pine needles out of his hair. Being in a clean house that smelled of nothing but

air-conditioning made him acutely aware of his own stale aroma of beer and sweat and cigarettes. He was aware also of the smudged remnants of Joe Powell's boot print rubbed into his brand new shirt, but he refused to angle his body so that it was out of sight. "So how was your damn night?" he said.

"You mean except for not having a car? Just fine. Who's Mr. Conroy, by the way?"

"Mr. Conroy. I don't know. Satan?" The table was covered now in pine needles and dirt. Eddie swept it all to the floor.

Ash sprinkled sugar and cinnamon over the bread he'd placed in a pan, then shoved the pan into the oven and tipped the door with his foot so that it slammed shut.

"It might be Satan. It could be. Would Satan be concerned about a Saturn on his lawn?"

Eddie held up his hands. "Somebody stole your car?"

"How about you clean all that crap off the floor."

"Okay," Eddie said, without moving. The digital clock above the stove read 12:35. He watched the little green colon blink, trying to remember botching so badly his attempt to glide smoothly to the curb out in Germantown.

"This Mr. Conroy guy called the house. And my dad would've answered if he hadn't been in the bath."

"Your dad takes baths? In the morning?"

"He takes baths and goes back to sleep lately. But I answered the phone and this guy said the windows were down and he got my dad's name from the insurance card, then looked us up in the Yellow Pages. Yeah, Eddie, the windows were down. On a lawn."

“So? It’s still there. Let’s go get it.”

“Sure thing, we’ll take my car.”

Eddie didn’t want to go anywhere, though he wouldn’t mind Ash leaving. The kitchen smelled of the coffee Ash had just put on, and the cinnamon and sugar melting into butter in the oven. The sun streaming through the window at his back was warm and cast the kitchen into soft blue dusk-like shadow beyond its reach. This was home without being Home.

“So how did you get here?” Ash asked.

“Well you sure didn’t give me a ride back after a fun night out.”

“You stole my car.”

“Maybe you should have been in it with me.”

Ash was silent a moment, concentrating on stirring sugar into a mug of coffee with a spoon. Eddie licked his lips; they seemed to tingle still from the hard, insistent kiss he’d shared with the girl on the deck. She’d had wild red hair, which Eddie had plunged his hands into, down and down without ever finding her scalp.

“The cops came,” Ash said. “Right after you. . . It was madness. Didn’t you see them?”

“Guess I was already gone.”

Chapter Eight

Ash looked up directions to the address Mr. Conroy had given them. They would take David's Jetta to retrieve the car and hopefully return before he knew it was gone. Ash had to creep into the master bedroom, where his father slept off another long morning bath, to slip the keys from a pair of jeans. They hadn't spoken yet. Ash was unsure if his father knew how late he'd come in. He was unsure himself. When he'd stumbled from the cab he was outside of time; he could've been a ghost in the year 3000, standing there on his old front porch for several minutes, turning his pockets out over and over again in search of keys. Eventually he'd crawled around in the flower bed, fumbling for the little plastic rock that contained the spare. It seemed very likely now that once he'd finally gotten inside he'd raised a considerable racket in the quest to find his bed.

In the car, Eddie reclined the passenger seat and lay back with an arm over his eyes. He warmed up with a few groans, cleared his throat theatrically, and began singing to the tune of a Mary Poppins song: "When my head hurts, when my stomach heaves, when I'm feeling sick, I simply remember the night I have had, and then I don't feel so bad." He sang it through three times before Ash put on the radio.

Eddie leaned forward and turned it off. "The radio would be murder."

"Well, dead people don't sing." Ash switched the radio back on and Eddie switched it off.

"I'll quit singing if we can stop for a honey bun."

They pulled in at the gas station near the school where all the neighborhood kids came for their junk food. As Eddie wandered the store with his honey bun, looking as if he hadn't slept at all, ever, Ash stared blankly at a rack stuffed with bright bags of chips,

exploring the new inner workings of himself. His trembling, pounding hangover felt like an honor, a prize carried up from the depths of the night. He kept pushing away the memory of crying in the field, and of Eddie clutching his stomach as he fled the house. The regret that most occupied his thoughts and his guts was that he hadn't woken with Holly tangled in his sheets.

Two girls entered the store. Ash didn't look up because his hair was a mess, but once they passed him he glimpsed through his peripherals the singular Brittany Harding, in white shorts and a blue tank top, with a pair a giant sunglasses nestled in the curls of her own perfect hair. He found Eddie filling a cup with blue slurpee.

"Don't panic, but she's here."

"I already saw her," Eddie said, frowning over the task of fitting a plastic lid over his cup.

"Go say hi. Tell her about skiing in Gatlinburg." Ash felt an idiotic grin on his face. His heart pounded. When Eddie said no he heard himself saying, "Come on. Buy her a slurpee and a honey bun."

A group of younger kids came laughing through the door, one of the girls shrieking as she clung to the back of one of the boys. Eddie looked their way for a moment as if frightened, then his face seemed to crumple inward into hard lines. He left his food on the counter and intercepted Brittany and her friend as they headed for the register. He seemed taller to Ash, standing before the girls, even though his chin was tilted up so he could look into Brittany's eyes.

"Hi. Do you know who I am?"

"Um, you look sort of familiar?"

“My name’s Eddie. We’re in the same History class and the same lunch period and I’ve loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you. I don’t know anything about you except that you like skiing and singing and that you make me miserable. You make me sick and its starting to piss me off. Why should I love you?”

“What?”

“Why should I love you?”

“You’re asking me?” The friend was laughing. Brittney seemed to be enjoying the attention, with her hip thrown out and her eyes wide and searching for an audience, of which there were a few, kids and adults watching Eddie and herself in the roles they were born to play.

“Yeah,” Eddie said. “Why should I? It would be a whole lot easier if I had a good reason.”

“Hm, why should you love me.” She tapped her juice bottle against her chin. “I don’t know. I guess you shouldn’t.”

“But I need something specific.”

“Okay. How about, I would probably never love you back.”

“I don’t think that’ll stop me, actually. How about this. Answer this question. Who is Bruce Wayne?”

“Who?”

“Bruce Wayne.”

“I don’t know, the mayor?”

“No!” her friend cried. “He’s Batman, dummy.”

“Whatever. I failed, oh no. Can we go now? May we pass, please?”

“If I were to squeeze a packet of ketchup in front your face, say I do that, and it explodes ketchup all over your forehead, what would you do?”

“What the hell?”

“How would you retaliate?”

“Are you about to throw ketchup on me? Are you deranged?”

“Would you start a prank war?”

“What the hell’s a prank war?”

“You’d never forgive me for squirting ketchup on your head, would you?”

“No. I never would. We’re gonna go now.”

“Go right ahead.” Eddie stepped aside and waved them past with a slight bow.

“I’ve heard enough.”

The girls joined the short line at the register. Brittany turned back. “So do you still love me?”

“It’s not something one conversation would destroy. It’s a good start, though. Ideally we’ll get to the point where I think you’re a total bitch. But even then you’re still beautiful, so I don’t know. Maybe you should do something really mean to me, like, throw raw meat at me or something. And soon, since things are already shitty and I’m kind of on a roll. How about we go outside and you dump a slurpee all over my head? Ash, will you bring my slurpee over? Actually, will you just pay for it? I’ll be outside. Brittany, you can throw it on me if you want.”

He’d been backing toward the door. Now he turned and pushed through it and strode along the front windows out of sight, everyone near the front of the store following his progress. The girl who’d been riding the boy said “Ha!” then seemed to lose interest.

Ash gathered the slurpee and honey bun and waited in line, embarrassed to have been addressed by the guy talking loudly about raw meat and humiliation. Brittany Harding and her friend paid for their drinks, joking about other things they could do to squelch Eddie's love, and the woman behind the counter said, "That boy ain't right."

The girls left without a glance at Ash. When he laid his items on the counter, the woman said, "You watch out for that boy," and he didn't know quite how she meant it, whether he should be wary or solicitous. He went around to the back of the building, where he found Eddie at the top of an embankment beyond a line of trees, pacing back and forth on the railroad tracks and tapping absently on one of the rusted brown rails with a stick.

"I fucked up, didn't I?" he said.

"Not if you want food thrown at you."

Ash sat in the grass in the cool shade of the tree line, where the purple and blue wildflowers trembled in the breeze and smelled gently of rain and his grandmother's garden. He peeled open the honey bun wrapper, taking care not to touch the sticky insides, took a huge, gum-tingling bite, swallowed, and felt restored in small measure to the Earth. He thought of Holly's lips pressed against his ear—*Ash, will you protect me?*—and shuddered. Such an exotic sensation, and fulfilling in every way, a girl's close whisper.

"I don't even care," Eddie was saying. *Tap tap tap*. Far off, the long blow of a horn.

"Trains coming," Ash said.

“It was doomed from the start, though, right? I’m done with all that crap.” *Tap tap tap. Tap. Tap.* He threw the stick at the tree next to Ash and continued muttering to himself.

It occurred to Ash that this was his fault. He felt ashamed now for mocking Eddie about his skiing-in-Gatlinburg icebreaker, for wanting to see a spectacle there in the gas station.

“You know,” he said, “maybe there’s still hope for you. Like, I met this girl last night. She’s totally, completely beautiful.”

Eddie stopped and looked down at him. “You’re lying.”

“No sir.”

“Stop eating my honey bun and bring it to me. And the slurpee.”

Ash climbed the embankment and stood just outside of the rails. Eddie accepted the half-eaten bun and quickly dispatched the rest.

“Her name’s Holly. We got wasted together. In a bar. I think I got her number. At least, I woke up today with a phone number in my pocket.”

“You got wasted? You?”

Ash filled him in. By the time he finished, Eddie was looking off through the trees at the traffic on Meadowvale. “Sounds like you had a really good night,” he said.

“Well, we didn’t make out or anything.”

Another blast from the horn.

“I’m the one that called the cops,” Eddie said. “And I smashed Joe Powell’s mustang to smithereens. The windshield’s gone. And I keyed up the paint pretty bad, too.”

The news took Ash a moment to process. He regretted talking about Holly, felt stupid for it, since he never would have met her had he stuck with Eddie, and of course Eddie knew this. Now he knew that Eddie had broken up the party, which had thrown Ash and Holly and Sean together in the back of X's Lincoln. Further, Eddie had foregone his previous plan to coat the mustang in mustard and stick a potato in the tailpipe—the type of vandalism that most suited his style—and instead had committed an act of true violence. It was almost—almost—enough for Ash to wish he was standing again in the yard of the house as Eddie was lifted above the keg, the nozzle aimed at his face. This time Ash would leap onto the porch and raise his arms and command Stop! and at his command all would go still, the fires in the field, the shouting crowd, the stream of beer, and only he would have authority

“I met a girl, too,” Eddie said. “We had sex.”

“Uh, wow.”

“Do you believe me?”

Ash hesitated. He didn't.

“Of course you don't believe me. Mr. ladies man all of a sudden. What I want to know is, what the hell did you do in Chelsa's room?”

“What's Chelsa got to do with anything?”

“I don't know.” Eddie walked off down the tracks. A horn sounded. In the distance, the rippling blur of a train approached. Eddie turned back. “When I woke up this morning, I thought for a second that the world had ended, and it was scary, just for that one second. But the end means a beginning, right? So really it wouldn't be so bad.

If everything ended. Who knows what could happen then? So I feel like I'm done with this crap. Like maybe I'll just destroy everything I have."

"You're not talking about suicide are you?"

"Probably not. No. More like starting over. I'd probably go to Hell if I killed myself, right? But I don't know, death is always what's next, I guess. Maybe there is no Hell. Or this is Hell. Have you ever thought about all the things you wouldn't have to deal with if you were dead?"

"No. Don't talk like that."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"You wouldn't destroy *everything* you have, would you?"

"Everything."

The train was taking shape, big and yellow. Its horn sounded as it approached Stratford and Troy, the next intersection over.

"Time to get off the tracks," Ash said.

Eddie walked away from him again and toward the train, down the center of the rails. He had his hand in his back pocket, holding something inside. Ash hurried forward and grabbed his arm, and Eddie said, "Everything."

"Sure," Ash said. "Tell me more. Over here."

But Eddie resisted. "Stay here with me. We'll jump at the last second." Now he had hold of Ash's arm, his eyes narrowed to slits as they always were when he smiled.

"This isn't funny, you lunatic." Ash pulled away and stepped to the edge of the embankment. Eddie stepped to the other side as the train approached. The rails hummed. "Go down the hill, you idiot," Ash said, afraid to do so himself. Eddie's manic energy

had never frightened him before, had never spiraled into self destruction that he knew of, but now it seemed as if Eddie might step again onto the tracks at the last minute, and Ash would have no authority here, no command. The train wouldn't stop, and Eddie would disappear into its 5,000 tons of steel.

The horn blared, a sound that stirred marrow. Eddie was shouting, but Ash couldn't hear a word, and then the train blasted between them, rumbling, shrieking, metal on metal and throwing off a hot wind, and for a moment Eddie was gone, obliterated. But no. There he was, glimpsed in the gaps of cars that seemed now to roll on with leisure. Ash skidded down the embankment and waited, his heart pounding. He knew what to expect. When the last car passed, Eddie was gone.

Chapter Nine

Spring deepened into the torpor of summer. Ash spent the days reading in his underwear and eating popsicles, listening in the afternoons for the approach of thunderstorms, then going for walks in the brief, cool aftermath. He and Holly had been caught in a downpour early one evening driving to Sean's house, and Holly had ordered Ash to pull over and stop. "Let's dance," she said, hopping out of the car, but Ash couldn't bring himself to move as she swayed and leapt through his headlights in the gloom. When she fell back into her seat, she brought with her the scent of rain and mud and wet clothes. Oh, how that turquoise blouse clung to her body. She steamed, wiping off her streaked makeup with a tissue and laughing about a turtle she'd almost stepped on, the rain still pounding the car, Ash watching it fall with a sense of wonder, as if rain was different now, and meant something else.

That night, Holly kissed Sean on the back patio.

The trio had been hanging out with a cooler of cheap beer between them a few nights a week since the field party. Sean's parents didn't mind, preferring their son drunk at home instead of "at some rager," as his mother said. His father sometimes drank a bottle of Sam Adams with them, flirting awkwardly with Holly and reminiscing about his own carefree summers before retreating into his study.

Ash felt suited for the hard-drinking life, which for him meant five to eight beers a week. He could no longer fathom what it was he'd thought people lost of themselves to alcohol. He sat now in a low-slung wicker chair on a patio surrounded by hedges and overhung by a massive oak, in a world left dripping and fragrant from the storm. The beer was cold and watery and good. Holly had rolled out the towel Sean's mother had

given her to dry off with. She lay on her back, peering up into the branches of the oak. Ash wanted to bury his nose in her tangled hair. He wanted to take off his shirt and let her wear it, distraught that Sean had given her one of his own to replace the wet one. From the beginning it had only been the three of them on these nights, as if for several hours they had no other friends.

Sean was talking about his plans for the money he'd been saving since he was fifteen—money from birthdays and Christmases, from graduation, from his job at a sporting goods store. He hadn't known why he was saving the money until he received his acceptance letter from Ole Miss.

“I took one look at that letter and poof. I knew I wasn't going to college.”

“Poof. Just like that?” Holly said. “I've known since I was twelve.”

“I've known since I could say ‘Rebels’ that I would go to Ole Miss. Or, at least I knew that's where everybody expected me to go. It's where my parents and my grandparents went. My dad's obsessed. On the campus visit, he went around picking up trash. I'm not kidding. He couldn't help himself. He kept waving trash around in his Colonel Reb sweater vest and saying it's disrespectful.”

“Maybe he was referring to Mother Earth, not the campus,” Ash said.

“Right, and maybe in celebration of me not going to college he'll shit a cake.”

“Ok,” Holly said, “so Poof! You're not going to college. What *are* you gonna do?”

“Travel, of course.”

“You're not backpacking through Europe, are you? That's just as clichéd as me going to L.A.”

“No. I’m driving through the States. But I’ll probably live out of a backpack.”

As he outlined his plan, Ash watched Holly. He wanted her to be unimpressed, but she was sitting up now, clutching her knees. Sean was defying his parents and going to New Orleans, Miami, Atlanta, New York, setting out into foreign country, sleeping in hostels and on the backseat of his car. He would be eating Power Bars, bathing in moldy showers, listening to violinists in subways, watching waves come in on bright Atlantic beaches. He would eat a hot dog on Coney Island and run a finger along the Vietnam Wall.

“Gas is expensive,” Ash said.

“You could take the bus,” Holly said eagerly. “Like if you run low on money. Just park your car at Wal-Mart and come back for it later.”

“It just hit me,” Sean said. He looked out into his yard, unblinking, as if he’d just seen something astonishing out in the dark. “I’m actually doing this. For some reason, telling it to y’all makes it real. With my school friends, it was like a joke. When you’re in high school, it doesn’t feel like you’ll ever actually do anything. Life’s just a lot of . . . ha ha, let’s see what kinds of shit we can get into, what’s the worst that could happen. And now . . .”

They were silent for awhile. Above them, the moon was a white haze behind thin clouds. The sound of a neighbor’s wind chimes made Ash feel lonely. It was loneliness with a strange new layer, which had become familiar in the weeks since school ended. It was like nostalgia, except he didn’t miss anything about what he’d left behind; it was like fear, except—yes, it was like fear. He shuddered, aware suddenly of this great hollow

fear in him. He had only now ventured into the world, and the ground shifted with every step.

“I cried at graduation,” Holly said. “We were all lined up, waiting to file in, and I didn’t really know anyone around me. All my friends were further up. I couldn’t see them. And suddenly everything felt wrong. It seemed like I was in the wrong place, like this wasn’t even my own life. I thought for a second I’d never see my friends again, and I started crying uncontrollably, and everyone tried to ignore me. A lot of people hate me at my school. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Aw, they don’t hate you,” Sean said.

“Stop right there.” Holly wiped her eyes. “You don’t know the first thing about it.”

Ash would love to be hated, would love to mourn the end of an era. He’d nearly dozed off during his own graduation, which was held in the Coliseum, a defunct arena at the fairgrounds, whose hallways were swept every spring for the spate of high school ceremonies. It smelled of ancient sweat and mildew. Afterwards, he pushed through the jubilant crowd to meet up with his grandparents, who’d driven in for the weekend, and his father, who stood with his hands in his pockets and marveled at the yellowed walls and tarnished silver handrails of the building. “I saw Kiss here in 1982,” he said. Ash’s grandfather said he’d seen The Beatles here on their last American tour. One day Ash could say he’d seen the Edmonson High School graduation ceremony, and had his picture taken in a blue gown.

He stood on the patio and swayed for a moment before shuffling off into the yard to pee. Behind the shed, he stumbled over the stump of a hacked-off bamboo shoot and

fell. He caught hold of one of the tall remaining shoots, but his knees sank into the mud. He started laughing in the silent, breathless manner of a mime, clutching his stomach. At that moment there was nothing to fear; he was in the dazzling kernel of summer.

As he crossed the yard again he saw that Sean had joined Holly on her towel. The scene was like a painting rendered by a heartbroken artist: two small figures embracing in the lower corner of a canvas filled with darkness and flowering hedges, a meager golden porch light revealing just enough.

It turned out that the esteemed King X—or Kenneth—had been more of a fling than anything. One of a few. Holly was currently obsessed with the sulky guitarist of a local indie band, Jesus Miracle Power, whose singer wore roller skates. At Ash's first show, he was hit in the face with a shoe and woke up the next morning with brittle bits of silly string in his pockets.

One Saturday in late June, a few hours before the band's set, Ash decided to invite Eddie along. They had barely spoken in the past month. Eddie's parents had shown up at graduation with Charlie in tow, bewildered that their son had not crossed the stage when his name was called. A week passed in which Ash's calls and texts went unanswered. Then, at the Jenkins/Sacs family dinner, Eddie told Ash of how he and a couple of guys had snuck into the abandoned amusement park next to the Coliseum and shared a bottle of whiskey on the prow of the Sea Dragon.

Ordinarily, Ash would dismiss this story as an outright lie, or at the very least a subtle misrepresentation of the likely fact that Eddie had merely tagged along, unwelcome. But there was new mystery in Eddie. He'd seemed for so long as simple

and empty as a bell without its clapper. Now he reverberated with strange intensity, sitting still as he spoke, laying out sentences more carefully, smiling less and smirking more. His thoughts no longer streamed from his mouth uninhibited, but seemed to clang around in his head, creasing his brow. He sipped from a small bottle of Old Granddad in Ash's room and wouldn't say where he got it from.

Ash was surprised when Eddie responded so quickly, and affirmatively, to the text inviting him to the show. As soon as the plans were set, he regretted making them. He couldn't decide if he actually wanted Eddie to come. He'd felt magnanimous, thinking of his friend, and yet he wondered what Sean and Holly would make of this friendship. He was prepared to deny everything, unable to quite admit to himself that he deeply missed every one of those tedious afternoons with Eddie, afternoons so easy to dismiss as time wasted in lonely towers, life streaming by, but which actually, in the turning of comic book pages, in the killing of a hundred ghouls in video game castles, in the whisperings of countless shared stories and fantasies, comprised nearly everything that had ever brought Ash happiness.

And yet this happiness was not enough, did not, often, even feel like happiness.

Eddie wore his Slayer shirt and those incongruous tight jeans of his, as if he couldn't quite decide who to be. The gel in his hair was more subtle tonight. He was quiet for most of the drive, which was disconcerting. The burden of conversation had never before fallen so heavily on Ash. He wanted to put a hand on Eddie's shoulder and say, "What's going on with you, man? Maybe I can help." But he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to help, afraid too that his failures as a friend would come to light. So

all he said was, “This band has a chick singer. She’s pretty hot.” This was not the kind of observation he would customarily make, and he blushed deeply.

All Eddie said was, “Sweet action.”

The concert that night, as before, was at The Complex, a low brick building in the medical district which decades ago had been a beauty parlor. Ash turned off Madison into the tiny gravel lot early enough to find a spot. He hated being so early, but couldn’t help arriving at the exact time Holly told him to, as if she would notice and give him her heart in return for his punctuality. Arriving early meant sipping flat beer from a keg on the deck out back and watching Holly flirt with her guitarist while Sean hovered and cut in with witty or subversive comments.

At nine o’clock the club was mostly empty. Ash gave his and Eddie’s names at the door and the burly, bald man there scratched at the guest list. The original reception desk had survived its beauty parlor days and now served as the ticket booth, where the name of the venue had been burned into the wood. Several torn, synthetic leather dryer chairs remained along one wall, and a gleaming black bar stretched along the other, behind which were the five narrow mirrors ringed by empty light bulb sockets, where people used to watch themselves be transformed. Ash liked to stare into the dark glass and imagine that the reflection he saw there was not of him, but of one of those bright, young customers of the 80s or 90s, admiring their astonishing new beauty.

The stage and dance floor had been added on when the building changed ownership, so that the brown and tan checkered tile at the front ended abruptly in five feet of concrete at the back and five more feet of slightly raised, black-painted wooden stage. The deck outside served as backstage, since the club was hardly big enough to

accommodate a band, let alone a place for the band to feel exclusive. This was where Ash found Holly and Sean among a small crowd. This was where the night began its slow detonation.

There had been shots of searing brown liquid. Too many clear plastic cups of beer. Ash had lost track of his friends. He sat on the corner rail of the deck, watching strangers move through the harsh glare of white floodlights that hummed under the eaves. Insects hovered in the wash. The strangers were too white; at certain angles their eyes or mouths disappeared into shadow. They were dazzling in their skinny jeans, their fedoras and newsboy caps and denim vests and bowties, their torn leggings, classic rock tank tops, and floral thrift shop dresses. They laughed and smirked and scoffed, carefully aloof, blowing smoke into the muggy, windless air as the back wall of the building shook and the boards of the deck shook and the whole world shook from the bass and drums of Jesus Miracle Power. Ash was seeing double—here were the strangers speaking in their heightened, theatrical way, but behind them he could see where they'd come from, and he foraged into their lives as if they'd left bright contrails for him to follow. He could hear snatches of their jangly music as he passed through their days, taste their espresso and feel their ennui as they sat behind school desks or stood at registers, the night waiting, the internet waiting, the perfect tee at the bottom of a bin waiting to show them another piece of who they were as bit by bit they made themselves up. They seemed so much further along, so confident in what they were creating, in what they would become.

“I hate everyone here,” Holly said. She collapsed onto the bench at his feet. He slid down to join her, shoulder to shoulder. Tonight she wore her bangs straight across

her eyebrows and a dark dress with a high waist and a bright pink belt. Ash had been surprised at his first show by how much she stood out from the other girls, who didn't wear trendy dresses, and by how remarkably confident she seemed regardless. Ash himself stood out for all the wrong reasons: neat hair, too-bright clothes, a freshman on his first day of high school.

"They're amazing," he said. "They're like crazy aliens to me. I actually feel like a human being." He laughed, remembering that he'd never told her about the great species-crisis of his childhood and its lasting effect on his psyche.

"I can tell you something wrong with every single one of them."

"Do they all have diseases?"

"They all have the same disease. It's called Memphis."

"Then don't we have it, too?"

"No. Because me and you are going places."

"You're going to the Hollywood Hills."

"And you're going to Mars. You're already halfway there." She leaned her head into his, straightened up again. He leaned back in and buried his head in her hair, straightened up again.

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

"Not soon enough."

"Let's go now." He stood, swayed. She pulled him back down.

"Can I tell you something?"

She was turned away from the glare of the floodlights so that her face was pocked with shadow, accentuating her look of concern, the way she bit her lower lip. It seemed

her dark eyes were made darker by some secret, and in the moments before she spoke Ash feared she would reveal something sinister: she had leukemia, she loved Sean.

But what she said was, “I’m not a very good actor,” and Ash laughed.

She scooted away from him. “What’s so funny?”

“Sorry. I thought it was something serious.”

“Unbelievable!”

She jumped up and Ash followed her as she pushed through the crowd toward the club. Before he could think of anything say, before he could even utter her name, she’d thrown open the door and disappeared inside, releasing a blast of guitars. He jumped down the short staircase leading to the dance floor and tried to keep up with her, but the crowd ate her alive, and he was nearly laid out by Christina, the maniacal red-headed singer, as she cut across the club crouched in her neon skates, gouts of silly string blooming from her fists.

The music was too loud, and Christina wasn’t a very good singer, though supposedly that was part of her appeal. Ash had convinced himself that these shows were fun, but as Christina hopped back onto the stage, ready to “shriek in the voice of a broken diamond” as Sean had enthusiastically put it, he realized that he hated this band. Why else had he been out back? He didn’t want to return to the deck, and he wouldn’t be able to apologize to Holly in the racket, so he went out front, where people stood smoking in groups along the sidewalk.

He sat on one of the benches at the trolley stop in the middle of the street. When a car rattled up, a few of the smokers ran to catch it. Ash watched as they draped

themselves across the seats in the back. The car moved off towards downtown, and Ash searched his pockets for gum.

An hour later, he was squeezed into the back of a downtown-bound trolley car full of people from the show. The band, along with Holly and Sean, made a riotous knot up front, except for Holly's glum guitarist wilted into a corner like tragedy personified, even though Holly was practically in his lap. Eddie stood towards the center and transferred generous helpings of Old Granddad from the bottle to several outstretched plastic cups taken from the back deck of The Complex.

They went to a haunted bar on Main. The place had been a drugstore, a hotel, and a brothel. Prostitutes had died there and never left. Murders and suicides. Overdoses. Nothing much of the building had been restored since the days B.B. King, Otis Redding, and Sam Cooke were regulars. All this Ash learned from the old black man perched on a stool behind the tiny bar upstairs, in a hot room mostly empty, where the single light bulb was painted blue. The man poured two shots of whiskey.

"How old do you think I am?" Ash said.

"Younger than me." They clinked glasses.

Ash staggered down the hallway, peering into each dim room for a familiar face. He found a bathroom and sat in a rusted claw foot bathtub for awhile. A few guys came in and left when they saw the pale boy in the tub studying the cracks in the ceiling. Eddie rushed in, unzipped, and unleashed hell into the toilet without noticing he had company.

"Boo," Ash said.

Eddie jumped and sprayed into the corner. He cursed, finishing up, then slammed the lid of the toilet and sat on it.

“You’re laid out in the place that prostitute committed suicide in,” he said.

“I’m staring at the crack her soul slipped through.”

“You think her soul went that way? It probably went down the drain.”

“She had a good heart. Her church prayed for her.” Ash picked at flakes of rust on the brown porcelain. “How many diseases do you think I have now?”

“All of them.”

“Holly has the Memphis disease. She’s too big for here. That’s what she means, I think. But I’m just starting to feel a part of it. Can you bring me some water?”

Eddie returned later with two plastic bottles and slid the latch across the bathroom door. They sat and drained the water. The room was stifling, the air a solid mass bearing down against the silence. The bar could be empty but for the ghosts.

“You left me,” Eddie said. “That night.”

Ash closed his eyes and tried to find himself again in that field, somewhere in the shadows among the fires. He wasn’t there. He was with Holly in a cab, coming home.

“You took my car,” he said. “You’re the one who left.”

“You left me,” he said again, almost a whisper.

Neither of them looked at each other. Ash swallowed the last of his already warm water and wished he had more, just for the ritual of it, of drinking water instead of speaking or sitting there not speaking.

“Before that, even,” Eddie said.

Ash stood, using the wall for support. “I’m part of things now. You have to keep up.” This sounded ridiculous, wrong, yet in some inscrutable way it rang true.

“Part of things how? You mean like with that girl Holly? That’s a joke.”

He was standing now too, blocking the way. Ash tried to push him but ended up falling against his pillowy, damp chest, and they both stumbled into the door in an awkward embrace. They grappled in a daze, slowed, like weary boxers, heads pressed into the other’s shoulders.

“I’m leaving,” Ash said.

“Obviously. Me too.”

They moved apart. Eddie opened the door and vanished into the hallway.

Ash found Holly with the others at a large round table in a red-hued room beyond the stair landing. He saw the look of concern on her face when their eyes met and realized he was crying. He turned and hurried for the stairs, which were steep and narrow and uneven. He grabbed the iron pipe that served as a railing and took the steps two and three at a leap, making good time until his heel caught an edge and sent him tumbling the last several feet into the wall at the bottom.

Pain shot up his arm, and then Holly was there, leading him out the side door and sitting with him on the high curb beneath the Amtrak rails. She inspected the bruise on his elbow. “You’ll live,” she said. “Maybe.”

“You didn’t have to follow me. Sorry to take you away from your friends.” He hated the sulky tone to his voice. He added, “But thank you. It feels good out here. The breeze and everything.”

“I wasn’t having fun,” she said. “Those little groupies in there are glad I’m gone anyway, trust me.”

Ash thought that was true, but he didn’t believe she hadn’t been having fun, not among the rapt attention of boys and the jealous scorn of girls.

“I’m sorry for what I said earlier. About acting. If you can’t act, that’s pretty serious.”

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

The way she looked off down the street when she said this made Ash want to figure it out for her, for both of them. He followed her gaze. No sign of Eddie. He could be in a cab headed for home, a train for New Orleans.

It seemed imperative at that moment to leave the city. To leave with Holly. He almost leapt to his feet.

“I know how we can prevent your Memphis disease and practice your acting skills at the same time. Come with me to my grandparents’ farm. 4th of July weekend.”

“How will that help my acting?”

“I don’t know. You’ll be a stranger there. Pretend to be a bumpkin.”

Chapter Ten

When Ash rang the doorbell, Holly turned to him on the wide front porch, hunched suddenly as if something had detonated inside the house. “They’ll hate me,” she said, her face a perfect banner of wide-eyed horror. “They’ll think I’m no better than the cows.”

It took a moment, but as Ash listened to his Grandma Lou on the other side of the door dismantling the defenses of her house, raking back chains and twisting open deadbolts, he realized that Holly was joking. Of course she was. She was ready to blow elderly minds. Ash himself had been anticipating his grandparents’ shock at the sight of her—vibrant, beautiful Holly and not some dumpy, sweet girl with a quiet love for Tolkien.

Though really, any companion other than Eddie was shocking enough. The only girl Ash had ever brought out to Lane’s Ferry was Jasmine, his invisible girlfriend in fourth grade. She spent most of that Thanksgiving weekend sulking because she missed her family in Detroit. She’d run away to be with Ash after they met online and he sent her a poem about the wild rivers of his love (which was true, except for the running away part, and for ‘Jasmine’ actually being a twelve-year-old girl from Iowa named Nancy, who stopped IM-ing Ash after reading about his wild rivers). He felt so bad for “Jasmine” after the Thanksgiving trip that he broke up with her on the swings in Straub Park, magnanimously but with a great deal of satisfying regret, so that she could be with her family. He watched her fade across the field toward the woods, bound for that fantastic northern city.

Grandma Lou flung the door wide, her green eyes ablaze, undimmed since girlhood, her large glasses, as always and inexplicably, askew on her bulbous nose. “Oh, Ashlee Bear!” she said, and Ash ducked his head, stepped into her embrace, and inhaled the morning’s worth of her chores: the sharp tang of sweat buried beneath powder and deodorant, the whiff of wet black garden soil. He closed his eyes and tried in vain to reach around her ample waist until his fingers touched, a secret ritual performed under the impression that fat deposits in the elderly were a sign of good health, and that she would live for years to come as long as she maintained her famous girth. No one could explain the origins of this “just a little bit extra,” as she called it. She came from a tall, crane-like family, cousins and sisters under whose pylon legs Ash had scurried as a child. But Lou had always been short and thick. There was a rumor of an affair between her mother and an enormous drifter, who gained a degree of notoriety the spring before Lou was born by sleeping in the pastures along Highway 51 and squeezing under the floorboards of Lark’s Grocery, yelling “Boo!” at the customers. Lou’s mother bought him bologna, bread, and ice cream one day and persuaded him to move on to the church down the road and yell boo at the Pentecostals, who loved a reason to jump anyway, she said. She was church of Christ, herself, when she felt up to it, and the Lord never once persuaded her to shout out in church or break a sweat over Him.

Where she came from didn’t much bother Lou. If she was conceived in a country hollow, it didn’t change where she’d ended up, and if a drifter was her father, he hadn’t sewn a stitch of his wanderlust into her. Lou Annabel Mosey had never been more than a hundred miles beyond the flat river delta and soft ridges of West Tennessee.

“And you,” she said, releasing Ash, “must be Holly.” Low to the ground as she was, Lou gave the word a three syllable musicality that seemed to come from the sky.

“Hi!” Holly shouted, and thrust out her hand.

“Oh, what is that?” Lou engulfed those slender outstretched fingers in a fist and pulled Holly to her bosom. “Ashlee, she’s just beautiful! Oh, honey, you’re a precious thing.”

Ash watched them embrace, Holly swallowed to the neck, her chin buried in Lou’s puff of silver hair. He felt a stirring in his chest, a fluttery optimism. It seemed possible to build an entire life from that moment. And even if, as the summer barreled along and past with its freight of days, Holly never came to love him, if she came to hate or pity him, or to remember these months with indifference, maybe she could love his family, and in that way never forget him.

When Lou released her, Holly stepped back and beamed at Ash, her braided hair swishing against the collar of her blue and white plaid shirt, which she’d bought, along with the black cowboy boots on her feet, especially for her first farm experience. She’d left the boots for two days under the hedges bordering her yard to lend them the lived-in aura of many long hours in the fields, but they still held some of their stiff, department store polish. She could never pass for a farm-girl anyway, with her too-white skin, the aristocratic tilt of her chin, the delicate, careless way she walked, as if the earth were made of plush carpet, and, mostly, those mirthful eyes, too shrewd and sarcastic for idle country pleasantries. She looked like a glamorous actress in a TV movie about following your heart to big-city fame but remaining true to your roots and loving your Mama.

Lou led them in through the stuffy entryway, chattering about how the house (clean, if a bit dusty) was such a mess and how the garden had exploded with tomatoes and cucumbers and how her friend Wauneta hadn't eaten meat for two whole years and was probably going to die of some strange vegetarian disease. Holly wore a look of rapture, her head swiveling to take in the house.

Ash let the familiarity of his surroundings work its way into his muscles, deep and relaxing in a way no other place could touch. The hush of the house was profound; even underneath voices or the clatter of kitchenware, silence ruled, the hum of a box fan, the tick of the grandfather clock in the hallway only magnifying a larger quiet. Part of it was the pocket of time the place seemed nestled in, as if his grandparents had decided that 1990 was far enough into the century to progress. Floral wallpaper decorated the walls and thin brown carpet covered the floors. In the kitchen, the faded pink and blue linoleum bubbled up beneath the table and beside the stove. The furniture in the den, hard and uncomfortable, maintained a ratty, sad dignity, creaking into the silence when sat on, exuding a pompous air of entitlement, as if they'd served in an English drawing room. Ash received several scoldings as a child for being too rough with the furniture.

He and Holly sat now on the long, low couch, which let out an indignant screech.

"Your Grampy's in the bathroom again," Lou said, settling into a wooden rocker with a thin pink pad tied to the seat. "I'll get him. Grampy!" she yelled. She turned to Holly and said, "He's deaf as a pill bug. Grampy!" she hollered.

"What!" came the muffled reply.

"Your grandson is here, with his little friend-girl Holly!"

"What?"

Lou sighed. “He could be in there ‘til dinner. Doctor says he needs more water and fiber and less dairy. Naturally, he craves eggs more than anything now. I won’t buy ‘em anymore.”

“Sounds tough,” Ash said.

“Yes,” said Lou, “it is. That’s exactly the problem.”

In the inevitable conversational lull after mention of constipation, Ash looked around the den, wondering what it looked like through Holly’s eyes. The TV sat on a chipped walnut stand in the corner, a film of dust over the 24-inch screen. Particle board bookshelves sagged against the walls, lined with yellow paperbacks and issues of Reader’s Digest and Southern Living. The shade on the window was drawn, a dark blot rimmed in sunlight. The room’s crowning piece of artistic expression loomed over the mantle: A portrait of thirteen-year-old Ashlee Jenkins with a line of hair straight across his forehead, wearing a yellow and blue striped pastel shirt, oval-shaped glasses, and a half-smile that revealed a dull sheen of metal across his teeth. Would all this be depressing or charming to a girl like Holly? With her there, the house seemed to lose some of its allure and comfort. He grew hot with embarrassment. The air conditioner clicked on then off, as if taunting.

Lou had filled the void by telling Holly about the lack of rain, a subject Holly seemed fascinated by, an edge-of-your-seat-thriller about one woman’s struggle to keep her grass green.

“Gracious,” Holly said, winking at Ash. “You’re right about that darned heat.”

Somewhere within the walls of the house a series of pipes clanged to life. “That’d be your Grampy,” Lou said.

Shortly he appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, Albert Mosey, a tall man of sixty-five with brown eyes and a dash of gray hair, whose leanness had only recently begun to give way to frailty, his skin drooping more dramatically in recent years, the age spots not quite disguised by his tan. He had retired from the Navy a decade earlier, at which time he'd purchased the thirty acres surrounding the house (where he'd grown up, inheriting the place without quarrel between himself and his uninterested younger brother) along with five Polled Herefords. The herd now numbered three times that, which he sold for beef or displayed in regional cattle shows.

Albert shuffled into the room grinning and stopped in front of Holly as if surprised to see her, thumbs hooked into his blue suspenders. "Well, hello there. You must be Susie."

"Grampy!" Lou cried. She swatted at his behind. "Susie is Ashlee's *other* friend-girl."

"Other! How many you got now, boy? I can't keep 'em straight."

"Ten," Ash said.

"Well Holly—" he reached out his hand, and she stood to take it in both of hers—"you're the loveliest yet by far."

"Thank you, sir. You're a handsome man yourself," Holly said, with a little too sharp a flirtatious edge.

"Hm," Albert said, uncomfortable suddenly. "Well. . . Lou, I guess I'm handsome!" He chuckled to himself and retreated to his leather recliner by the window, the Vietnam vet, the legendary charmer of Navy wives, children and store clerks. Ash had never seen his grandfather disarmed. It was terrifying.

Lou pummeled everyone with questions. Albert sat engulfed in his chair, head canted to a degree that best allowed the conversation to enter his fuzzy ear canals. The portrait of Ashlee commanded too much wall space, that slow-witted smile a pall. The yellowed books whispered about their many quiet years. Heat waves flowed from Holly, a bomb, a star fallen to earth, inches to Ash's left. He sweated. The room was so quaint, so muted. Why had he brought her here? Lou was talking about a sale at Peebles. Peebles! Where old ladies went to gossip and buy clothes for distant grandchildren who would never wear them. He couldn't take it anymore.

“Hey, how about I show Holly the farm? She's been dying to see it.”

“Oh of course, the farm. But not before lunch. You're hungry,” Lou insisted, as always both solicitous and aggressive when it came to food. She was a terror at the table, accosting already full guests with yet another dish, eyeing which dishes were being neglected and by whom so she could guilt the offender into a bite (“Oh, hon. I thought you *liked* my pickle relish!” “Don't you want more pear preserves? They take so long to make.”), tensed all the while and ready to attack the slightest need.

“I've got those chips you like. Those ones with the green flecks,” she said, referring to a flavor she'd noticed him eating once when he was twelve. “And there's chocolate pie for dessert.”

Albert roused from a doze. “Pie?”

Ash looked at Holly, hoping to convey misery and remorse, but she was already standing.

“Let me give you a hand,” she said.

#

After a lunch of turkey sandwiches, left-over chicken breast, sour cream and onion chips, root beer, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes from the garden, potato salad, pickle spears, and chocolate pie, Ash led Holly into the backyard, feeling woozy and bloated behind the more pressing thrill of escape from the house.

The air was humid, the backyard green and lush, exuding the sparkle of sprinkler water and the pungent richness of vegetables and fertile soil. Stone angels peered from clumps of honeysuckle and rhododendron, eyes full of lichen. The garden rose from the ground between colonnades of swaying dogwoods, beyond which were the apple, pear, and pecan trees, whose yields Ash as a child had collected in white buckets. A gravel path branched into three directions, and Ash took the left arm, through a small hayfield to the shop, a structure of corrugated aluminum that housed, along with two deep freezers, a pool table dusted with dead flies and wasps, and various implements of gardening and farming, the Kawasaki Mule—a 4x4 red wagon/ATV on 24-inch mud tires.

“Wait, we’re not riding around on horseback?” Holly teased.

“You haven’t seen what this baby can do yet. Ever raced through a cow pasture at 17 miles an hour?” Ash looked into the rusted bed, disappointed to find it cluttered with snarls of barbed wire and blackened rags. He’d entertained a half-formed notion of getting cozy in that bed underneath a particular oak tree on a hill that overlooked the pond. Lying out in such a way felt like a required step in the art of falling in love.

Holly slid onto the bench seat in the cab. “Take me away, cowboy.”

Ash took the rutted path laid by years of rolling wheels, which wound around the bases of two browned hills, then ascended the slope of a ridge where wild blackberries grew in tangles. They found the herd in and around the pond, each cow brown with

mottled white heads and bellies, some sunk to the neck in the muddy water, others standing ankle-deep or reclining in the grass like statuary. Ash switched off the rattling Mule. The silence was sudden and loud, the insects of the field whirring and thumping against the tires.

“Ooh and ahh,” Ash said. Holly had been excited to see the cows, which made Ash excited to show her. But he’d forgotten how boring they were. Somehow he’d expected entertainment, a wrestling match maybe, or a stampede.

“I’m gonna pet one,” Holly said.

“Good luck.”

“You don’t think I can?” She was already half out of the Mule, eyeing the herd. The wind blew strands of hair across her face. Her boots had at last touched pasture.

“I think you’ll drive them all the way into pond, where they’ll drown.”

“But you’ll save them before they drown, right? Wonder Ash. Da dada da!” She took a few steps toward the nearest cow lying in the grass, which gazed at her with profound boredom.

“Wait,” Ash said. He hadn’t really been joking about losing the entire herd to the catfish-haunted depths. It seemed entirely possible. Holly turned to look at him. She was stunning with her bright plaid shirt, her flash of white teeth and glaring skin, eyes and hair so dark, standing there before the dirty cluster of Polled Herefords.

“Come on, Ash. Live a little.”

He didn’t say anything, but his expression must have conveyed worry and unmanly prissiness, because she rolled her eyes. He cursed his face for betraying him.

“Look,” she said. “How about this. If I manage to pet one of these beasts, and not a single one drowns or breaks a hip, you get a big wet kiss.”

It sounded like a joke, like “big wet kiss” was a euphemism for getting smacked in the face with a fish. So he said, “What do you mean?”

She walked over and leaned into the cab, her forearms against the frame, the shadows beyond the unclasped top buttons of her shirt dangerously prevalent in Ash’s sightline, releasing the last vestige of the perfume that had so intoxicated him when she’d first swept herself into his car that morning. “I mean exactly what I said,” she whispered. He managed to hold her gaze for .4 seconds. It was the look he’d seen her give boys on the dance floors of Memphis, lips parted, eyes promising all secrets revealed. “So now what do you think?”

“I think you should go for it,” he said, surprised he could speak at all.

The first phrase Ash had ever uttered, preceded by a sharp intake of breath, was “Big dogs!” He’d looked up in astonishment at his mother from her lap, pointing out the car window to the stand of trees where his grandfather’s fifteen newly acquired cattle grazed, as his father eased their old Pontiac through the pasture and parked in the shade. “Yes! Big dogs!” his mother had said, raising his arms and wiggling them in celebration. He gripped the dashboard and jumped up and down on the seat between her legs. “Big dogs, big dogs, big dogs!” he shouted. “Pet, pet, pet! Pet, pet, pet!”

He had no memory of this, but the story was told often, and it became part of the mythos of his childhood. A few years later, Albert named the first-born on his farm Ashlee. He towed his five-year-old grandson through the tall grass to where the calf

slept. The sun had just risen, and a band of gold streaked the far hillside beyond the pale blue shadows of the woods. “Pet him,” Albert whispered. “He’s yours.” Ash stretched his hand out and Albert leaned him forward. The calf woke with a start, staggered up on its spindly legs, and dashed off into the sunlight.

Ash never did pet the calf, or any of the other cattle. He proudly watched his namesake grow up, until it was no longer distinguishable from the herd. Though Ashlee the cow was now surely dead, tumbled down the steep bank of the creek or sold off and slaughtered or put down by his grandfather following some illness, Ash liked to pretend the fleet-footed calf was still around, grown into one of the stronger-looking, more robust members of the herd. Defying its human oppressors.

The cow Holly approached looked the part—fat, wild-eyed as if already in a state of terror or madness, standing with its legs wide apart, tail swishing angrily at a shifting nebula of flies. It seemed to stare precisely at Holly’s delicate sternum in the periphery of its vision.

Ash decided this cow was his namesake. It would flee again, or charge, and Holly would die. He would have to make up a better story. Her obituary would be too hilarious, too senseless, death by trampling here near the Fourth of July, the fireworks cancelled, the whole town in mourning, Ash’s doopy face on the news. All for a kiss. It would be grand that way, at least. All for love. She died for me, Ash would think, sprawled on the various beds of his lifetime, curtains drawn, bourbon at his bedside, half drained.

She reached out, touched the cow on its back haunch, and managed a single downward stroke before it batted her arm away with its tail and shuffled a few paces

toward the pond, where it worked its jaws on a mouthful of grass and stared into the distance.

Holly took a bow. “That, sir, is how it’s done.” She hopped back into the Mule. Ash let his hands fall from the wheel to his lap.

“So,” Ash said. “Yeah. That was pretty good.”

Holly stared at him, her face relaxed and open, slightly quizzical.

“What?” Ash said. He gripped the wheel again. Holly scooted across the seat until the length of her body was against his. She placed a hand on his leg. She leaned in and kissed him, her lips soft and warm. He could taste her glossy lip balm, medicinal, an aftertaste of lemon. He wanted to push through it, to her, to the true taste of her lips. He pressed harder, too hard, but she gently took his face in her hands and held him still. He could smell the fields on her, a sunny, scorched scent of sweat and grass. When he opened his eyes he saw her pink eyelid, lined in black, the eyelashes clasped in a delicate dark curve.

She pulled away and slid her hand down to his knee. “Nervous?” she asked.

He became aware again of his body, returning slowly as if from the bottom of the sea. Here was his heart, hammering; his blood, tingling. And his leg—what’s this? What’s happening here?—his leg bouncing around, sneaker tapping its merry way across the foot well. He almost reached out and grabbed it.

“No,” he said, blushing. “It jumps around like that when I’m happy. It’s a thing I have.”

“Well then. Let’s see if this makes it jump.”

She found his zipper with disconcerting precision. Her hand disappeared into his jeans. Faintly, an inner voice said “Relax.” But geezum, his penis was out now, so white, so sad-looking and dispirited in Holly’s grip. It flopped around miserably, as if disoriented. Holly closed her mouth around it. He’d been sweating all morning and wondered desperately if his crotch was as damp and foul as his armpit.

He had a dim sense of how it should feel, how it was supposed to be a gift, how so many boys would maim themselves for Holly Ross’s mouth to touch even their foreheads, but the pleasure wasn’t reaching him. Somehow he was cut off, watching Holly’s head bob, feeling only terror and a tenseness in every part of his body except the part he should now be most aware of.

Holly’s head grew still. She sat up and they each looked down for a moment at the little thing startled from its burrow. Ash placed a palm over it, unable to move any further. A grasshopper thumped against the plastic windshield. A white moth flew through the cab.

“What, exactly, just happened?” Holly said.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you not—do you—what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s fine,” he said brightly, and when she shook her head in disbelief and turned away from him, arms crossed, he tucked himself away and zipped up, the zipper ratcheting far too loudly back into place, and with too much finality.

“You don’t *want* me, Ash? You don’t *desire* me? You just want to *cuddle*, is that it? Are you just *so* sensitive and precious that you couldn’t do anything as indecent as get a hard-on? Is that it?”

He couldn't think of a thing to say. He couldn't look at her, the way her glowering presence filled the spaces between them.

"Do you not find me attractive?"

"It's not that. It's me, not you."

"Ha! That whole thing." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm not this easy, you know. I don't do this for just anybody."

"I feel special. I do. Maybe I just need Viagra."

"Oh God. I can't even look at you right now."

Mid-afternoon, the four of them went fishing off the dock at the pond, Ash and Holly perched on wooden stools, Albert and Lou sunk into faded plastic lawn chairs. They all wore wide-brimmed straw hats. Fishing was a fourth of July tradition that began when Ash was a child. But in those days, his father and mother had sat on the gnarled stools, along with Lou's petite, chain-smoking sisters and their rotating cache of boyfriends and ex-husbands, Albert's morose, widower brother, and various cousins or friends, some of which grew bored and accompanied Ash on his mission to peg catfish with dirt clods. He accepted the company, but was always glad when the interloper lost interest and rejoined the party on the dock. It was a wonder they ever caught anything up there, dancing to the radio, shouting, laughing at each other's jokes and stories, sending all those vibrations into the water through the wood. Ash liked to sit at the quiet banks on the other side of the pond, crumbling dirt in his fingers or shaping it into the perfect instrument of catfish destruction. He watched them, all those strange adults, and listened to their faint murmurs, the sudden pop of their laughter. Theirs was a world he couldn't

imagine ever wanting. Later they would fry what they pulled from the water. They would eat it on paper plates with coleslaw, cornbread, and green beans, picking around the bones, the plates balanced on laps as they sat in the grass of the yard or the tailgates of trucks, waiting for the Lane's Ferry fireworks to rise and explode above the woods, launched from the high school. Ash would eat too, and he too would raise his head with the rest of them to watch the show, but none of this was his in the way it was theirs. He didn't catch the fish, or plant or prepare the vegetables; his awe at the exploding sky was not the awe of patriotism or pyrotechnics, but simply of fire in the dark, like his beloved stars colored and detonated. There were whole measures of experience not meant for him. His parents lying close together on a blanket—that was not for him, that was only theirs, and he didn't want it then. He wanted only the things given him, and the only thing he sought was quiet. Those fireworks, that food, and after, a place in the woods that no one knew of, then his bed in a back room of that perpetually silent house. These simple things.

Now nothing was given, and he wouldn't know what to ask for anyway. Holly had decided on a nap before fishing. Ash gratefully left the house, though he knew she wouldn't sleep; she would lie there on the guest bed and blow up all her friends' phones with scandalous text messages. He'd spent an hour moping around the western ridge, where he sat for awhile in the hot shade of the woods at the edge of a steep drop-off. The spot overlooked Harness road and the full green and yellow fields of corn it cut through. This was one of the few places in West Tennessee where you could see for miles. Ash watched the old white church at the end of the road get older and more decrepit. It

seemed to sag before his eyes. A gunshot echoed across the fields. Those solitary hunters, full of power.

This land soothed him. He almost felt a part of something here, where his tiny, truncated family had begun.

A large brick house sat in town just off the square, with a deep porch and a stone fountain out front. Ash's father used to walk him by there when they went to pick up groceries or a prescription for Lou or Albert. They lingered on the sidewalk. David might comment on the new paint job the owners had decided on, or how the pecan tree had been pruned back too far. This was where he'd grown up. "This house," he'd sometimes say. "We should've come here." But he wasn't really talking to Ash.

David had been studying history in Memphis when his mother's heart failed. His father, already retired from a successful law practice, immediately arranged a move to Wyoming, where he said it was too cold and remote for people to worry over a widower. He'd offered the house to David and his fiancée, Evelyn, but the world then had seemed too full of possibility for David to return to his hometown, too big to merely conquer and claim the rooms of his childhood. They'd remained in Memphis, in the apartment they shared.

He told Ash once how he and Evelyn had spent hours together on the front porch swing, and how they used to walk around the square, sharing a bag of popcorn from the red and white machine at the pharmacy.

This was back when he still visited Lane's Ferry, for Ash's sake. Once Ash could drive, David made sure his son could find his way alone. Ash memorized the shortcuts from Memphis, the highway numbers and street names irrelevant, each turn with its own

landmark—left at the cotton field with the staved-in barn, right at the house with the green door, right again at Christmastime All The Time, with its peeling white paint, strings of lights, and desolate cracked parking lot.

The way took a long time to learn, and it amazed Ash that his father could devise a route so complicated and secret, weaving through little towns and long stretches of woods, across bridges spanning brown creeks, whose waters boys and old men had fished, then forgotten. His father spoke to him about the lost places in the country. There was a sycamore at the bend of a creek, he said, not far from the farm, with a tree house and a rope swing, where all his friends would gather to wrestle and sing pirate songs and tell lies. No one could remember how to get there now, as if it passed from the world entirely when memory was all anybody had left of it.

Evelyn was a lost place in that country. David no longer looked for her. Ash sometimes thought he caught a glimpse, a flash of color in a field, a wisp of smoke on the horizon. Was that a voice in the garden, or a bird?

Ash was part of this somehow, this land, this story, maybe a good part eventually. It was hard now to feel anything other than pity for the way the trip had turned out, but there was something heartening about sitting on that ridge, in the shifting rays of sun through the shade, watching that old white church fall more into itself, a fall as long as his memory. The earth was warm beneath him, the undergrowth of the woods a rich and humming tangle. Somewhere, cows stood in a pond. Somewhere, hunters watched the fields in silence. Somewhere, all the lost things waited.

#

Albert was telling Holly about the Ghost of Tom as they fished. Ash tuned most of it out, having heard plenty over the years about the wily spirit's antics. As a child Ash had ranged the hills with Albert, determined to find ol' Tom's liar, rumored to be cut into a towering eroded hillside called the East Mountain, 'where bones upon bones litter the ground and the trees have no leaves year-round,' according to the song that Albert sang in a high, clear voice on those rare days in autumn when the air made him feel young and wistful. His own father had sung the song to him when he was a boy.

"That ol' Tom. I saw him once, just once, but boy that's all I needed. Great big scary bastard. Sorry. Dude. That what you kids say now? Dude?"

Holly said, "You can cuss in front of me. *Dude.*" Her attitude was getting to Ash. She sat up straight on her stool, legs crossed and her fishing pole wedged between her thighs, forgotten. The bob had drifted below the dock, and when the others reeled in and recast, lines whizzing, she kept picking at her nails. Ash saw condescension in every gesture. Earlier, she'd gushed about Lou's painfully plain hoop earrings until even Lou looked at her sideways, suspicious she was being mocked.

"All right, dude," Albert said. He sat for a moment collecting his thoughts. He wasn't one for exuberance. (When Evelyn told him during a visit, seventeen years earlier, that she was pregnant with Ash, he'd famously said, "You came all the way out for that? Telephone broke?") The little excitement he'd just displayed concerning the family legend seemed to have embarrassed him. Ash, in his petulant funk, blamed Holly. She was on a role making men look like fools.

"So Tom scared the bejesus out of you or something?" Holly said. "Did he jump out of a closet?"

“No. Saw him out across the pasture.”

“What did he look like?”

“Oh, ‘bout what you’d expect for a ghost.”

“Tell it right, Grampy,” Lou said. “Say how big he was.”

“Big ‘un.”

“Eight feet,” said Lou. “Blue as ice at Christmas. Tell it right, Grampy.”

When it became apparent Albert was finished speaking, Ash said, “I used to have nightmares about the Ghost of Tom. Grampy said that on really hot nights he would come into the house for the air-conditioning.”

“He sat right down in the fridge,” Lou said, “and made the milk go bad.”

“I was scared of the fridge,” Ash said.

“He refused to eat my pumpkin pie once,” Lou said. “Said it tasted too ghosty!”

Holly laughed. Ash said, “I was convinced Tom had been sitting on it. It did look like it would be comfortable.” He decided this story made him seem too precious, so he said, “I, uh, killed a squirrel once, with a slingshot, and cooked it myself over a fire.”

Lou eyed him uncertainly. “Why on earth . . .”

“Because I thought all the food in the house was contaminated by Tom. Sitting on things, maybe licking them.”

Holly didn’t seem to be paying attention anymore. She was texting. Maybe he should say he’d been shirtless. Maybe he should’ve spent the past few years working out so that if he said he’d been shirtless it would conjure an image of an least one well-toned muscle.

After an hour, they'd caught four catfish. Albert stood and used an old coffee tin to scoop fish food out of a plastic trash can. He let Holly toss the brown pellets into the pond, and the fish rose to the surface, pale brown and gray, mouths agape to receive food and fishing lures. Soon, the cooler on the dock held nine fish. Ash caught two. Holly hadn't caught any. She stared into the cooler and Ash followed her gaze. He saw among the ice cubes the gills open and close, open and close, and he turned away.

"They look like scared little kids," Holly said. She whispered to Ash, "I don't want to eat them. I've never seen my food alive before."

"You have to eat them," he whispered back. "It's what we've always done." He felt very smug and sure and cruel about this. She would eat his family's catfish and she would like it.

"I don't care what you've always done."

"Yoo-hoo! Love birds! What are you two whispering about over there?" Lou was standing over Albert and helping him peel off his T-shirt, under which he wore a skimpy, yellowed tank top. She had been fussing about how for all the capabilities he retained in his golden years, he simply couldn't take off a sweaty shirt by himself.

"We're talking about how delicious and un-terrified these fish look," Holly said.

"They do look terrific, don't they? They'll fry up good."

"Oooh, Mr. Mosey," Holly said, "you are so fine."

Albert sprang from his chair and flexed. His white chest and upper arms glared in the sun, but they drooped only slightly. The last traces of the pride of his youth were still evident in the shrunken twin knobs on each bicep. A ten pound dumbbell sat underneath

his bed, the last of a great, lost collection. “I still got it,” he said. “In ‘Nam, they called me ‘Knots.’”

“You always did put knots in my heart,” Lou said, taking his arm in two hands and fluttering her eyelashes.

Ash sent Holly a text. *Please stop patronizing my family.* He gathered up the poles in one arm. Albert insisted on hefting the cooler. The two of them would go to the shop to fry the fish while Lou and Holly prepared the vegetables in the kitchen.

Holly responded, *Please google ‘erection.’*

The four of them took the dirt path back to the house in silence. The shade of the woods offered no respite from the heat, the air thick and soupy and swarming with gnats and mosquitoes. Ash felt wet all over. He looked over at Holly, walking next to him. Her hair was limp and windblown, her face red and sweat-covered. She fanned herself with the straw hat Lou had given her.

He sent, *Just be nice, ok?*

She responded, *Sorry if I don’t know how to talk to hicks.*

He wrote that her hair looked terrible, but he didn’t hit send. It was too exhausting to hit send. It all seemed so insignificant, everything, the catfish, the cows, the fireworks, his sad, sweaty failure of a penis. Actually, that was the one thing that felt important. Actually, it all felt important. He just couldn’t figure any of it out.

As Albert skinned the fish and cut the fillets, Ash rinsed the meat in a lukewarm stream of water from the industrial sink in the shop. After drying them he let the fillets soak in a pie plate full of milk before rolling them in another pie plate of cornmeal and

dropping them with a hiss into the deep fryer. They worked in silence, as always, facing away from each other. Ash didn't like to watch his grandfather pull the fish apart. They had nothing to say to each other anyway.

When they had two heaps of golden fillets, Albert said, "Well, I believe that'll get you full, you reckon?" and they each stared at the plates, thinking how ten years ago there would have been enough people around to eat all that food.

Albert instructed Ash to take the plates to the house so Lou could keep the fish warm and crisp in the oven, while he put away the fryer and wrapped up the remains in a trash bag to store in the freezer. Ash had to kick the kitchen door to be let in, and of course Holly opened it for him. "For the oven," Ash said, trying to make it sound sexy, and she took the plates without a word. Lou stood at the sink washing her hands. She said, "My word, Ashlee, did you make all those yourself?"

"Of course. Grampy was no help at all." He stood in the doorway while Lou rummaged for something to put the fish on and Holly stood with the plates in her arms, staring at the ceiling. Late sunlight filled the kitchen. The air smelled of cornbread and butter. "Ok, then," he said and stepped outside.

He wandered back to the shop, where he found Albert rummaging through the detritus on one of his worktables. "Look here, Ashlee, I found something for you the other day. It's here somewhere." Albert pawed through trowels, wrenches, bolts, brackets, screws, yellowed documents, ticket stubs, failed woodworking experiments, old hats and boots, dried mud, crispy wasps, spider webs, and maybe a cat corpse or two (he kept food out for strays, who crawled off to die in inconvenient places after a clash with the coyotes) until he found what he was looking for. "They're my old sunglasses. I had

these in ‘Nam.” He handed over a pair of gold aviators, the arms sheathed in fat rubber, rust in the metal rims. The lenses were covered in grime, but Ash could see his reflection there, small and warped. “You take them,” his grandfather said. “Clean them up a little. You can tell your friends your granddaddy wore those in the war.”

“Thanks,” Ash said, already sad that he would never wear them. But he was touched. His grandfather, never one to bequeath, had given him something.

“Here, let me clean them up for you.” He took the glasses back and wiped the lenses with his shirttail. “I was wearing these the first time I asked your Grandma Lou on a date, you know, a few months before I shipped out. They were brand new. Made me feel like a war hero, wearin’ ‘em. Lou-Lou was a knock-out. Still is. We were at a church picnic and I felt like a big man. Just up and got the notion in my head suddenly to ask her to take a drive with me. Never did regret it.” He inspected his work, holding up the glasses as if a beam of sunlight sliced across the dim air of the shop, and he handed them to Ash. “You think Holly will like them on you?”

Ash tried to smile. “I don’t know. How do I look?” He put them on, and his grandfather nearly disappeared from sight. They were a roomy fit, the arms sitting atop his ears, the pads of the bridge sliding down his nose. He felt inadequate and petty beside the idea of his grandfather young and in love, on the brink of real conflict. He had never heard the story before, never considered there was a story to hear. Grampy and Grandma Lou had never been young, and they had never felt longing or new love.

“You look like your mamma,” Albert said. “She used to wear those. When she was a girl.”

Ash pushed the glasses up his nose and followed the ghostly shape of his grandfather through the shop. They stepped out into the heat, which rose from the orange gravel of the path even at dusk. The sky was dark in the east, pink in the west, where later the fireworks show would start. Soon stars would cover the farm. Ash remembered trying to learn their names one night, years ago, hunched beside the tent on a camping expedition with his grandfather out on the ridges, shining a flashlight on a map of the sky. His grandfather had rolled out of the tent and said, "You're looking in the wrong place," and he took the map and folded it into his shirt pocket and lay on his back, instructing Ash to do the same. "Don't think about what they are," he said.

Ash had forgotten all about that night until now. The memory cut cleanly through the ugliness of the incident with Holly. It was so clear and physical he felt he could hold it in his hands.

"Grampy," he said. "What made you think of these sunglasses?" They had almost arrived at the house. He could see Holly and Grandma Lou through the kitchen window, setting the table with plates and dishes of food. Wearing the sunglasses made them look to Ash like figures glowing on a movie screen. Holly was a projection from another life. He could let her go, if only she stayed so remote.

His grandfather said, "I didn't. I'd forgotten them. But I think of that church picnic all the time."

"What did it feel like back then, to be with Grandma Lou?"

"Can't say a lot's changed."

They had stopped on the back walkway. Grampy peered into the kitchen, where Lou stood surveying the table, smiling at whatever Holly was saying as Holly set down a

glass of ice at each chair. The table was small. It was so far from the sprawling backyard feasts of previous years, yet Grandma Lou stood as if over a valley.

Chapter Eleven

Eddie met Libby on the second night of his family's visit to New Canaan for the 4th of July. It was nearly nine before he escaped Aunt Sandy's house on the 3rd, after a dispiriting spaghetti dinner in which Charlie had unleashed a hellish but much-lauded harmonica solo, and in which his aunt had catalogued her many ailments and grievances, focusing mainly on her grim trek through menopause and the lack of respect she garnered as a sales lead in the Home and Garden section of Wal-Mart.

The screen door banged behind him, and the dry summer scent of hayfields quickly overpowered a lingering whiff of tomato and garlic. The faded white afternoon sky had softened and sunk to the horizon, revealing the infinite black universe overhead. Eddie sucked in the fragrant air and crossed the highway, pounding the pavement with satisfaction, and then walked along a barbed wire fence until he found a section whose bottom strand had snapped. He crawled under and moved along the rows of soybeans to the far tree line, where he encountered another fence, on the other side of which a pasture shone white-blue in the last glow of daylight. He managed to hoist himself over the top wire using a low-hanging branch.

His neighborhood in Memphis was as still and lifeless as a museum piece. The night was different here, full of movement, a sense of rivers in the dark. He'd never really been anywhere, had only been back to New Canaan twice, but standing in the long empty fields, he could believe in faraway places.

Across the pasture, orange streaks of light swept the darkness, tiny pops rang out, followed by shouts and laughter; red and green sparks flared low in the air or in the

grass. Though he'd never participated in one, Eddie would know a bottle rocket war from outer space. He jogged toward the action.

Five people were crouched behind two large rolls of hay, backs to Eddie, firing across the field at their adversaries. A thin veil of smoke hung over the area. In the heavy reek of sulfur Eddie caught the phantom scent of a hundred rockets and multicolored spinners from years past, launched in solitude or under the careful gaze of his father, or of Ash.

One of the figures had shoulder length blonde hair. A beacon. Eddie ran into the fray, lunged toward the blonde girl, and rolled to a stop against her leg.

"What the hell is this?" she said, leaning close to examine his face, as if he were some strange object she'd found in the grass. Eddie couldn't see her in the dark, with her lank hair hanging down and brushing his cheeks, but he got the impression of broad, rounded features, of blue pockets beneath her eyes, of mint and cigarettes on her breath.

"I've come to your aid," he said.

She laughed and pulled back. A rocket landed next to Eddie, hissing, sputtering sparks. He grabbed the red stem and hurled it into the air, where it exploded and showered its clutch of stars around the girl's head.

"Hot damn," the guy next to her said. "Who's this guy?"

"This guy's Aragorn. He's come to our aid."

They had a paper sack between them, bristling with rockets. Scattered on the ground were several unlabeled brown bottles and blackened bits of cardboard from spent cones. Poised at the edge of the hay bale, they lit the rockets with long red butane lighters, held them in a leather-gloved hand until the fuses burned to nothing, stuck out

their arms, and released. The rockets shot forward. Eddie was impressed with the timing, with the lack of concern for the sparks, with the whole notion of launching explosives at your friends. Not dreaming it, but doing it.

“I’ll keep them lit for you,” he said.

He sat between them, happy to be of use, and provided a steady stream of ignited ordnance until the girl dumped half the contents of the sack, hefted it and grabbed his arm. “Come with me,” she said to Eddie. “Flanking maneuvers.”

They managed to escape without being seen. From their dark outpost behind a fallen tree, crouched within its dead crown of tangled branches, and with the vast night rolled out behind them, quiet with insects and wind, the battle seemed much diminished, as quickly receding from memory as the last vestiges of a dream. The girl was here next to him, real, right here, breathing heavily. She rose to peek through the limbs and in the moonlight Eddie could see her fully. She wore all black, a large T-shirt and baggy jeans full of zippers. Her mouth was a frightening black gash—black lipstick, he realized. A diamond stud in her nose threw white light. She turned to look down at him, and he froze, caught staring. Her eyes seemed naked and wild above those dark, dark lips.

“We’re gonna make a bomb,” she said, and from those wild eyes came the electric desire, through some cable or current feeding Eddie’s heart, to destroy whole cities.

The battle had shifted to the base of a small hill. Eddie and the girl circled the base and ascended its backside. They lay flat in the grass. Eddie blinked through the sweat dripping into his eyes as the girl pointed out the enemy, all five of them clustered behind what appeared to be a broken cattle trailer, wide open to attack from this vantage

point, but completely shielded from the other team, whose rockets bounced off the trailer or exploded underneath it with impotent metallic pops.

“I’m about to make you a hero, Aragorn.”

She told him her plan, and when his mission was clear, he scooted down the hill with the bag of fireworks in his arms and the lighter in his pocket. He went unnoticed by the group until he plopped the bag down in their midst, at which time he explained against their cries that he was from out of town and wanted to join their team. They didn’t question him, and seemed impressed by the fresh ammo. One guy patted him on the back and handed him a flask, which Eddie immediately forgot he was clutching. This group was all male, older guys. A lot of scraggly beards glowed red in the brief flare of spark-light.

He dropped the flask and picked up the sack again, as if he were going to make the rounds, refilling their supplies, but he only handed out one bundle of rockets before retreating a few steps. He dropped the sack, then knelt between it and the group, and used the long butane lighter to set it on fire. He worked his way around, setting small patches ablaze, the brown paper searing black and peeling into itself. When he had a little fire before him, he sat in front of it, the heat pulsing against his back as he faced the group again, blocking their view in case they looked his way. But there was no hiding the curling smoke in the bright moonlight, and when one of the guys glanced back he did a double take.

“The grass was on fire,” Eddie told him. “I had to sit on it.”

“Jesus,” the guy said.

The first few rockets exploded inside the bag. Eddie leapt to his feet and ran back up the hill unscathed as the rest of the bag went off, popping and shrieking, missiles flying in all directions. He didn't see the girl as she smashed into him, and they tumbled partway down the hill together, laughing. Eddie's whole body hurt from laughter. He couldn't see through his tears but he could hear joyous shouts somewhere below him. He wiped his eyes and saw dark figures orbiting the red core he'd created. The world smelled of grass and fire and sweat, and his arm was pinned beneath the girl's large, soft body as she laughed at the sky here at the outskirts of that bright center. He'd caused this, all this, he'd created a world with fire, and he stood shaking, pulling the girl with him, ready to careen back into it.

She followed him. They ran through the field and leapt over the exploding bag, sparks nicking Eddie's legs, hot and shocking, a thrill in the brief moment they lived against his skin. Soon, others followed suit. Their shadows fled long and jagged across the grass and over the hay bales. The battle had ended in this celebration. The flask found its way back to Eddie, and he drank deeply, and looked for the girl. There she was leaping through the air as a rocket exploded at her feet, white teeth flashing behind those black lips, hair hanging in greasy strands. Eddie ran to her with the flask, holding it high, and she drank deeply from it as well.

When the night settled down, and after someone had stomped the fire to embers, Eddie learned her name: Libby. He tried to smoke a cigarette with her, but he had a coughing fit. His heart wouldn't stop pounding. He talked for two minutes straight about organizing a league for bottle rocket wars.

Libby laughed and told him to relax. "I know just the thing," she said.

She gathered the group and they set off. As they crossed the field, Eddie told a made-up tale about the time he set off a string of firecrackers in the school cafeteria, which everyone seemed impressed by, and which led to other tales of delinquency. One guy with a shaved head and close-set eyes told Eddie of the night he'd gotten high and slipped into a stranger's house through a window, crept into the bedroom, shook awake the sleeping figures there, and shouted, "I'm gonna kill you now, okay?" He ran from the room but got lost. He stumbled around in the dark, laughing, a man's voice shouting, "I'm getting my gun, I've got my gun, I have a gun, I'll shoot," and a woman's voice shouting, "Where's my phone? Jim, where's the phone?" Eventually the guy found the front door and escaped. The next day he put a note in the mailbox that said I keep my promises.

"That's awesome," Eddie said, terrified.

They hopped a gate in a gravel drive where a few cars were parked. Eddie sat on the flat hood of an old Cadillac and leaned against the windshield next to Libby, who produced from one of her many zippered pockets a baggie of weed and a blue and purple pipe. Eddie watched carefully as she took a hit, and when she passed the pipe to him, he managed to imitate her competently enough, and to suppress a cough despite the itch in his throat.

When he tried to talk to her, she said, "Shh. No speaky."

Gradually the others grew quiet, nothing but shadows under the cover of trees, soft yellow flames from lighters, bobbing orange cigarette flares. The cicadas in the woods warbled, in and out, and the wind shook language from the treetops that seemed in

some way urgent, inevitable. Eddie scooted as close as he dared to Libby, then closed his eyes and listened.

The next evening, during the Chip Hunt Chevrolet Fireworks Extravaganza, he met Libby as planned under the bleachers at the ragged baseball field behind the Methodist church, at the edge of New Canaan's only park. His family had arrived late, as the last traces of sunlight caught in the trees, and so had to set up their blankets near the gazebo, where a portion of the high school band blasted "The Stars and Stripes Forever" so loudly that he was able to escape with only a sarcastic salute.

Libby sat on the concrete beneath the bleachers in the same black zippered jeans from the night before, but tonight she wore a bright, solid red T-shirt and no lipstick, no nose ring, her hair pulled into two tight braids. She was smoking a cigarette and sharing a giant Pixy Stix with her cousin Nick, a sleepy-eyed boy who had dirt caked in the Kool-Aid stains on his face.

"Little Nicky here made us a small fortune," she said, pulling a brown leather wallet from one of her pockets. "Stolen right out of the pocket of . . ." she flipped it open and squinted at the I.D. "Mr. Bill Hendricks. Forty-one dollars and a Subway card. Holy shite. He kind of looks like you, Aragorn."

"It's Eddie."

"Ugh. Blah. Why'd you have to tell me that? I wanted to call you Aragorn."

"You still can."

"It's different now. Now you're just some normal guy with a boring past and dreams and shit. Look at this." She got up and showed him Bill Hendricks's driver's

license. Bill had a round face with very little discernible chin or neck, and a high wispy hairline. “This is your future. Obesity and mortgage payments. You could’ve been heir to the throne of men.”

“Well, I’m not Bill. I’m Eddie.” He grabbed at the wallet but she pulled it back. He had whispered her name all day. Libby, Libby.

“I’m gonna call you Bill,” she said. “I’m gonna call you Bill until I stop seeing you as a Bill.”

“What do you want me to do? Blow something up again?”

“Has to be something new.”

With the money in her pocket, she tossed the wallet aside. Eddie kicked into further into the drifts of paper cups and popcorn bags.

“Where’d he steal that thing from, anyway?”

“He’s a good climber.” She cocked a thumb toward the clattering bleachers. “A lot of butts and purses up there.” She turned to Nick, who sat stirring a pile of dirt with his finger. “But now we’ve spent *all* that money on this one super expensive tube of sugar. Uh-oh. Guess it’s time to go back to Uncle Joe.”

“Nuh-uh. We didn’t spend none of it!” he said.

Libby gave him a dollar and tried to explain the concept of hush money as she led him by the hand out into the field. Eddie followed, stealing glances at her face, shocked by its plainness in the failing daylight, by the livid pockets under her eyes against her pale skin. She stared straight ahead, weaving around columns of lawn chairs and families spread out on blankets across left field, ignoring the playing children who trailed bands of smoke from their sparklers. Her hurried stride and downturned mouth seemed to render

the whole idea of family fun ridiculous. By the time they reached their destination—a group of cackling women in chairs and leering men standing with cans of beer—Eddie knew the night would end in some spectacular act of mayhem.

The women were her mother and her aunt, the men her uncle, step-father and step-brother. The men were tall and grizzled, with impressive stomachs bulging over narrow hips, except for the step-brother, James, who was lean, gangly and clean-shaven, wearing loafers, the kind of guy Eddie always associated with golf and vegetables.

Before Libby could say anything, Eddie stepped forward and introduced himself, wanting to make an impression. He said, “I’m Eddie, not Bill,” before realizing they wouldn’t get it, and started to wave before realizing it was unnecessary, so that he ended up twirling his hands in the air and hoping it was too dark for them to see.

“Ignore him,” Libby said. “We’re gonna go walk around some.”

“Sure, ok,” her step-father said. “What does that mean, walk around some?”

“It means stepping on the ground in a way that moves you places.”

“Why don’t you stay here with us?” her mother said, in a tone that implied she didn’t care one way or the other. She had a rasping smoker’s voice, thick bangs across her eyebrows, and loose brown skin, as if recently she’d lost a lot of weight. She didn’t look much like Libby.

Eddie felt suddenly protective. He could see that it was imperative to get away from these people, that Libby was like him, a stranger here.

“I don’t think so. I could use the exercise, right Mom?”

“Your mother loves you,” the aunt said.

“What I want to know is what walking around some really means,” her step-father said, to which James answered, “It’s lingo for sniffing out drugs.”

“It’s lingo for getting me the hell away from here.”

She walked off into the field at a faster pace than before, and as Eddie turned to follow, her step-father said, “James, why don’t you go hang out with your sister.”

“Step sister!” she called.

Eddie hurried after her. James followed half-heartedly for awhile and then wandered off when Libby left the park. She crossed Cleveland St. and entered one of New Canaan’s newer neighborhoods, full of frail freshly planted trees and houses that stood barely an arm span apart. The yards and driveways were full of people waiting for the fireworks.

It was difficult for Eddie to remain quiet, breathless as he was trying to keep up with her. She seemed to be brooding, and while the emotional states of others rarely gave him pause, he sensed a fragile connection being forged between them as they moved briskly away from the revelers, exiling themselves willingly from all that noise, a connection that with the wrong word could snap.

When he couldn’t stand it any longer, though, he said, “So where are we going? Are you gonna murder me?”

They had turned down a dark dust covered street, which led through an unfinished part of the neighborhood. Houses loomed skeletal behind yards full of boards and sawhorses. White PVC poked out of empty lots.

“I’m taking you to the real fireworks show,” she said.

He felt emboldened by the implicit kindness in this statement—I'm taking you somewhere special, friend and future lover—and decided it was safe to start talking.

“Is it another war?”

“Not really. Just a bunch of metal heads blowing stuff up.”

“Will there be Satan worship? Am I the sacrifice?”

“Nobody worships Satan anymore. Too much work.”

“Are you a wiccan?”

“Dude. Chill with the questions.”

“What do you believe in, though?”

“The internet.”

“You know what's interesting? Matter can't be destroyed. It all goes somewhere else.”

“Fascinating.”

“What I'm saying is, what if that's true about other stuff? Like souls and memories.”

“Then that would suck for you, because what my memory of tonight will be so far is a funny little guy named Bill talking about everlasting souls. And then probably going on to crystal magic. And anyway, memories are destroyed all the time.”

“Maybe they just go somewhere else.”

“Do they go to heaven, Bill?”

“Are you a happy person?”

“So happy.”

“Me neither.”

They walked in silence for a block. Behind them, a faint cheer went up as a red, white, and blue flower bloomed in the sky. They turned to watch the beginning of the show. Eddie snuck a glimpse at Libby, at her large forehead and flat, broad nose. She looked grim and unforgiving and powerful. He wanted to unwrap her, and she him.

“So,” he said, “your family seems nice.”

“They’re a barrel of fun.” They watched the sky. Eddie waited. Finally, she said, “My mom’s all righteous right now about everybody losing weight. Not that she accomplished anything at all herself, except using my stepdad’s money for a bunch of surgeries. She looks like a raisin.”

“Your stepdad looks like dick. He thinks you’re a druggie.”

“No shit. He’s right about that, though.”

He wanted to tell her something true about himself. He slipped his hand into his pocket and touched the folded photograph of Benjamin. His dark brother, who in death could be everywhere, who in death surely knew more than Eddie. Benjamin hadn’t spoken, not yet, but Eddie could feel him in some far corner, a presence, an intake of breath.

“My mother can’t stand the sight of me,” he said.

But all she said in return was, “Welcome to the club.”

Her friends had set up camp in one of the house frames, from which issued a sternum-kicking assault of death metal. Two construction tables in one of the front rooms were piled with brightly-colored artillery, and a steady stream of gaunt young men dressed in black or ironic pink carted armfuls out to the street, where they lit fuses and set

rockets loose in every direction but up. A fire burned in the shell of an aluminum grill, fed by gasoline from a red jug. Two spike-haired girls tossed in smoke bombs and M-90s, and soon they were wraiths in blue and green billows. The guy with the jug poured gasoline designs into the street and set them alight. Somebody yelled over the music, “Hail Satan!” to general laughter, and several others took up the cry.

Eddie wanted go back out there (walking up, he’d nearly been hit in the face by a sizzling rocket and wanted to allow the universe another crack at it), but Libby led him upstairs, clutching a plastic ring that still held five beers. The first two rooms they came to were full of people drinking and smoking and making out. Eddie glimpsed someone hanging from a beam like a bat. They continued down the sawdust hall, which rumbled with muted music, moonlight shining brightly through the beams of the roof between scuds of clouds. The far corner of the house was relatively empty. They perched on the edge of the floor and watched the street below, where someone had hauled out an old, bulky big-screen TV that a chubby guy with glasses hacked at with an ax. Away to the left, the Chip Hunt Chevrolet Fireworks Extravaganza still lit the sky.

Libby handed him a beer, then pulled from one of her pockets a baggie and a pipe. She had hardly spoken to anyone. Eddie was thrilled she wanted to spend time with him alone, but he couldn’t help asking why she wasn’t hanging out with her friends.

“It’s bullshit,” she said.

“What is?”

“You know what relationships are about?” She took a hit from the pipe, passed it to him, and leaned back, holding the smoke in. Eddie watched her, impressed, until at

last she exhaled. “Wanting something,” she said. “And taking it. It’s easier not to bother.”

“But don’t you want things?” He was finding it easier to hold in his coughs. He passed back the pipe and relished the tingling in his lungs.

“I can get everything I want from myself.”

“Hallelujah, amen.”

They sat in silence for awhile. Everything I want can come from me, Eddie thought. It sounded so appealing. Halfway through his second beer, he said, “But how do you know what you want?”

“The key is to not want much.”

Not want much? How impossible. Every single day, every single night exploded with desire. How could he not want much? Everywhere was the soft skin of women, the sweep of laundered dresses, the orchard scent of perfume and shampoo. And their eyes—God! If their eyes would only look at him, really look, and tell him something about himself, something that could never come from his own heart. And damn it, this wasn’t only about lust. If he could just put his head down somewhere, that would be enough, a shoulder, a lap, a chest—he’d never felt a girl breathing. But forget girls. Wipe them off the face of the Earth and still there is wanting, wanting without end, without focus. The desire to tear everything down, the desire to rebuild what’s already torn. His whole life an if and never a when. If he could talk to Ash. If Ash wouldn’t make him feel so small. If he could be for his parents what Charlie was, if his mother could see beyond what he had ruined for her. If he could understand what it was he had ruined.

“I want to destroy my desires,” he said.

“You talk like you’re in a soap opera.”

“No. Stop it. I’m sick of people giving me shit for what I say.”

“Fine. You want to destroy your desires. That in no way resembles melodrama.”

“How is it that you don’t want much?”

“I don’t think you should destroy your desires. Good for you, that you have them.”

“I wish I didn’t.”

Libby stretched out on the floor. Her shirt rode up slightly, revealing the dimple of her belly button.

“This is gonna sound stupid,” Eddie said.

“Try me.”

“Can I lay down with you?”

She held out her arms. With his head on her chest, he could hear the wet thump of her heart. He’d never actually heard a heartbeat before, a disconcerting sound. Someone else’s life.

At length she whispered, as if from the drifts of sleep, “Where are you from?” Eddie himself had been on the verge of a doze, dreaming of bobbing through the swells of an ocean, where Libby was on the wind, her smell of sweat, sugar, and unscented deodorant.

“Here,” he said. “I’m from here but I barely remember it.”

“Is that why you want memories to last forever?”

“I don’t know. I would like to remember my brother. He died when he was a baby.”

“Oh. Oh! Are you that kid?” She sounded more awake now.

“What kid?”

“Never mind.”

Eddie sat up. Dark blots filled his eyes from the blood rush to his head.

Something loud and concussive exploded below, then again, and again. “Tell me.”

“There was just some kid. My friend’s mom used to babysit. Everybody was talking about it.”

“Talking about what?”

“Just that somebody’s baby died.”

“Tell me the truth.”

He grabbed her arm, but she pulled free, and as she stood his grasp found one of the pockets on her jeans. She gazed down at him, her expression a startling mix of sorrow and fear, the way she might have looked as a child, before her anger. “Please,” she said. “Don’t make me.”

“I’ll never leave you alone.”

She yanked her leg and he lost his grip. She ran for the stairs and he ran after her, down into the barrage of music, onto the street. The TV was on fire from the inside. Through the broken-out screen several people were tossing professional grade shells, which exploded with tremendous force and spewed colored flares across the crowd for several yards. Libby ran too close and covered her face when another shell went off. In the confusion, Eddie managed to grab her and steer her to the far side of a large pile of scrap board. He asked if she was ok, and she told him to leave.

“Get out of here,” she said. “I don’t want to do any of this. I don’t care about your sad-sack childhood. I just want to get high.”

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” He realized he’d been shaking. He released her but she didn’t run.

“Let’s just forget everything.” She put her hands on his shoulders. “Forget all about Bill. Forget Eddie. You’re Aragorn, remember?”

He couldn’t look at her, ashamed that he was crying. “Just tell me,” he whispered.

Chapter Twelve

The week after his disastrous trip to Lane's Ferry, Ash sat on the bedroom floor and strummed his guitar. His fingers ached and peeled, but still the D chord wouldn't sing. He hadn't realized the life of a rock star started so quietly. When he'd bought the guitar, he'd half-expected it to come with a roll of condoms and a bandana.

He was about to quit for the night when he looked up and saw Chelsa standing in his doorway. She had been by the house earlier for her weekly cleaning session, and as usual, Ash had gone into hiding. Her presence now, at nearly 10 o'clock, standing there and peering into his room, where he sat among piles of papers and dirty clothes, where she had never before set foot, where her shorts and plaid shirt seemed as foreign as a sari or spacesuit would've been—her presence made him angry and afraid and excited. He could hardly breathe.

She clung to the doorframe. "I'm sorry," she said. "I had to come back. I lost an earring."

"Oh," he said, too loudly.

"I heard you playing. Don't stop because of me."

"Ok." It was something to do. Even though he didn't actually know how to do it. But in that moment he was confident that Dave Matthews had nothing on him. He pressed hard into the fret board, strummed the D chord. Rattles and thumps. He adjusted the guitar on his lap, fiddled minutely with the pegs, strummed. Rattles and thumps. She came into the room and sat on the floor in front of him. "This will be your new favorite song," he said, and strummed. Rattles and thumps. He kept at it, strumming up and down, hoping to redeem with passion what he lacked in skill, and then, just as a few

clean, bright notes surfaced from his labor, she leaned in across the guitar and kissed him. He played on. The D chord sang through his aching fingers. His strumming tapered to a single slowing note, the root note, D, the pick pinging off the string and their lips parting and joining again wetly in the quiet room.

Chelsa pulled the guitar from his grasp and leaned it against the bed. They wrapped their arms around each other, hands beneath shirts.

“My dad,” Ash whispered.

She sat back and blushed, straightening her clothes, running her hands along the buttons. “Oh, yeah, totally. I should get home, anyway. I’m sorry.”

“Meet me at the Electric Light Grill.”

She grinned, revealing her silver braces, then giggled, putting her hand over her mouth. “Sorry.” At the doorway she turned just before disappearing into the hall and said, “Hey, guess what?”

“What?”

“I don’t have pierced ears.”

This rooftop had been his sanctuary, a singular world where only he existed. He trembled, terrified and aroused by the certainty that Chelsa would transform it into a new place. She stood in it now, looking up through the trees—his trees—as if she understood what it meant to be here.

They laid down on the gravelly surface.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“I’ll guide you.” As if he had a clue. But he felt capable of anything. She gave him that.

After, they dressed quickly. It had been awkward, uncomfortable, painful, thrilling. It’d happened so fast, a blur. He’d come off to the side, shouting in staccato grunts, unsure whether to take himself in hand. He hadn’t even had time to break a sweat, and now his skin was hot and prickly all over.

He couldn’t look at her, or speak, laying there next to her, but as the minutes passed, so did his embarrassment. It was a clear night and the stars were bright when the wind blew gaps between the overhanging branches. Thunder rumbled, far off over Mississippi or Arkansas. Summer pulsed around them, and a car swished by on the street, as remote a sound as ever.

Two months ago, he had sat on top of the slide in Straub Park, full of nameless hope. Maybe he would never find a name for it, but he felt it now on the tip of his tongue.

Chelsa leaned her head against his shoulder and said, “Life feels like forever, doesn’t it? It’s corny, but it feels so . . . *there*. Especially now. Like something that could never end. But I’m talking to someone right now who will die. You, Ash Jenkins, will have a heart attack or get cancer or something. Or get murdered.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“The simplest things seem like miracles, right? I mean, it’s kind of a miracle that one day you’ll die of a heart attack or a broken heart or an ancient heart. Feel your heart right now in your chest. Does it feel like something that would ever stop?”

It wasn’t difficult for him to imagine.

“When my mom died, I didn’t really understand it,” he said. “I thought she’d just gone someplace else and would come back. As herself, but like a spirit, too. I did a séance and everything, trying to summon her.”

“And?”

“Didn’t happen.”

“Bummer.”

“I guess I never really got over it. I’m always expecting things to disappoint me.”

The truth of this surprised him. And another truth: he’d never stopped summoning. He’d felt something of his mother that night, hadn’t he? Just as he’d felt her in the things she had touched, in the smells he associated with her—he’d felt her for weeks after her accident, before she’d faded. But it seemed now the séance had been merely the beginning, the search ongoing, much broader and much less defined than a final glimpse of the dead.

“Did I disappoint you?” she asked.

“No. No. I feel like I disappointed you, though.”

“You didn’t.”

“I’ve never felt more relaxed. I feel like I’ve never used my body before.”

She kissed his ear.

When eventually he checked his phone for the time, he saw that he had six missed calls from Eddie, which he hadn’t heard or felt because he kept his phone on silent, annoyed with ringtones and vibrations. Before he could slip the phone back into his pocket, it lit up. Eddie again. He took the call on the other side of the roof.

“Ashlee!” he shouted. It sounded like he was at a rave in a wind tunnel. “Ashlee Jenkins! I’m drunk!”

“I can tell. Where are you?”

“New Canaan!”

“Explain.”

Chelsa had been watching him. When he hung up, she said, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, exactly. I think I need to take a road trip.”

Chapter Thirteen

The house in New Canaan where Eddie had been staying for the past four days belonged to a big pot-bellied atheist named Isaac, who lived off an inheritance from his dead parents. The house was gray brick, long and low to the ground, with large eaves that gave it a hooded aspect from where it sat in the declivity of two wooded hills off the highway. Eddie had taken one look at it and known here was a place that could swallow him. He welcomed it.

There was one other boarder. Rip was an old man who sometimes claimed to be Isaac's grandfather, which his alleged grandson would neither confirm nor deny. He also said he was a modern day Rip Van Winkle, and asked a lot of questions about the 90s. It was generally assumed that the 90s slipped past him while he was exploring new planes of being. He said he was clean ten years, and sat in a rocker on the porch during parties drinking sugar-free red bull. His collection of wool and synthetic wigs, worn at raffish angles, and lending his room an acrid, throat-closing odor, was legendary among the legions of people that came through the house.

Eddie slept in a room full of mattresses, which filled up late at night and emptied out in mid afternoon, a constant cycle. He lived out of a bag of clothes on the floor of the otherwise empty closet, and hadn't been fully sober since his arrival, when Libby had picked him up from his aunt's house near midnight and proffered the requested bottle of whiskey. He'd grown a taste for the stuff after stealing a fifth from a liquor store in Memphis and being chased down the block by the proprietor. Its smoky taste and its burn were enhanced by the notion that police were prowling the street in search of the bandit who stole it.

On the 4th of July, he'd slept at the apartment of one of Libby's older friends. He'd collapsed fully clothed on the fold-out couch with Libby and awoken with her legs thrown across his lap. That day he convinced his parents he wanted to stay with Aunt Sandra another week, and that night, after spending ten hours under the covers in the guest room, and after leaving a note for his aunt saying he'd be staying with a friend, Libby had whisked him away in her old Camry to Isaac's place.

"You won't have a minute to think," she'd said, and she was right.

Isaac always had drugs and alcohol and company to consume them with. He was tall and oafish, with a high bald forehead and a tangled mass of black hair down his back, eyes that were small and close together behind coke bottle glasses, and arms covered in scars and needle marks. Eddie feared the hard stuff. He stuck with booze and weed, often smoking with Isaac on the porch in the late afternoon lull before the party cranked up again. Occasionally they were interrupted by solemn-faced or falsely cheerful guys with cash in their pockets. Isaac took them inside to his stash while Eddie waited on the porch in the hot shade, searing his lungs with smoke. By sundown, when the house started to fill up for another night, the world spun freely and Eddie floated across it, everything that had passed through his life a low, comforting hum.

Until the third night that is, when he saw Benjamin.

First he had a dream. In the dream he was sleeping in his bed at home and Benjamin came into the room and stood over him. His brother had grown up—stout and dark-haired, maybe fourteen. Then his eyes turned to spotlights and shone onto Eddie's face, terrible light, godly, burning, and Eddie, coming out of sleep on one of Isaac's mattresses, sweat-soaked, thought he was on fire. .

The whole day was like that, like fire. He sweated and trembled. His skin felt too tight, his lungs too small. Isaac said he'd been drinking too much and made him lie down with a cool rag over his eyes. Libby spent the day with him, rewetting the rag as he drifted in and out of a sleep haunted by the image of his brother.

He awoke after dark, having finally gotten some rest. Isaac looked him over and prescribed one beer. That one beer tasted so good, so cold and crisp and refreshing, that he had several more. In a moment of desperate good cheer, he called Ash and invited him to come party in New Canaan. But hearing Ash's familiar voice put a lump in his throat. He ended up tearfully recounting the past few days in a disjointed way that he knew would be confusing. He tried to clarify and only confused things further.

He hung up and opened another beer and sat with Libby on one of the many second-hand couches along the walls. He'd discovered that he wasn't as talkative when drunk, was content to sit and listen, and he'd become engrossed, though uninterested, in a debate about contraception, when he looked up and saw Benjamin in the hallway, halfway to the end, staring at him with that dark gaze from the photograph and then turning and entering the room where Eddie had been sleeping.

Eddie squeezed Libby's arm and clawed at her shoulder with his other hand. "Ben! Ben! I saw Benjamin! Shit, shit! Libby!"

Libby grabbed him by the ears and made him look into her eyes, bloodshot and rimmed in black and red. "Calm down you spaz. You didn't see shit."

"I swear it was him. From my dream."

"It was just some dude."

Libby took him outside, and they spent a few hours underneath the apple tree, where two guys played guitar far enough away from the house to be heard, there at the edge of the woods, Eddie and Libby kissing in the grass and being pelted playfully with apples. Could he hide like this forever? He kissed her harder, felt her thick black lipstick smearing against his lips; he pressed down on her broad shoulder blades so that she was tight against him. If he could inhabit her, if he could leave himself behind.

Benjamin was speaking now. He spoke in slow, internal rhythms; he spoke in tides against Eddie's heart. He'd been speaking ever since that day Eddie picked him up from his blanket, carried him around by the neck. Eddie hadn't known it for the voice of his brother. He knew it now. The voice was in no tongue, yet he knew it, every word.

He rolled away from Libby.

"Where'd you go?" she said, feeling the air as if blind.

"I wanted to destroy everything," he said.

"New start, right? Here we are." She leaned over him and pressed her lips into his. She couldn't press deeply enough. He moved his head away.

"There is no new start. There never was."

The babysitter had left the room. He had picked up the baby. Probably he jabbered nonsense words for the baby, or words he'd heard his mother speak or sing. He didn't remember any of it, but he carried all of it. Nothing is ever lost. Just becomes something else.

Chapter Fourteen

Ash got a late start from Memphis the next day. He dallied over dinner at a burrito place, and it was after five before he cruised east on highway 57 with the windows down. He was anxious to arrive, and yet he wanted to put it off.

“Come out here,” Eddie had said over the phone the night before, and when Ash resisted he’d slurred, “Fuck you. Why bother? I’m never coming back. There’s this girl. I want to love her. I do love her, maybe. It’s confusing because I can’t think anymore. And I found out something.”

Ash hadn’t known of Benjamin. Not the first thing. Yet the news Eddie delivered made him feel oddly culpable. He managed to get out of Eddie the address to the place he was staying.

“It’s good here,” Eddie said, but there was a note of doubt, of sorrow in his voice.

Ash hadn’t revealed much of the situation to Chelsa, and she seemed to intuit his reluctance in attempting to untangle for her the knot that was Eddie Sacs. They hung around in Ash’s room all day, moving tentatively, experimenting in the ways of affection, perfecting in increments the ways that two bodies can fit together. Chelsa filled the time with riddles and word games, with top-five lists, with tales of vacations gone awry and family legends. She talked as much as Eddie would have, and this was comforting. He dropped her off at home, kissed her on the porch, and she slipped two barrettes from her yellow hair and clipped them into his. On the way to New Canaan he blasted the classic rock station until it broke into static. The sun, when it set behind the hills beyond the Tennessee River, lit the sky in four shades of fire. He weaved across the highway, mesmerized.

He found the house without trouble and was greeted by an old man in a rocker out front, who said, “You just missed him. Took to the woods when he saw you.” He wore pleated khakis with salmon-pink suspenders over a white T-shirt. A bright red wig sat on the back half of his head as if he’d tipped it up in the manner of a baseball cap, lending him an air of deranged affability. “Name’s Rip. Like Van Winkle. Fitting since I’ve slept through whole stitches of time.”

“Did you say Eddie ran off into the woods?”

“You after him? Got any weapons? I don’t like being around no sorts of weaponry.”

“I just need to talk to him.”

“Sure can run, for a big ‘un.” Rip slapped his knee, and his wig slipped a degree further south. “Have a seat. He’ll be back.”

Ash sat on the steps, unsure of what else to do. Rip quickly nodded off, and Ash felt ridiculous sitting there, but he was afraid to go into the house. Over the next hour, the yard filled with cars, and out of the cars came people covered in tattoos and piercings, people with unblemished, too-white skin, people with dyed hair and hair that looked untouched for years. They ascended the steps around Ash or went around back. Some of them rubbed the wig on Rip’s head as they passed, and he never stirred. They spilled out onto the porch again with drinks and cigarettes. Ash went back to his car, now hopelessly blocked in, and sat on the hood.

The house reminded him of Beth Caldwell’s place, alight in a field and full of strangers. He’d stood by, two months ago, while those strangers did their work on Eddie. He’d stood in the darkness, yearning to be up on that brightly lit porch with them,

wanting so badly to abandon himself and his quiet nights and his only friend. He pulled Chelsea's barrettes from his shirt pocket and kissed each of them, chuckling at the corniness of the act, glad to welcome it, glad to feel separate, out there in the dark.

He wouldn't stand by. It was time for him and Eddie to go home.

Eddie had slipped back inside from the woods long enough to snatch a bottle of whiskey, then he'd retreated to the apple tree. He couldn't believe Ash had actually shown up. He didn't want to speak to anyone. Not Ash, not Libby. She'd spent an hour trying to convince Eddie to shoot up with her, and finally did it without him. He sat with her on the mattress and watched her pupils shrink. "It's nice," she kept saying. "You'll do it next time." He didn't leave the room all day. His hangover was glorious. Such obliterating pain.

Under the tree, he took a few sips of the whiskey then tossed it aside. His whole body still thudded with the affects of depriving himself alcohol. He wanted it to last forever.

A figure approached from the house. He could tell from the prim posture and hesitant gait that it was Ash. It was too much, Ash being here. There were too many easy hours passed between them to add to their number this difficult one. There were too many hours passed in recent weeks blaming Ash, blaming himself for investing so much into friendship, when the actual blame belonged to the boy who held his brother by the neck. "I can't talk to you," he said.

"You told me to come party."

"Go inside and have a drink. Have a ball. Go nuts."

“This place scares me. What is this place?”

“They take care of me.”

“Really. You look like you just survived a train wreck.”

“Just leave me alone.”

“Eddie, I need to tell you something.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’ve been stupid.”

“I don’t care about anything. Just stop.” He didn’t want an apology. He didn’t want a powerless phrase or even an arm around his shoulder. There was nothing for him short of a complete rearrangement of the particles of his being.

“Eddie . . .”

“Write me a poem. Write me a poem about us. Put everything from before in it.”

This seemed to be the closest thing to what he wanted to say, which he couldn’t articulate, which was “Take me back.”

He stood and brushed past Ash, crossed the yard to the house. He sensed Ash behind him, searching for the right words, and he hoped those words would come. But what words could possibly come that would stop him, what human utterance could overpower the terrible voice of his dead brother? He could feel it tearing at his head and his gut.

In the house, he rummaged through the bowl of keys by the door until he found Libby’s. Ash kept asking what he was doing, but he hardly heard. A part of him was miles away, and the rest of him clamored to catch up. He ran out to the street and found

Libby's car unlocked. He opened the door and before he could lock it, Ash had opened the passenger side.

Eddie started the car. "Get out."

"No."

He pulled onto the road and hit the gas. This was good. Speed.

"Where are you going?" Ash had buckled his seat belt and sat pressed against his seat.

"I was trying to get away from you." He took a curve too quickly and the tires squealed. The headlights swept across trees and barbed wire. The darkness beyond the headlights suggested an entire unexplored country. He sped up.

"Why don't you come home with me?"

"That'd be great!" he shouted. "Super wow! We'll bake cookies! You know, I wrote an email to my parents tonight. I said I was gonna kill myself."

It took Ash several seconds to respond. "Are you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." He cut the wheel back and forth. The car lurched and lost purchase for a sickening moment before the tires grabbed the pavement again. Ash was screaming at him. "Relax!" he shouted back. "When you yell at me I feel all flustered like I'm gonna lose control!" He wiggled the wheel again. "Whoa! See? Hope this thing has airbags."

"Will you please put on your seatbelt?"

Eddie laughed at the quiet strain in Ash's voice.

"Eddie, listen to me. Are you listening?"

"No." But he was. Listening for the right words. Willing to be shown a path.

“Eddie. Listen. I don’t know how to say it. There’s too much. What I can say, I can say you deserved so much better. So much. You still do.”

“Aw, that’s sweet.” He took his foot off the gas and applied the brake. He pressed his face into his shoulder to blot tears from his cheek, and in that moment, as they took a curve, headlights glared through the windshield. He snapped his head up, afraid he’d drifted into the oncoming lane, and jerked the wheel to the right, too hard.

The car rolled. During its brief flight above the pavement, the boys’ eyes met. There was time to see beyond the panic. There was time, almost leisurely, to take comfort in the other’s presence.

Just before the instant of impact, everything was gone from Eddie but Ash—Ash driving him through the suburbs of Memphis, out into farmland, all last spring and summer. The memory was a new language, or an old one he’d forgotten. Those drives, that wind and music—he’d needed nothing else. If he could feel that again, the companionship, the singular sensation of freedom that comes from traveling without direction, without need of arrival.

If it could go on, if the car wouldn’t land—life only this, this simple movement.

Chapter Fifteen

Ash was released from the hospital in New Canaan after two days. He had minor abrasions across his shoulders, face, head, and legs, a bruised rib, a broken arm. On the first morning, he had no idea where he was when he awoke, or what had happened to cause him such pain, but his father was there, red-eyed and puffy, to give him what details he could. The events of the previous night flared in his memory, cutting new layers into his pain.

Eddie would be airlifted that day to Baptist East in Memphis for more extensive care. He had severe head trauma, and had yet to wake up.

Ash slept off and on. He awoke from a nap to find a girl about his age sitting in the chair by the bed. “Where’s Dad?” he said groggily.

“He left for a minute. I’m Libby.” She seemed to wait for Ash to recognize her, or maybe she thought he’d mistaken her for someone else. She had deep pockets under her eyes and greasy hair pulled into a bun.

“Oh, hi,” he said, trying to be polite. Then the girl’s identity dawned on him.

“So Eddie wrecked my car,” she said. “I just thought you should know that my car’s wrecked.”

“Ok.” Did she expect him to pay for it?

“Tell Eddie. I need a car.”

“You know, he’s in a coma.”

“When he wakes up, I mean.”

“But what if . . .”

“He’d better. I need a car.” She went to the door and turned back. “He talked about you some.” She eyed him, as if trying to figure him out. “He said you were like a brother.”

“That’s nice.”

“The way he said it, it could go either way.”

He visited Eddie every day in Memphis, often sitting for hours. He stayed the night once, to give the family a break. Chelsa kept him company through the long hours of that week, at movies, restaurants, and in her room, so that for stretches of up to an hour he could lose track of every bit of sorrow and horror in his life. He was ashamed of the happiness he found with Chelsa.

They went to dinner one night at a small taqueria. As they approached the restaurant, Sean and Holly came out. Sean held the door and smiled. Holly shone in a polka dot dress.

Ash registered the look of general dismay on Holly’s face when she recognized him before it changed slightly to include his cast. “Ash! What happened to you?”

He opened his mouth, but simply stood there. Chelsa filled the silence with, “I pushed him down the stairs.”

Holly looked her up and down, a quick eye-flick that took in and dismissed her cut-off shorts and faded Batman T-shirt.

“Harsh,” Sean said. He bounced on his heels and gazed around the parking lot, looking fresh and important in his pale yellow polo, his skin a rich brown, a large silver

watch draped over his slim wrist. “Well, we won’t hold you up.” He wouldn’t look anybody in the eye.

Ash found out later, from somebody he ran into in the Jesus Miracle Power crowd, that Holly left with Sean on his big road trip east. Except they went west, out to L.A. When Ash thought of them at all, he saw them getting in each other’s way in a tiny apartment, Holly’s waitress uniform crumpled on the edge of a laundry basket. Sometimes he scanned the background in a movie, looking for a familiar face.

That night in the restaurant, he looked at Chelsa across the table until she blushed and told him to stop. Back in her room she declared it was time to read his suicide note.

“But I haven’t died yet,” he protested, as she read what he’d written at the beginning of that long summer.

““There should have been more explosions.”” She tore the note in two. “More explosions, huh?” She used her whole body to push him down onto her bed, there beneath the Eventide galaxy.

“Just wake up.” He murmured this daily. It was the last thing he said before sleep. “Just wake up.”

Eight days after the accident, on a bright and hot Saturday afternoon, Ash sat alone with Eddie in the hospital room. Eddie’s parents had trudged wearily down to the cafeteria. Ash sat for awhile, thinking of nothing, then he leaned forward, put a hand on Eddie’s knee, and peered into his pale, doughy face, at his cracked lips, the thick bandage

wrapped around his head, the blue pockets under his eyes. “Eddie,” he said, but that was all.

When Kathy and Robert returned, Ash hadn’t moved. They hesitated at the door, then left again. Later, something compelled Ash to look up.

Eddie’s eyes were open. Dull and glazed but open, and looking at him. Seeing him. His initial confusion seeped away, and he said softly, “Ash.”

Ash had never heard his name spoken in such a way. It was the way his mother would’ve said it, he was sure of this, had he managed to summon her those years ago, when he was a child in an oversized sweatshirt, sitting in a candlelit room and crying out into the unknown, casting such a small, small net.