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SPEAK, MIRA

by

Bret Vincent LeBeau

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Chapter One

He arrives at his parents' house after walking many miles. It's still light out so he decides to hide in the pine trees along the sideyard, hidden from view of the house. When the sun sets, he gathers his nerves to continue on.

As he lurches through the pines, the airy night concealing everything except the yellow-lit driveway in the distance, he's struck by a sensation, like disembodiment, that numbs his legs, making it difficult to stay up upright.

Through the livingroom window of the ranch-style home, the deep-ocean blue of a flickering TV illuminates the eave where he stands, no longer crouching to remain hidden, watching his sleeping parents. The room is squalid as it was his entire childhood and adolescence. Judging their sleeping postures, he knows they won't wake easily, so he decides to enter through the front door instead of breaking in through a bedroom window.

Into the pocket of stale cigarette smoke, he navigates down the hall to Mira's bedroom, acknowledging the rashness of what he's doing, but he continues into his sister's room without a notion of hesitation.

"Mira," he whispers and the sound of it strikes a chill in his blood. "Mira," he says and he hears a rustling and a murmur, and through the unlit space between them, he can see her head turning out from her pillow and looking in his direction, and he can sense her recognition of his voice.

"Caden?"

"Yeah." His face swells, about to cry. "It's me." He shuts the door behind him and turns on the light, a single stale bulb in a wobbling, unbalanced ceiling fan.

"Hi," she says, as though he hasn't been gone for years.

“Hey. How are you?”

Without waiting for her to respond, he searches through her strewn belongings, taking up a duffle bag from the doorless closet and a backpack from under the bed.

“Get ready to go. We’re going,” he says, bundling clothes and filling the duffle bag. “Me and you are going on a trip right now, tonight. Grab the things you want and let’s get going.”

She obeys without a word.

With the two bags full, he leads her out to the end of the driveway and tells her to wait while he returns to the house. He riffles through his parents’ room for cash and anything of value. He stops in the livingroom, standing over the two inert bodies illuminated by the flickering TV. Shooting through him once and quickly is the urge to wake them with a violent shaking and tell them one last time how much he hates them and how much they should hate themselves. Instead, he finds this half-dead state of theirs to be a fitting last image of them. He turns out through the kitchen, taking up the keys from a pile of unopened mail, and out into the garage, searching out what might be needed for the road and their lives ahead, and he puts the old Neon sedan in neutral and coasts it out of the garage and down to where he left her. She gets in the car without him having to say a thing. He starts up the engine, relieved that it still runs, and he eases the car out into the road and drives away from the house, intending, for both of them, on never seeing it again.

As he drives, Caden twists the rubber grip of the steering wheel. He counts the seconds between inhalation and exhalation. The oxygen is diffused down into his hands which then loosen. Another calculated breath. He looks at Mira. She’s been sitting in the

same position since they left: legs curled up onto the seat, face to window, knuckles pressed to her lips.

It took the last few hours of night navigating the rural backroads of Lafayette County before he found the interstate heading south, which they have now been on all morning, going past the whole of Mississippi, from top to bottom, having to make several stops to tune-up the poorly maintained car and to feed Mira, who eats more than he remembers her eating. The sun is no longer in the pines to the east but somewhere above, dipping west already, the July closeness of it giving a thick heat to grapple with. Vents in the dashboard puffer out wafts of damp cool air, but their skin still glistens with sweat. Mira's unbathed smell fills the car: one of her distinctive traits that he had never forgotten while away. It's strong and distinctive and not quite human. He always likened it to some sort of foreign or otherworldly herb or spice. It's not unpleasant, but because it is a function of the body, he still finds it discomfiting.

She hasn't said a word since he stole her away. He remembers well enough that trying to incite her can be futile. Every mile or so he checks the review, never knowing what to expect: if he'll see a team of squad cars with their lights spinning. Or, he wonders, will there only be one, already up ahead somewhere, waiting for us to stop?

At the welcome center past the Louisiana border, Caden parks the car between two SUVs. When he comes out of the men's room he finds that Mira has strayed about twenty yards off, standing under a sprawling live oak, staring up into the branches.

"Look at that branch, Caden," she says once he reaches her.

Her speech is like an art form. Hearing it for the first time in years is like hearing a ghost speak. Her voice is soft, as if coming through a downy filament, yet there's an

ungraspable nuance of firmness and assertion. And the way she annunciates is like jazz, the stresses falling hard where you wouldn't expect them to, hesitations skirting past entire phrases, flittering and halting and drawing out. And the rarity of her speech adds to its mesmerizing effect.

Caden tries to discern which of the long winding branches she's referring to.

She points and says, "The two."

One of the branches—a massive one with the thickness and length of a telephone pole—has two separate origins from the trunk, but becomes fused together after several feet, only to separate several feet further along and then fuse again several feet after that, creating an eye-shaped torus in the middle of the two spans of conjoining branches.

They sit down together, Caden watching her with furtive glances while she pulls at the sparse patches of bermuda around her. She hasn't changed over the years. Taller, of course, but the same long black hair, same blue jeans rolled half way up her calves so her ankles can breathe, same black flats that smell like a wet dog, same second-hand t-shirt of mysterious origin. Her demeanor is unchanged, too: same curious silence and docility. She never seemed to change, he remembers. Never became her age or transformed into older versions of herself. Although, he considers, she is still young, only fifteen years old and still with time to mature, to become—something, especially now that she's away from them, out from under them, no longer hidden from the world, and she can come into herself, perhaps.

She lived for fifteen years with nothing but those two in that house, on that old crumbling road. He had been waiting at the house, alone probably, at the age of four or five, when his parents first brought her home from the hospital, entering the small dark

foyer and saying nothing. His dad staggered to the master bedroom and kicked the door shut with his heel. His mom ambled around like a wind-shorn vagrant, itinerant in her own home. Caden tiptoed up to her. Mira was wrapped in his old baby blanket, a blue one, so he thought he had a brother.

He didn't learn that Mira was a girl until he learned her name. It was summer when she was born. Dad had work. Something that he complained about having sucked his soul away, and Caden believed him. Mom didn't work, yet she seemed to have no soul either. Not the soul of a mother, at least. She was just a body that ate and drank and smoked. He knew in a seminal way that she could not be the true mother of any child, no matter who she bore.

At school, his mood was foul. He mulled all day. Was volatile. Anything could get him screaming and kicking. He damaged things. He bit and pulled hair, jabbed with pencils and slapped. When he urinated in the teacher's purse he was sent home and never returned. Two years passed with no school. Days went by, unchecked. A vague blur of backyard dirt pits and rainy days spent inside trying to teach Mira the names of things. She didn't begin to speak until five years later.

Eventually, he started school again, coming home in the afternoons in the midst of their parents yelling. Mira's entire world was the angry bedlam of their home. The delirium and selfishness and liquor-rage of their mom and dad. Their senseless anger became his anger. As a teen, he broke a peer's cheekbone and jaw, spent time in a detention center. The behavioral counseling baffled him, as if someone had forgotten to explain to him how the sessions were supposed to work, that there was a script somewhere he hadn't received. A year later, he fought his father. He found himself in an

angry haze, holding a bat in his fists. This time, he was charged with attempted first-degree murder and sent to juvenile detention for four years, state prison for one year after that. He spent the whole time worried about Mira being alone with them, never being brought to daycare or enrolled in school, beyond the reach of anyone who would care. As he saw it, sees it still, he was her guardian, is her guardian, will always be, and that is why he has taken her away from them. From him. To protect her from others like him. Men of only lust and of no scruples or morality.

He looks at her sidelong and thinks, Mira. Miranda. Why can't you be ugly?

A car pulls into the parking lot, a Crown Victoria, all black with tinted windows. An older heavy-set man with a shaved pinkish head climbs out and strides to the restroom. Perhaps an undercover. Caden doesn't move. After a long wait, the man returns to his car and drives away. As soon as the car is out of sight, Caden helps Mira to her feet and they leave.

With the Crown Victoria on the tip of the horizon, no other cars in between or behind, Caden glances at Mira. She's staring straight ahead, her eyes the dark blue-gray shade of a heavy dissipating thunderstorm cloud in the late afternoon, or maybe just the empty sky in the dusk of midsummer. A serene smile in the corners of her mouth. Her black hair, ratty and greasy.

"Remember John-Robert? Our older half-brother?" he says, glancing back and forth from her to the road. "He lives in New Orleans. You never actually met him, but he used to send us presents and money when we were kids. He bought us the TV that's in the den. Remember when we got that TV?"

"I remember."

“And he bought us this car a long time ago after mom had crashed the other one. I met him once. You were still a baby. Nice guy. He doesn’t care for our parents much anymore, but he likes us. Maybe he can help us out until we can get on our feet and make it on our own. I’m sure he won’t mind if we drop in on him. We’ll just have to find him first. John-Robert Mayhew. Dad’s son, not mom’s. Dad left the lady he had him with. Did you know about that? John-Robert kept his mom’s last name anyway. He’s about fourteen years older than I am. So about eighteen years older than you. Technically old enough to be your dad. Isn’t that weird?”

She doesn’t respond.

Does she listen, he wonders. He wrings the wheel and takes a deep breath. Mira, he thinks, do you listen? What’s in your head right now? What’s on your mind?

He isn’t certain, but as the interstate lifts over marshlands, he figures that they will be in New Orleans soon. As the overpass continues on and on, he marvels, watching the tops of cypress trees flash by, and he wonders how long it will go without touching land—like he blinked and in that blink the road was transported to a world of only swamp. He realizes that they’re somehow heading east now, not south as they had been, and in the distance ahead is the murky cityscape, like a clustered growth of cement nettles rising out of the marshes, and soon they’re surrounded by an expanse of industrial outskirts and interstate ramps.

Caught in the sudden flow of traffic, the Neon drums along with other cars. Soon, the skyline has burgeoned. The Superdome is almost frightening as Caden gains perspective of its size. As they drive past it, Mira wheezes and laughs at its immensity. Her laughter is infectious.

They loop once around the business district before Caden takes the exit at Tulane Avenue. He makes a few turns, noting a pawn shop, before pulling into the parking lot of the first hotel he sees, the Rose Inn Motel.

It's dusk now. He tugs on the office door but it's locked. Inside is dimly lit. Mira is still sitting in the car, and he shrugs at her. She smiles, maybe laughing, he can't tell. He raps on the glass and he notices a movement inside, something on the counter. A rat, perhaps. It moves a few inches, and then it backs up to where it was and doesn't move again.

"Tryin' to get Paul?" says a woman from out in the parking lot. Caught off guard by her appearance, Caden says nothing. She's almost seven feet tall in her heels. Under her short, red skirt extends a pair of golden spandex.

"What?" he says.

"You tryin' to get Paul. You can't. He deaf."

"I think there's something on the counter in there," he says, too flustered to comprehend.

She nudges past him with a grunt, rears her head as though to scream but then pauses, her mouth open, and she looks at him and says, "Young blood," with a masculine voice and a smirk. She turns back to the door, takes another deep breath and screeches, "Paul, wake the motherfuck up!"

The object on the counter springs into the air. Caden flinches and then realizes that this object is the hair of an Asian man who had been sitting on the other side of the counter, and also that the office isn't dark, it's only that the windows are tinted from the outside.

He waves for Caden to enter, and as Caden reaches for the door once more the woman shouts again, “Door’s locked, Paul! He can’t come in!”

The man flutters his hands in the air as he wobbles around the counter and towards the door. He pulls a keychain from his belt and unlocks the door. “Come in. Come in.” A bit of an Asian accent breaks through an otherwise generic American one. “Delilah, what do you want?”

The woman is already walking back out into the parking lot. “I don’t want nothing,” she mumbles without directing herself to Paul. She saunters with her lower half but seems to strut with her upper half, creating an excessive wriggle.

“Tomorrow you have to pay for tomorrow, for today and for Tuesday,” Paul says, calling after her.

Grumbling, Paul retreats back behind the counter, bumping into a dust-encased pedestal fan that whomps as it shakes back and forth, and he seems to have forgotten Caden.

“Mr. Paul,” Caden says.

“No hourly, sir. Only nightly and extended stay.” Paul glances at the Neon.

“Extended will work,” says Caden. “Three days maybe.”

“Yes. Extended stay.”

“We’re new to the city. We don’t have any place to live, so it might be indefinitely.”

Paul glances back out to the car, and then slowly continues printing up a receipt.

With a key to the room, Caden pulls the car farther into the parking lot and the two grab their bags. The room is repulsive. Caden remembers the hurricane that

happened two or three years before. When he was locked up, he watched little TV or news, so he knows almost nothing of the details—only that the city was flooded and now it's not. He assumes that this room, which is ground level, was flooded and renovated, but nothing about it appears new. Stains on everything. A massive cockroach is roaming the bedspread. It scrapes its mandibles and rotates its antennae and then its shellback opens up with fluttering wings and it flies away from the entrance, landing with a thud on the floor and then disappearing into the bathroom. Caden chases after it with his shoe, only to witness it vanish into a rectangular hole in the wall where the toilet paper holder is supposed to be—instead, the toilet paper holder is on the floor by the toilet amidst a scattering of drywall crumbles.

When Caden walks out, Mira is standing by the door with her hands cupping her nose and mouth. Her narrowed brows denote a smile hidden behind her hands.

“We'll get some spray,” he says. “And it'll be the last we see of those.”

“It flew,” says Mira with a hoot.

They put their bags on the table by the window and leave. A couple of blocks away is a gas station where they go for drinks and food and bug spray. They eat on a bench outside while their room airs out of the heavy chemicals that Caden sprayed on everything—they had laughed, watching cockroaches come stumbling out of the bathroom, drenched in spray, and flop over on their backs and slowly die. “My mouth tingles,” Mira said shortly afterwards, and that's when Caden grabbed their food and drinks and took them outside to eat.

He's pensive and watchful sitting out in the open, not just because he's now a felon and a fugitive having broken parole, but because he's aware that there are dangers in the city.

A car pulls into the parking lot and an old, gaunt man gets out and knocks on a door several rooms down from theirs. The man looks over and gives them a toothless grin. The door opens and he's hustled inside by some unseen tenant. After a short moment, the toothless man exits backwards so he can continue talking to the person inside. When the door shuts on him, he looks back over to them.

"Y'all aren't from here?" he asks.

"Why would we be?" says Caden.

"Just a question, brother. What brings you here?"

"Looking for a relative."

"Whereat?"

"He works at a music store. It's all I know."

"Music store? Which one?"

"Don't know."

The man laughs. Foamy spittle flops onto his lip. "You ain't going to find no relative, boy. You're lost lost lost, kiddo." He laughs harder and slinks out into the parking lot. "Lost little kitties," he sings, ambling away.

Chapter Two

(Winter—2004)

It was cold and the moisture in the air could penetrate the skin and chill the blood, setting everybody's hearts into a rattling shiver that no amount of hot coffee could warm. The crape myrtles on the median along Winsor Road were skeletons, and the fog over Bayou St. John crept across the winding lanes and gathered around the oaks in the park.

Meg Bowen, with a hand shaking from the cold, tossed out a cigarette butt with a flurried streak of embers and rolled the window up. Theo, her little brother, sitting in the passenger seat with his arms crossed over his chest, glanced at Meg with disdain, and turned the heat up.

Meg changed lanes at every curve in the road to avoid having to slow down. She ran a red light crossing Harrison Avenue, and again crossing Filmore. She turned right onto Robert E. Lee with the back tires skittering on the wet pavement, little bits of gravel pelting the undercarriage.

Speeding through the residential grid of Gentilly, Theo noticed that they were about to pass his pot dealer's house and he almost suggested she drop him off there instead of bringing him the rest of the way to his high school. He had dropped out a month ago, so it wasn't as if he was actually going to go in. He was only going to turn and walk back down the street.

When Meg brought the car to a stop in front of Ben Franklin High School, she looked at Theo and said, "I know what you're going to do, but—"

"But by dropping me off here," Theo interrupted with his mousy voice, "you get to look like the responsible adult, when really you don't give a shit what I do."

“Just don’t get yourself killed, retard.”

Theo climbed out and slammed the door, and instead of walking up to his school he skirted around the hood of the car and crossed the street, heading into the adjacent neighborhood.

Meg rolled down the window and said, “You could at least pretend, asshole.”

Theo gave her the finger and kept on.

At about the same time, Claudia woke up in her bed blinking against the morning sun and looked to her on-again-off-again girlfriend, just a head protruding from under a lump of comforters, snoring and drooling on a laundered pillow case. She checked the time and groaned at how early it was, knowing she wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep. She slid out of her bed and the sharp chill in the room struck her, goosebumps all over her body, and she tiptoed to her bathroom and lit the gas heater in the wall, a spurt of flames and fumes and then a steady rushing—but the warmth was slow to fill the room, so she danced around, snatching her heavy terrycloth robe and wrapping herself in it. In the mirror of the recessed medicine cabinet, which could never be shut all the way after years and years of slapdash repaints and summer humidity, she saw in her face the results of a poor night’s sleep: pillowy skin around her eyes, her dusty brown hair a like a large mass of tropical moss half tucked into the robe and half streaming in frizzy waves down her shoulder and chest, chapped lips, rubbed-raw nostrils of a persistent cold, her dark-olive skin: ashen and bloodless. She wetted her hands in the icy tap water and rubbed her face and gasped, drips of water specking the mirror.

Regaining her warmth, she ambled along the span of her cluttered shotgun house—smelling the earthiness of the cold hardwood floors and the soft, not unwelcoming mustiness of all her used and well-loved belongings: myriad secondhand clothes, many little towers of books—some newer, some yellowing—through the spacious kitchen, the residual aroma of spices and herbs and sautéed vegetables, and into the living room, amply furnished and a place of comfort and memories.

The weather update on her laptop posted that it was currently sixty degrees. She groaned at this in disbelief, finding that it felt like half that. She continued out to her front porch, hoping to find warmer air there. She grabbed a neighborhood cat that was lounging in a chair and sat in its place, keeping the cat in her lap for warmth, trapping it there with shushes, petting it until it settled and began to purr. She flipped open her phone and stared at it for a moment, and then, with a quick start, clicked through her contacts and called the number for Professor Nick.

“Coffee?” she asked, when he answered.

“Coffee?” he responded. “Oh, coffee. Sweetie, I’d love to but I’m at The Magnolia tending to business at the moment. Would tenish-elevenish do? No, eleven. Eleven.”

“Business?”

“I’ll explain over coffee,” he said, and the call cut out.

Her girlfriend came out in one of Claudia’s old jackets.

“Hey,” said Claudia without looking up.

“I woke up and you weren’t there.” The girl sat and waited, and then said, “Claudia?”

“Huh.”

“Where were you last night?”

Claudia became queasy hearing this question, knowing where it was heading, and dreading it.

“What do you mean? I didn’t go anywhere.”

The tabby sprang out as Claudia stood and pretended to have somewhere to go.

Arriving at his drug dealer’s house, shivering and craving a cigarette, Theo stomped up the wooden staircase on the side of the house to where the second-floor unit was.

Tom was still sleeping, so Theo helped himself to a bong hit and a cigarette.

“I was saving that bowl,” Tom mumbled when he came out.

“Pack another one,” said Theo.

“I’m out.”

“You’re out, out?”

“Completely out. Steve and his crew had a party last night. I went and sold everything.”

“You should’ve called. I would’ve come out.”

Tom shrugged. “I’m re-upping later. I have a new guy. Did I tell you about him?”

“No. You think he can front me something?”

“Maybe. You’ll have to meet him.”

“Fine.”

“How much you think you want to take on?”

“I don’t know. A quawp.”

Tom tisked and said, “Who do you know to sell out a quarter pound to?”

“I know people you don’t know. I can get rid of it in two weeks.”

“If I find out you’re trying to steal my customers, I’ll have to slap your freckly-ass.”

Theo didn’t say anything. He only attempted insolence, his face feeling flushed.

“So what’s the deal with your parents, then?” said Tom.

Theo massaged his temples with one hand, saying, “I can’t stay with them anymore. They don’t understand that I’m done with school. They keep trying all these retarded ways to get me to come home because they want me to be, I don’t fucking know, fucking normal or something.”

“Cause they care about you maybe.”

Theo rubbed his neck, his cheeks going flush again.

“Yeah, but they don’t understand shit. They can’t understand that I’m not like them. I can’t just magically be what they want me to be. If they knew this shit I wouldn’t have to be running out all the time, selling dope just to get by.”

“Just to get by,” Tom repeated under his breath with a patronizing laugh. With his chin stuck up in the air, he said, “You’re what, sixteen? You don’t have to get by shit. Get a job, man. Stay at a friend’s house while your parents cool off. Stay here for all I give a fuck.” His face went from humored to annoyed. “All I’m saying is, you don’t need to sell weed. This new guy, Silver Back. He’s not me. He’ll fuck you up. He won’t care who you are or where you come from, because he’s got people who’ll fuck your ass up for him.”

“Okay, okay.” Theo was fidgeting now, and when he spoke, his knees would jitter up and down. “I’m not just being desperate to get pot. I know I can sell it. I’ve got people bugging me all the time, and those people got people bugging them to get me to supply them.”

“Just saying, man. Just looking out for you.”

It felt good to hear this. Even though Theo had two brothers, they were both ten years his senior and neither showed any interest in him, so Tom, only five years older than Theo, felt like the closest thing to a real older brother.

“His name’s Silver Back?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why are you going to him if he’s so sketchy?”

“No, he’s not sketchy at all. He’s professional. He’s all business. Eric and Terrence and those other guys, you can kind of jerk around a little, but they’re always trying to pull some shit too, and it gets annoying. Silver Back will deal you straight every time as long as you do the same. Plus, Silver Back’s got the best coke in the city.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. I bought a half ounce of it two nights ago and it was gone by last night. Sold it mostly in grams and made fucking bank.”

“And it’s good?”

“It’s the best yay in the city. I got a little left if you want to try it out.”

Theo didn’t have to think about it, so Tom pulled out a baggie and emptied the clumped powder onto the coffee table. As he smashed and chopped the clumps into smaller bits and fines with a pocket knife, the quantity of it seemed to grow.

“A little, huh?” said Theo.

“You’re right. See, this stuff just—I don’t know.”

He set the powder into lines and they took turns sniffing them up with a straw.

Tom began pacing the room until he yanked a thick wool beanie from behind an ice chest and said, “Let’s go for a walk.”

They walked as though they were late for something. Tom sighed in through his nose. Theo imitated. They climbed up the levee along Bayou St. John even though it seemed prohibited, and they followed it up to the concrete wavebreak of Lake Pontchartrain, kicking beer cans around and throwing flat rocks into the air to watch them catch the seabreeze and come sailing back as they fell into the water. They squinted to trace with their eyes northward the length of the Pontchartrain Bridge all the way until it disappeared in a haze over the wind-chopped lake.

With her girlfriend gone, Claudia wrapped herself in her coat and scarf. Lifting her bike down the porch steps, she set off down the street, finally warming with the sun full upon her.

When she entered the CC’s coffee shop, she saw that Nick was already there and had ordered for both of them. He stood and greeted her with a hug and a kiss on her cheek.

Claudia warmed her hands on her coffee cup and sighed.

“Who is it this time?” he asked.

“Emily, the hapless woman-child. It’s as if, from miles away, not knowing what I’m doing what-so-ever, that sad little girl can sense when I’m vulnerable, and she comes snuggling back into my life.”

“She knows you have a tender heart,” said Nick.

“And takes advantage.”

“And might have guilt about that.”

“Well, not enough guilt to stop her from sucking me dry.”

Nick grinned and Claudia scoffed at him.

“Pervert,” she said.

He laughed but it seemed that his thoughts were turning to something less humorous.

“Well, our two glorious morning stars have fallen and are out of the game,” he said, stirring his coffee even though he drank it black.

“Fired?”

“Fired. Pulled the plug. Well, I had Quinn do it. They closed down last night without telling anyone, which you know I don’t care about, but it led me and Quinn to finding some money missing—quite a bit, actually—and some other merchandise. I’m not sure exactly what, but Quinn knows. Some three hundred dollars in total.”

Claudia explored the consequences to follow the firing of her two coworkers at The Magnolia Record Store. The two who were fired were the only two employees working there, other than herself and Quinn, the manager—Nick having long since resigned to a more elusive position as the owner. And she knew that she would be primarily responsible for weeding out two new employees.

Nick, probably still mulling in disbelief of the betrayal of the two employees, didn't seem aware of Claudia's own mulling.

"Bygones," he concluded. "At least I can feel relieved for your sake. I know you didn't care for those two. Understandably, now. So, that's why Quinn and I are going to leave the picking to you. Quinn will work with you, with all the bureaucratic details. But you get the final say. If they seem like a good fit for the store but not for you, pass them. Take your time. I'll be around to help cover shifts."

"Who's there now?" she asked.

"Quinn. But it's closed. Can you work today?"

"Sure. I better head home, then. I still smell like Emily. Just in case you were wondering why I smell like insecurity this morning."

"I hadn't noticed a smell," said Nick. "Are you sure you're okay to work today? You said you were feeling vulnerable, didn't you?" He stood up, somewhat eager and clumsy. "I'm sorry to have been so—"

"No. I'm fine."

"—So businesslike and impersonal. You don't have to go right away."

"Yeah, but," she said, smelling a lock of her hair, "I do smell."

"I'll walk you out."

They walked side by side, Nick a whole head shorter than Claudia.

"I think it's all just confusing to me," she confessed. "It seems necessary to have all these people in my life, or at least some of them, in order to be happy, but sometimes it seems that they're the cause of my biggest, I don't know, sadness."

“Sometimes,” Nick started. “No, let’s see. Well yes, sometimes the best we can do is blame our sadness on the most tangible aspects of our lives. But sadness isn’t tangible when you try to get a grasp of it. It’s a slippery son of a bitch.”

“I guess so. Maybe sadness wasn’t the word I was looking for.”

Nick smiled and he grabbed her hands and squeezed. She hunched over to hug him, and then got on her bike and rode home.

They drove in silence, Tom breaking the silence only once to say, “I know you know this, but, play it cool.”

They arrived at a small house in a subdivision out in New Orleans East, far out into what used to be swampland but was now the suburbs. Tom parked the car on the street and they crossed the front yard to the side door. Inside, Tom was handed a paper sack with cocaine and gun inside, and Theo was able to get the quarter pound of marijuana up front.

In the car, Tom could barely get his keys into the ignition switch because his hands were shaking so much. On the interstate heading back into the city, he said, “Goddamn, roll a joint, Theodore, my nerves are fucked.”

Theo complied. Breaking up the weed had a settling effect.

“So, what’s with the gun, man?”

“God, I don’t fucking know. But buying it shows them that I’m not just toying around with his stuff, that I’m serious about doing business. It sure makes me fucking uneasy, though.”

When Tom passed the exit to get back to his apartment, Theo asked where he was going.

“Make a delivery, if you don’t mind.”

“No. Where at?”

“You know Claudia? The mulatto chick? About my age?”

“Yeah. Sexy, but in a weird kinda way?”

“Yeah. She wants some pot. And Quinn, her boss—she works over at Magnolia Records—her boss is splitting the blow with me. He’s the one who introduced me to those guys.”

“You mean that old guy that’s sometimes there?”

“Not the real old guy. I’m talking about the manager. He’s like thirty-something.”

They got off at Carrollton Avenue and cruised Uptown to the River Bend neighborhood, and Tom, now stoned, took a few wrong turns before rolling up to the store. They went around and climbed up a set of rickety wooden stairs to the back door that led to the breakroom. When they entered, a man in an old polo shirt jerked his head up from a folding table where he sat. One side of his face was red and creased and it was obvious he’d been sleeping there.

“Tommy,” he drawled with a low, scratchy voice.

“Quinn.”

They sat at the table and talked for a while. Quinn gave them each a beer from the fridge in the corner. The windowless room smelled of stale cigarette smoke and incense and mold or feet. Stacks of flimsy cardboard boxes along the wall. From the speaker, hidden somewhere, played some dream rock which Theo couldn’t identify. Having

ceased to follow Tom and Quinn's conversation, he was caught off guard when Tom pulled out the bag of cocaine and a small pocket scale. After weighing some out and swapped for cash with Quinn, he nodded to Theo saying, "He's got herb if you want some. I know Claudia does. She here?"

Quinn took him up for a gram and said Claudia was down at the register, pissed about something and definitely needing a smoke. He texted her, and she texted back, saying for Theo to go down. He had been to Magnolia many times before and knew where to go. The upstairs was all vinyl, an area he had never been interested in. He went down the narrow stairway, the walls adorned with dozens of music venue posters and band decals, and into the backroom of the first floor where used CDs, DVDs and VHS tapes were shelved in no order at all, and down a couple of steps into another room of clothing and swingpanel displays for posters and various other sundries, and down two more steps into the main gallery where the checkout counter was and where the clerk could keep an eye on the sidewall where the glass bong and pipes were on display, as well as on the various other smaller items for sell: hemp jewelry, books about music, new CDs and vinyl records, wire racks of postcards and stationery and so on.

On the stool at the cash register was Claudia, hunched over a paperback. She cocked her head at Theo as he came around. She did a double take at him and then swiveled her head to look at the front door and looked back at him in slight confusion.

"Can I help you find something?" she asked.

"No, I was up there with Quinn."

"Oh, I was expecting someone else," she said.

"You mean Tom? He's upstairs. I have the, I think, some—"

“—Right. Great. Well, I’m Claudia. It’s nice to meet you. You’re a little young to be selling pot, huh?” she said with a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“I remember you. Meg’s brother. You were just a little kid like practically yesterday. Aren’t you still in high school?” She chuckled. “What, did you get the day off or something?”

“I’m not in school anymore. I dropped out.”

“To sell pot? Buddy,” she chuckled some more, “you’re nothing like your sister.”

“Well, not to sell pot, really. I’m hoping to find a job somewhere. Are y’all hiring?”

Claudia laughed. “We are, coincidentally enough. Only thing is, you have to be eighteen to work here, which I doubt you are.”

This was fine for Theo. He shrugged and dug his hands in his pockets and said, “Yeah, I got a year or so. Maybe then?” He moved closer to the counter, a glass case displaying various merchandise. “Well,” he said. “Tom said you wanted a gram.”

Just then, Tom and Quinn came stomping into the gallery.

“What are you doing with this poor guy,” she said. “He needs to be in school.”

“I told him he should get a job if he’s going to drop out.”

“Hey!” said Quinn, swatting Theo on the shoulder. “Get a job here.”

“He’s too young, Quinn,” said Claudia, and then to Theo: “What’d you say? Sixteen?”

“Good enough,” said Quinn. “He can work in the back. And now you won’t have to plow through applications. Wait,” he shouted, his face crooked with surprise. “Tom!

Tommy Boy. You need a job, you waisted youth. You're getting a job. Right here," he clapped his hands together and started making for the back. "I'll get the forms. Claudia, you're welcome."

"What got Mat and Amit fired?" said Tom. "I just saw them yesterday."

"They closed up early last night and took some cash from the register. A friend of the owner came by and they weren't here and the whole top blew off from there." She fiddled with her book. "Are y'all really going to take this job? Because Mat and Amit—with them, my life here was all about keeping them from running the business into the ground. They had some sort of seniority shit going on that somehow kept them from getting their asses kicked out a long time ago. But if you guys end up working here? No stealing shit. No giving shit away. No getting fucked up all the time and dealing drugs all over the place." Pointing at Theo. "I got enough headaches dealing with Quinn's mood swings as it is."

Tom shook his head, and Theo cleared his throat and said, "I don't deal drugs or steal or anything. It's just this one time, really, that I happened to have some. Which reminds me—"

"Just go into the bathroom around the corner," Claudia said. "Leave it in the cabinet above the sink."

Theo went, and when he came back out Quinn had returned with forms to sign. Theo didn't read any of it. He just filled out the blanks as best he could, using Tom as his reference, and using Tom's address as his own. As they finished up, Quinn explained that they would start immediately, if possible, and that Claudia would show them how

everything was run. Once again, he left the gallery, leaving the three in a standing silence.

Chapter Three

Caden wakes up with Mira sitting on his feet at the corner of the bed so be closer to the TV. The volume has been turned down such that the hum and fizz of the screen can be heard over the soundtrack of the movie that's playing.

“Hi, Mira. Sleep well?”

She nods. Her face is puffed.

“Want food?” he asks.

She nods. So much like a child still.

“What do you like to eat for breakfast?”

She doesn't respond. No shrug. No faint murmur. Nor is she fixated on the TV any longer. Only staring to her side. Her head half-cocked in Caden's direction like an animal intently listening. Greasy black strands of hair skirting her face.

“Cereal? Milk? Anything?”

She is unmoving.

Caden stands and limps on both legs as he crosses over to the smoke-tinged drapes and pulls them back a few inches, opening the room to the shock of daylight, and then lets the drapes go, shutting the room back into a tawny dimness.

He goes outside. The parking lot is saturated with light and heat and wet air. He talks to Paul about the music store, unable to specify whether the store sells instruments or music, and Paul uses a map on the Internet to make a list of both, which he gives to Caden along with a cartoonish tourist map of the city, drawing stars to coincide with the locations on the list. At a vending machine, he selects food items at random. For soft drinks, he gets one dark colored one and one clear colored. He shakes the remaining

coins and crumpled bills around in his hand and then squeezes it all together and presses it deep into his pocket and removes his hand and checks the ground to make sure none has fallen loose somehow. In the room, he spreads the junk food and drinks on the bedspread.

Mira grabs the candy and leaves the chips and granola bar and soft drinks.

He paces the room. Doesn't sit. He reaches for a pillow to fluff it but ends up boxing it inward, knocking it to the floor as he paces away.

"We're going to need help," he says as he paces, not even checking to see if Mira's listening. "And soon. It'll be tight. It'll be okay, but it'll be tight. Just remember that we're better off now. Always will be. Just not quite in the clear yet. Still have some challenges, okay?"

She doesn't respond in any way.

He squats in front of her and lures her eyes to his.

"But everything will be better." Caden recrosses the room and pulls at the curtain, looks out, and then drops the curtain back. "We'll have to take the car out," he says to himself.

"I like being in the car," she says, as though to herself too.

"Yeah," he mumbles, letting in another shock of daylight.

Domino Sound Record shack is the fourth store they try. As he had with the previous stores, Caden first spends a few minutes pretending to be a customer. He flips through some of their selection, his hands clumsy with the records. Mira leans against his

shoulder, her head rolling around, at times, to scan the store, but mostly she keeps watch of Caden's movements.

Once they've made a circuit of the cramped one-room store, Caden approaches the counter and says, "You know anyone named John-Robert?"

The clerk's mouth crooks downward and he shakes his head. Caden's left heel bounces on the floor in a brief jitter.

"John-Robert Mayhew, or Carlisle maybe? He's supposed to work at a music store somewhere around here. I'm his relative. Just trying to find him."

"Sorry," he says.

Caden's leg convulses and bounces once more before turning away from the counter and leaving the store, not saying thank you or anything to the clerk.

In the street, the two stand at the trunk of the Neon, which sticks out about four feet from the curb, and Caden lays out the tourist map on the hot metal. With his finger he traces Esplanade Avenue down to the French Quarter. He traces his finger back up to the star marking Domino Sound. He traces his finger again along no street in particular, passing the star for the Rose Inn, and cutting across the jumbled mess of neighborhoods until it touches upon Uptown. Then he follows the arching grid between St. Charles Avenue and Tchoupitoulas Street until his finger comes back around to the French Quarter.

"Shit," he says. "That's a lot of driving around, Mira, especially for being in a stolen car." He licks his chapped lips and snuffles and a drop of sweat goes up deep into his nostril.

They get in and the Neon starts. The engine revs as it tries to push itself over the curb in front of it, but the curb is too tall, so the car shutters backwards and then the gear clanks into reverse and coasts out into the street, cutting off a rust-mottled truck which decides not to honk, merely waits until the Neon straightens itself out and rolls up the block to Broad Street, turns left into oncoming traffic, a chorus of car horns, until the blundering Neon sets itself into its proper lane, only to be honked at again while making an illegal left onto Esplanade.

“I can’t drive in this city,” says Caden, his hand wringing the wheel at twelve and twelve and his torso lurching so far forward his chin nearly touches his knuckles.

As they draw upon a red light, a police cruiser falls in line with the traffic behind them, two cars back and one lane over. The light turns green and they cross under the interstate, beyond which Esplanade becomes a single lane, pushing the cruiser behind them and out of sight. For the next several blocks, Caden watches through the rearview, sweating and shaking, as each car turns off, leaving no one else but the police cruiser driving close upon his bumper.

At the next stop sign, Caden takes the opportunity to turn. He does so with a small rhythmic pulse flickering the breast of his shirt where his heart beats. He follows the street slowly to keep his eyes on the rearview until the cruiser crosses the intersection and slides away. Caden parks the car, the back end protruding into the street again. He releases the wheel and massages his sweating hands together and whispers “Son of a bitch” to himself several times with a tremble in his throat.

Mira watches him with her inscrutable gaze.

“I can’t do this,” he says and looks at her and then looks away. “There’s too much, just—Everything. I’m not used to all this stuff out in the world. And on the run.” He looks at her again. This time slower, resting his eyes on hers. “I’m sure it’s overwhelming for you, too, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, a little,” she says without moving her mouth.

Caden sits back in his seat to take a few deep breaths, each one rasping against his throat. There is silence and stillness in this neighborhood. Nothing more than part of the residential grid that fills the spaces between thoroughfares. Houses and houses crammed together. There is no privacy here. Every house has only a few spare feet on either side. And every house is two homes: two addresses, two mailboxes, two front doors under every roof. The houses are only as wide as the Neon is long, and they all extend beyond view from the street. About every fourth house is in disrepair: broken windows, unhinged doors, side panels rotted out and missing, roofs half caved-in and consumed by catclaw vines. This block and the blocks ahead are treeless, and with everything in a yellow haze under the sun—the cars, rooftops, the asphalt—there’s a lifeless desert quality to it all. A netting of thick black wires droop all along the sides, and across, hanging from telephone poles that are all in a chaotic tilt—not uniformly as if some wind blew them all in a single direction, but instead each one at its own random slope. Most of the housefronts have X’s painted on them. And symbols in the spaces of the X’s.

“This place doesn’t make any sense,” Caden says as he gropes for the gear shift to put the car in drive.

They continue on Esplanade, reaching the end of it in less than a minute. They park and search out the stores by foot, having no luck finding John-Robert in any of

them. By the fifth and final one, the sun has lowered enough for them to stop sweating. On their way back to the Rose Inn, they stop at a gas station for food and eat it in the parking lot. Everyone else who comes through is dressed for construction work. Mira falls asleep in her seat. Her nose and cheeks are sunburnt. Food crumbs litter her shirt and lap. Her half-eaten sandwich still in her hand.

They sleep until noon the following day. The whap of a flying cockroach landing hard against the dresser wakes Caden up, and upon reading the hellish red glow on the clock, he struggles out from under the blankets and he dances his limping legs across the room so he can peel the curtain back, the shock of light brighter, as though the sun had inched closer to earth while they slept.

“The hell,” he says.

He drops the curtain and goes outside wearing nothing but his tattered boxers. He approaches the door slowly, craning his neck to see in. When he gets to the rear door, which is open by several inches, he shuts it. He continues to the trunk door, which is also open, and shuts that too. Back to the front, he gets in and looks around. The casing for the ignition switch has been pried open. A cluster of wires dangle at his knee where he sits in the driver’s seat. The glove box is open and everything that was in it is now either on the floor or in the passenger seat. He gathers it all together and fills the glove box back up. With a delicate hand, he cradles the dangling wires. He moves them from side to side, tilting his head to get a better view of all the innards of the steering column.

With the tools that he stole along with the car, and with the knowledge of automachanics that he gained while in juvenile detention, he begins reassembling. It’s

sundown by the time he finishes putting it all back together as best as he can, so he wakes up Mira, who has stayed asleep all day, and the two go to the gas station for dinner. Two cans of potted meat, a box of crackers and three freckled bananas. He explains to her about the car, and how losing a day wasn't good because after tomorrow night they would no longer have money to stay at the hotel.

They return to the Rose Inn so that Mira can go back to bed, but it's several hours longer until Caden manages to sleep too but poorly.

In his dream before waking, she's a small child and he's as he is now and their parents have never been. He feeds her, bathes her and puts her to bed and reads her to sleep and leaves her sleeping in the safe glow of an orange light in the wall socket and he is her father. Her true intended one. And still as a dreamer he recedes from this silent content, drifts into an ether, becomes a conscious dreamer, and thinks: I could never earn that. Could never be that capable, that blessed. All I have is the right to convey her from one world to another. Granted to me only once.

The alarm goes off at dawn, waking Caden, who then wakes Mira. They take the car Uptown and Caden needles it along like through a maze. The traffic is faster and heavier and Caden spends a lot of time cussing through his teeth and twisting the wheel, the rubber crumbling in his sweating hands.

The Magnolia Music Corner Store is one of the last Uptown stores they check. When they get close to it, Caden parks along an empty span of streetside so he can have room enough to ease the car parallel to the curb. They get out and walk.

At the front entrance, the sign in the door says open, but when Caden tries it, he finds the doorlatch to be locked. He reads the store hours posted below the open sign.

“It should be open,” he says. They stand around for a moment. Caden knocks. He adjusts the weight of body back and forth. His hands are restless. “Stay here,” he says and then runs down the steps and wanders up and down one sidewalk and then up and down the other and then returns to the front door. A young man walks up, smoking a cigarette, and when he reaches the front door to unlock it, he nods to Mira and apologizes for being late out at lunch.

“You work here?” says Caden, coming up the porch steps.

“Uh, yeah.”

“We’re from out of town.” Caden sticks out his hand.

“Oh. Welcome to New Orleans. I’m Theo. How long are y’all in town for?”

“Actually,” says Caden, “We’re moving here.”

“No shit? Welcome home, then. Where y’all moving from?”

Caden doesn’t answer but instead asks for a cigarette.

“That’s Mira, my sister.”

The two look at each other for a moment without speaking, and then Caden asks him about John-Robert, telling him the whole story.

“Never heard of him,” says Theo. “There’s a good chance he’s not even in the city anymore. A lot of people didn’t come back after Katrina.”

“That’s what people are telling me,” says Caden as he turns and leaves, taking Mira by the wrist.

The last few stores are as futile as the previous ones, and as they return to the Rose Inn, the silence in the car is heavier than it was this morning. This silence hangs in the room, too. Broken at last by Mira, saying, “My stomach feels inside out.”

Caden, who has been standing at the sink and reviewing the map and the list splayed out on the counter, looks up at himself in the mirror as though he had been the one who spoke. They haven’t eaten a meal all day. All that’s left from last night is half a sleeve of crackers. He gives those to her.

“I’m—” he says to her but seems unable to continue speaking, instead he swallows down the unspoken words and returns to the sink. He moves the map around in small adjustments. His eyes switch about and never settle. His head cocks to the side at the sound of the saltine wrapper being crumpled into a ball and crickling back towards its manufactured shape after being set down somewhere. The breast of his shirt trembles to the beat of his heart again. He makes two fists, one around the map and the other around the list, and then the fists mash together, molding the two articles into a single wad of paper which he throws into the toilet with a deep-throated grunt that echoes out from the bathroom and startles Mira from her TV absorption.

Caden crosses the room, saying, “I know, I know, I know,” in urgent grunts, and then sits on his side of the bed, mumbling from deep in his throat. Mira keeps her eyes on him. Her lips move as if speaking in mute. Caden looks away from her. His back and shoulders and neck go rigid and he stands back up and shuffles to the window to wrench apart the drapes and peer out upon the parking lot, only to be met with a dark glassy reflection of his unshaven and crooked face and Mira sitting on the bed over his pent-up shoulder—she like a glassy apparition too, one of watchful concern, a contrast to his

derangement and anger. He watches her in this way, and she watches him this way too. Brother and sister. Their eye contact separated by a degree of nightly reflection and another degree of distance and a final degree of indirection.

“I’m sorry, Mira,” he says. His monotone voice bounces off the window.

“It’s okay,” she says.

His jaw muscles bulge and release. His eyes cut away from hers as though the buffer of three degrees is still not enough for him to stay composed under her watch.

“I can’t help but feel like I’m failing,” he continues, still speaking into the window. “I’m at a loss. My thinking was so clear. Now it’s not. I’m scared. And I can’t think past the fear.”

She says nothing but keeps her watch on Caden’s ghostly face. His eyes flash up at her and then shunt back downwards.

“If only we weren’t out of money.”

Mira adjusts herself on the bed, putting her foot up underneath her. In the window it looks like she levitates for a moment and then lowers back down.

“I’ll have to find a job somehow. Which means I’ll have to leave you alone.”

He turns from the window.

“Does that sound okay? Me leaving you by yourself during the day? Just for a few hours. And you could sleep in the car.”

Caden returns to the bed and sits watching her. She looks down to her lap as though thinking. She doesn’t respond. Her expression is empty. She keeps her eyes downward.

“Please, Mira. Is that okay? Would you be okay? It’s the only option.” He takes up her hand. “Mira?” She looks at him. “If I do this will you stay in the car while I’m gone? Would you stay put? Only for a few hours? You could sleep the whole time. You wouldn’t even realize I’m gone.”

She looks down and up and down. Her thin lashes fluttering.

“Please, Mira. We have to.”

She doesn’t look back up. She never responds and her expression remains empty.

The low sky at the end of South Carrollton Avenue is hazy pink and orange through long streaking cirrus clouds. Straight above, the deep blue lightens, becoming sharply daylight before the eye. There’s a dull, early-morning murmur carrying the trills and inflections of Mexican Spanish. Caden is sitting on his tool bag with his back against the tree. He and the half-dozen Mexicans nearby are waiting for work out front of the Home Depot. In the parking lot sits the Neon out of which Mira watches Caden. From his periphery, Caden watches Mira back, careful not to look right at her.

The morning is fresh and cool and serene. Everything is dew-misted and the air is wet with the remnants of fog. Traffic is sporadic and solitary and peaceful. Only a few minutes pass before a large red truck pulls up along the curb. The Mexicans who are sitting now stand, and the Mexicans already standing begin to mosey closer to the curb. Caden stands but remains at the back of the group. The window rolls down but the driver remains a shadowy silhouette.

“Hey, young man,” says the driver.

Caden approaches the truck when he realizes the driver is speaking to him.

“Yessir.”

“You do drywall, son?”

“Yeah.”

“Those your tools?”

“Yessir.”

“You speak any Spanish?”

“Somewhat, yeah.”

“Can you talk with these guys for me? Have them decide amongst themselves the two best drywallers that got their own tools and transportation? Tell ‘em it’s my house. I’m the owner. I’ll pay cash.”

Caden relays this and two men step forward immediately as though it’s already been discussed between them. After translating between the two Mexicans and the homeowner, it’s decided that Caden will join the two Mexicans in their truck and they will follow the homeowner to his gutted house.

The Mexicans’ truck is in the parking lot not far from the Neon, but because they’re in a rush to follow the homeowner, Caden doesn’t stop to tell Mira where he’s going. All she can do is watch as he crosses the parking lot and climbs into the bed of the truck. As the truck pulls out, he holds up his open palm and pumps his hand three times as to say, “Stay. Stay. Stay.”

The sun has gone down and they are still at work hanging drywall. They don’t want to stop yet because the homeowner has stipulated that he won’t pay until the job is done, and so their goal is to finish entirely by the end of tomorrow.

“Por favor,” Caden pleads. “Regresamos mañana. Por favor.”

The Mexicans seem sympathetic yet equally determined to work for a few more hours. Caden leaves them and tracks down the homeowner in another room of the house and asks for a ride back to the Home Depot. He's fidgeting and wide-eyed with desperation, but the man is hesitant to leave the Mexicans alone so he arranges for one of them to drive Caden back.

"I'm assuming you'll be back tomorrow to help finish up," says the homeowner from his porch and it stops Caden in midstride.

"Would that be okay?"

"Son," the homeowner says and then laughs through his teeth like a tisk and looks aside in his disbelief and says, "So you were ready to run off just like that?"

"It's an emergency. I can come back to work tomorrow though?"

"That's fine, son," he says, resigned and looking aside.

At that, Caden jumps into the truck and the peeved Mexican drives them away.

He's dropped off at the curb about twenty yards from the Neon. The parking lot is lit where the Neon sits in a far side-row partially shadowed by a ragged crape myrtle, and he can't see if Mira is in it or not. Ten yards away, Caden hunches low and cranes his neck, continuing his long and quick strides, and then he straightens up and sprints the rest of the way, throwing open the driver's side door when he gets there and bends himself in and contorts around to check the back seat. Mira is nowhere inside. He scans the parking lot. Three people exit the Home Depot, returning to one of only a few remaining cars. No one else is around. No movement.

Wincing and pacing, exasperated utterances shunt out from under his breath, and he wrings his hair back tight, his chest heaving out and in. He runs towards the store

several paces, and then halts and runs back to the car, dropping to his hands and knees to check underneath. He scans the sidelining darkness of a debris-strewn gravel lane separating the Home Depot from a Save-a-Center grocery store. Portable fencing blocks access to the gravel lane from the parking lot, but several spaces from the car there's a V-shaped gap in the fence made by two damaged chainlink panels, so Caden passes through it and follows the lane away from the lights of Carrollton.

“Mira,” he says in a raspy whisper. “Mira?” The crunch of gravel beneath his feet drowns his voice.

A spike of buried rebar protruding several inches from the ground trips him and he falls hard on both extended hands, palm-out, and rolls on his back in silent agony. When he gets up, he slows on a thickening darkness that surrounds a roll-off dumpster. Wreckage debris mounds above its rim and litters the lane around it like the scree of a demolished home. His foot catches again but he doesn't fall, instead skittering forward through the rocks amidst a soft grunt, blind and fragmented in the dark and tussle. Once he's clear of the object he's kicked he continues for several paces but then stops. He turns and cranes, cautious, slow.

“Hello?” he says to the object he kicked—a leg and foot extended away from the roll-off as though the steal container conceals the rest of the body beneath it.

Caden takes a step closer and the leg slides back several inches and the change of angle somehow increases some distant illumination which shines off the skin of the leg. The calf is like plaster: pale and hairless. And the foot is dressed in a short shoe that doesn't quite meet the ankle. Caden's body tenses and then he lunges forward saying, “Mira. Mira.” Down in the impenetrable shadow at the base of the roll-off Caden's body

envelops Mira's and he shakes her in gently rigid bursts, his breathless voice repeating her name. She responds in soft grunts. Her hand raises into the lesser shadows and wraps around Caden's neck as he gathers her up in his arms and lifts her, both of them reaching upward under his unsteady legs.

Carrying her to the car, he ignores the employee who has stopped in the parking lot between his car and the store to watch, rigid and unmoving as if stunned, while Caden works the car door open and settles Mira into her seat. He kneels by her and inspects her under the domelight. No blood. No abrasions. He questions her, not leaving her time to respond. But she's not in a responsive state anyway, her eyes half-closed and her head casting in languid circles. Caden pulls parts of her shirt into the light—it's botched with grey dust. No tears or stretches in the fabric. He lifts the shirt and tugs at the top of her pants. The button is clasped and the zipper is up. He lifts the shirt further, bunching it up beneath her unsupported breast, revealing to the pale, unblemished skin.

“Scuse me,” says a man, the employee. Caden looks up over his shoulder and the man looking down at him from several feet back shakes his head and says, “I don't think so, buddy. Cops are coming.”

He's holding an unfolded pocket knife down by his side, twisting it back and forth so to catch Caden's eye. His shoulders are notched up and his arms crook at the elbows and his stance is wide and oblique with the hungback heel lifted slightly off the pavement. Altogether, he's prepared to fight, despite being gray-haired, looking like a young man too soon gone old. “You're going nowhere till they get here,” he says. There's a wavering to his otherwise firm voice.

Mira's head is propped up by the headrest and is turned towards the man. Her tired half-mast eyes are waiting upon him.

"Is this man harming you?" the man asks.

When she doesn't respond, Caden says, "She's my sister."

"You know I ain't asking you. I'm asking her."

"She wandered off and got lost. I'm making sure she's okay."

He's still kneeling by Mira, his torso twisted back, his eyes turned up aiming past his narrowed underbrow.

"Well, I'll let the cops decide if that's true or not."

"I'm not waiting for the cops."

"If you're telling me the truth then you shouldn't have a problem telling to the police."

"It has nothing to do with what I've said. I'm not waiting."

"Try me."

"No."

In a release of tension, the man adjusts his weight while giving a quick chuckle, and then says, "There's no other options you got, son."

Caden's throat bulges up and down with a hard swallow and his eyes shut and stay shut while he says, "Stop always calling me son, you old son-of-a-bitch."

The man blinks with shadowed fluttering lids, adjusts his weight again, says nothing in return. Caden launches to his feet and wrestles with the man. They both fall, and as the man lands on the pavement first, Caden lands on top of him, driving his shoulder into the man's breastplate.

When Caden stands, he's in shock at what he's done. The man hacks a spatter of blood that slaps across his cheek. And with this cough, like a signal, Caden turns back to the car, shuts Mira's door, saying, "He'll be fine," and takes his seat behind the wheel and drives away, quick but steady, keeping his eyes trained between the road ahead and the road in the rearview, taking the final length of Carrollton up towards City Park into which he turns at Lelong Drive, skirts around the art museum and continues inward along the webbing of unlit and unmarked streets that weave and turn through the copse of trees.

On the shoulder of a street in the deep woods of the park and sitting in their seats, Caden tells Mira to shut her eyes, to go to sleep.

"Caden?" she says. He doesn't respond. Since leaving the parking lot, he's been curt and impatient with her.

"We're going to bed out here?" she asks.

The sky is starless and moonless and almost nothing is visible of each other.

"Yes. Now sleep." He reaches across her and pulls the recline lever. The back drops and she falls with it with an eek.

"Sleep now, all right," he says, reclining his own seat and nuzzling his back into it, folding his arms and shutting his eyes.

The windows are lowered an inch for air but instead only the deafening maniacal shrill of cicadas all rattling out of their shells and the bobbling thirsty mosquitoes wandering for blood enter the car. No wind passes under the trees. Nothing to thin out and cool the water-thick air.

Caden sighs against and amongst this. He jerks and slaps at the zizz of a mosquito in his ear. A woody crack echoes out from underneath the canopy and fills the cab, the source of it sounding ubiquitous and lending no certain direction for Caden to look.

“What was that?” Mira asks after he gives up on swiveling his head around and searching the dark nothing beyond the windows. Fear is discernable in her voice, and no hint of sleep.

“Nothing. Just a tree limb breaking under its own weight,” he says. “It’s okay. Okay? Go to sleep.”

“Is it safe?”

Caden looks towards her even though she can’t be seen at all so low in the car.

“We’ll be safe, Mira.” His voice now soft again. Almost pleading. “You’re safe to sleep. Okay?”

She doesn’t respond. She doesn’t move or make a noise. Caden keeps his watch on her despite. His ears attuned to her presence. Soon his face is dripping with tears and snot. He tries to wipe the tears away with shaking hands and sniff the snot back into his head with the breath of quivering lungs.

His ineffective eyes remain open the entire night. They witness the dawn that grows down from above and transforms the surrounding darkness into a heavy whispering fog.

In the full daylight, the morning still sharp and crisp, Caden parks the car catty-corner to the homeowner’s house, Mira asleep beside him. He shakes her awake and waits for her to rub her eyes open and look around before helping her straighten up her

seatback. He points out the windshield to the house. The Mexican's truck is parked in front. He explains to her that he will be in the house and nowhere else, that she must stay in the car, but that if she were to leave the car she should not go anywhere at all for any reason except to the house that he will be in. Before leaving, he manages to get her to look at him in the eye and repeat these rules aloud.

The homeowner greets Caden with a handshake and Caden picks up working beside the two Mexicans. By ten o'clock, there's nothing left of the morning coolness and the three drywallers are sweating. The homeowner comes into the room they're working and says, "Found someone who says she knows you, son."

Caden turns and sees Mira straggling behind the homeowner, her wide eyes scanning the naked interior. Caden's eyes go wide as well but in expression of guilt. He walks around to her. Strands of sweat-drenched hair cling across her forehead and down the sides of her face and around her neck. Wet splotches darken her shirt.

"Shit," Caden says under his breath, and then to Mira, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"I need to breathe."

Caden nods. He turns to the scrutinizing homeowner.

"I'm really sorry about this," he says. "This is my sister, Mira."

"Oh, a sister. Yeah, I see the resemblance."

"She's with me for the day. Is there any way she can hang around here while I work? She's no trouble."

"Sure, of course she isn't." He turns to Mira. "It'd be cooler for ya in the backyard. There's a bench-swing in the shade you can nap on or what-have-you."

Caden thanks him and then leads Mira out back and to the swing and goes back over his rules about leaving. She stares at him, blinking.

“You’ve done so well,” he adds after examining her face, her look. “You did exactly what I asked just now. Thank you for listening. It’s a big help, okay?”

She nods.

He fidgets and then wraps her in a hug and says, “I love you, Mira,” and then quickly lets her go and returns to the house.

About two hours of steady work pass when Caden begins to miss his mark with the drill. He sways. His face goes pallid, turns a bloodless grey and almost green. He lifts the drill above his head to start a new row working down but before he can start he faints. In the fall he strikes his head which leaves a short cut. While he remains out, the bleeding is staunch and the wound is held shut with a pair of butterfly bandages applied by one of the Mexicans.

When he regains consciousness he’s forced to drink water and argues with the homeowner against going to the hospital.

“I haven’t eaten is all,” he explains.

“The hell you doin’ not eating, boy?” His eyes flash and his face crooks and his head nods to the side and looks to Mira who was called in and is now sitting beside him.

“When was your last meal, then?”

“Night before last.”

“Fucksake, son.” And he leaves the porch where they’re sitting and returns with a small cooler, removing a banana from it and wrapping Caden’s hand around it. “You eat that, then split this with your sister,” removing a sandwich in plastic wrap, “who, I’m

assuming is starving too, then drink some more of that water. Do that and then we'll see about you getting back to work.”

“Thank you,” says Caden.

The homeowner watches with the face of agitation while the two begin to eat, and then he tisks and shakes his head and leaves the porch.

After an hour of rest Caden resumes his work and finishes out the day which ends at nightfall with the completion of the job and a paycheck.

As they approach the Rose Inn, flickering blue lights can be seen spilling out onto Tulane Avenue from the parking lot. Caden drives the car past. He turns it around after a block and finds a route to City Park that doesn't take them near the Home Depot.

They spend the night where they did the previous. Mira sleeps. Caden doesn't until dawn, and even then only briefly.

Once the sun is up, Caden reparks the car and the two spend the majority of the morning on foot, finding fast food on City Park Avenue and then returning to the car, dripping sweat as they walk.

Caden sits at a picnic table while Mira sits under a nearby oak, grazing under the spindly branches that seem to want to engulf her and hug her into the earth. Nearby is the car that Caden has reparked again, situating it in a spot next to a dumpster, and having backed it in. The maroon paintjob on the trunk, as with the roof and the hood, is weathered and mottled white in places, and in some spots the paint is worn through to the steel and the steel is rusted. The back bumper hangs aslant and is covered in stickers relating to politics and God.

“You ready, Mira? Let’s go” Caden says.

She looks at him and says nothing.

“Come on.”

They drive Uptown, returning to the Magnolia Music Corner Store.

“Why not, huh?” Caden says even though Mira hasn’t said anything.

Theo is at the register smoking a cigarette when the front door opens inward. A small smile pushes his rosy cheeks upward. Once the two have crossed the gallery halfway, he says, “Howdy.”

Caden doesn’t pretend to be customer. He stops at the counter and looks at the smiling cashier for a moment and says, “I saw a sign out front. It says y’all are hiring.”

“Yeah,” says Theo. “We sure are.”

“Can you pay in cash by any chance?”

“I don’t pay shit, dude. I just work here. But yeah, they’ll pay you under the table here.”

“How do I apply?”

“You’ll have to come back tomorrow. They don’t let me handle that kind of stuff.”

The two watch each other for a moment. Caden fidgets.

“Thing is, is there a cheap hotel in the area? Real cheap. We’re at the Rose Inn right now but—”

“That shit hole?” Theo says with a lungful of smoke hampering his voice. “Y’all really don’t want to be staying there. Man, that place is no good.” He appears overwhelmed by this, and increasingly distracted by it. “Jesus, man,” he says.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying,” says Caden. “Is there anywhere else less scary but just as cheap?”

Theo looks at Mira. He puts out his cigarette and lands his eyes back on Caden. He sighs through his nostrils and says, “Caden, right? Look, there’s nowhere cheap in this part of town that I know of. And I doubt that cheap-and-safe even exists at all in this city. Not the kind of cheap you’re probably talking about.” He pauses to light another cigarette, his eyes glancing from the flame to Caden and then to Mira. “Okay,” he says through a cloud of smoke and then takes another drag. “So look, why don’t y’all go back down to Carrollton and go to this place called O’Henry’s right over here and get some burgers or something. I’m off in an hour and I’ll meet y’all there and by then I’ll have some intel on what y’all can do for the time being, because that other place—I can’t just let—I have a sensitive conscience or something. I mean, it’s technically a place where you go to get either prostitutes, drugs or murdered. You know. So, y’all just hang tight and I’ll meet you over there in about an hour, and hopefully I can help you out a little. Is that cool?”

Caden nods and says, “O’Henry’s?”

“Yeah. One hour.”

Theo arrives an hour and a half later. The two have eaten and are waiting at their table on the balcony overlooking the avenue where twice a streetcar has rattled by. Mira has propped her elbow on the table and is holding up her sleeping head with her hand, and when Theo sits into his clattering chair with a gruff sigh she startles awake. A waitress follows not far behind him with three beers that he’s ordered at the bar

downstairs. She's hesitant to place one in front of Mira but does so anyway, and then rolls her eyes at Theo before walking away.

“So y'all aren't criminals or anything are you?” is the first thing Theo says upon sitting, and he upturns his bottle of beer, drinking it steadily with his eyes cast down on Caden, who shows no sign of responding. His face is blank and set on Theo.

Theo projects his voice straight from his throat—a noise that sounds like he's saying “Oh” only it doesn't come from his mouth because his mouth is busy drinking. He sits forward and puts his beer down and says past the back of his hand as he wipes his chin, “Sorry. That came out weird. What I mean to say is: are you really interested in the job?”

Caden looks angry and bewildered but says, “Yeah. I really am.”

“Cool. So here's the deal. Would you guys be interested in crashing at my place tonight? And then I can bring you to the store in the morning.”

Caden's face breaks into an open smile and then he laughs.

“It sounds weird I guess to some people. But I've housed strangers before and it was totally fine, you know. I mean, y'all seem straight, right? Brother and sister. New in town. Just applied at the Magnolia. So fuck it. Why not, right? Do unto others, some shit like that.”

Caden is laughing harder and harder. His face reddens and tears build up in his eyes. All the while, Theo's enthusiasm dwindles and is replaced by embarrassment. His face also reddening.

“Okay, man, you don’t have to act like it’s crazy that I’m being generous. People do this kind of shit all the time. Maybe not where you’re from. But around here, yeah, sure.”

“Relief,” says Caden, stifling his laughter and composing himself. “It’s relief. You have no idea. We’ve had a real hard time lately. Miserable. A little bit of help at this point feels like—It’s indescribable.”

Theo’s spirits are back on the rise, a cautious smile from twisted pursed lips.

“Really, though?” Caden adds. “You mean it? The offer?”

“Of course.”

“You have no idea how helpful this is. It’s like a huge weight being lifted. Thank you.”

Caden nods and drinks down his beer.

The moment passes into silence and the three look out over Carrollton Avenue. When the waitress returns, Caden orders another round, except sweet tea for Mira.

“Yeah, it’s almost hard not to get hired actually. I got hired there practically on accident.”

“What do you think my chances are?”

“Got any skills?”

“I can read.”

“Yeah, so can everyone.”

“I worked in a greenhouse once.”

“This isn’t a farm, man. Come on. It’s a—Okay, no. Look, I was just wondering if you have computer skills or experience in sales or running a register or some shit like that.”

“I don’t have a lot of experience with those.”

Theo shakes his head and waves his hand as if casting off the direction their conversation is taking.

“Don’t worry about that shit anyway. Don’t worry. I was just asking because I don’t know why.”

He takes a long drink and slams the beer down, creating a slow spume of foam that dribbles down the side of the bottle, which he ignores.

When they leave O’Henry’s a couple of hours later, Caden and Theo are bumping into each other and into Mira and into objects that they pass on the sidewalk, and their words are loud and slurred.

Theo says, “We’ll walk to my place, cool? We don’t need to drink and drive unless we have to, right?” He puts his arm around Mira’s shoulders and says, “If only you had a driver’s license, huh?” And then removes his arm and stumbles along his trajectory.

Chapter Four

Caden wakes up with a twinge in his neck. His head is heavy. His brain is tired. His thoughts, viscous.

“Morning,” he says to Mira who has wandered in from the guest bedroom where she slept.

“Morning.”

“Breakfast?”

“Yeah.”

“He told us not to steal his stuff, but what’s a little food, right?”

He shuffles to the kitchen and he can sense her watching him. He opens the fridge, expecting it to be empty, but instead finds a bewildering amount of food. He opens the pantry door finding the shelves full of food. He throws a large bag of assorted candy to Mira and she catches it with a squeak. He bounces around, almost dancing, his mood having improved. After further exploring the kitchen, unsure of what to do with all the food that’s available, he returns to the livingroom and settles on the couch with a copy of *Tropic of Cancer* taken from the coffee table. Two or three hours pass before Theo comes out.

“Holy shit,” he says, startled by Caden and Mira sitting there.

Caden doesn’t think much of Theo’s surprise. He holds up the book and says, “Interesting book.”

“Yeah,” says Theo in slow agreement. “It’s pretty good.” He sits on a stool next to the counter that divides the kitchen and the living room. He runs his hands through his greasy hair.

“How’d you find out about this? School?”

“No, Nick. The store owner.” He rubs at his forehead while coming up with this answer. “He’s also a professor and he talks like one, always rambling and telling us how to think and what to read.” He shoves open a window and then finds a cigarette and lights it. “I never read shit until I started working there. He gives me weird fucking stuff like that all the time. He’s—you’ll see. He’s really smart, but definitely bonkers. Great guy, though. Good people.” He looks at Mira. “Toss me a, uh. Toss me, uh. What’s in there?”

Mira digs through the bag but no candy is left.

“None?” he says. “That’s fine. That’s fine. I feel like an omelet anyway.”

He stands from the stool and wanders into his kitchen mumbling to himself as he opens the refrigerator. “How’s omelet sandwiches sound?” he says over his shoulder. “I’m a great chef, by the way. I’m like a magician when it comes to cooking.”

Mira nods her head at Caden and Caden says yes, uncertain as to what exactly Theo means. His curiosity is spurred, having such a limited concept of how food is put together, so he moves to the stool where Theo had been and watches in silence.

“When do we need to be at the store,” he asks.

Theo stops to look at him and to think. “About eleven, I guess. What time is it now?”

“A little over nine.”

“Perfect. Doesn’t matter anyway. Claudia’s coming down for breakfast probably. She’s, I don’t know what: type-A, maybe? I don’t really know what that means though. Let’s just say she’s the responsible one here. Fortunately, she lives in the unit upstairs and doesn’t have to go far out of her way to tell me what to do.”

“She works at the store too?”

“Yeah. You’ll meet her in a minute. She’s probably one of the best people I know.”

He returns to cooking. Drawers open and close, pots or pans clatter, two or three sources of heady smells and oily sizzling emanate from the stovetop. He mumbles to himself from time to time. He mutters, “No, no, shit,” and continues shuffling and pivoting around. An egg drops on the floor and he says, “Fuck it, man.” At one point he turns, beating a bowlful of eggs and cream and says, “To be honest, when I woke up this morning, I had forgotten y’all were here.” And then returns to the stove.

When Caden offers to help, Theo at first seems too focused to answer, but then he says, “I don’t know, man. I don’t know what I’m doing until I do it, so I can’t really say what comes next.”

Caden watches for a moment longer and nearly returns to the couch, but then Theo says over his shoulder, “Yes! Actually,” as he jostles around a mound of chopped vegetables in a large skillet with one hand and with the other adjusts a burner nozzle for a skillet of bacon, the whole pound of it frying all at once, popping out grease and making him yelp. “Yeah. The cheese is out, but needs to be grated. Can you get that? Watch the broken egg. You can go ahead and grate the whole thing. It don’t matter.” Caden has never grated cheese before but is glad not to be put to one of the other incomprehensible tasks that Theo is busy with. “And another thing that would be killer,” adds Theo, “is if you opened a beer and just sort of set it on the counter there. Thank you. Have one too, man. Mira, too, if she wants one.”

Caden looks over at her. She's watching every move Theo makes, her lips glistening and her eyes steady.

They've eaten. It might have been the best meal Caden's ever had. He can't think past it to judge any other meals.

Theo finishes compiling the last sandwich, the one for Claudia, and finally sits down to eat his own. It's now about a half past eleven. The front door punches open but jams on a flipflop.

"Theo, goddamnit," a woman says, not angrily but resigned.

Theo removes the flipflop, trying to talk through a mouth full of food, saying, "Wait, Claudia, wait."

Partly, and flustered by the door, Claudia enters. Caden's first impression of her is rapid and stilling. She's wearing a tube top and a long summer skirt which hangs on her hips. Her feet are bare. She walks in, tall and graceful, with a subtle energy to her movements. He hasn't made eye contact with her yet, but his observation of her is so quick that she hasn't even noticed yet that he's there.

She gives Theo a motherly lesson on why not to leave objects lying in the way of the front door. She bends to pick up her keys, which she had dropped onto the doorjamb. Caden notices her hair: a single thick wavy bush with about a half dozen thin dreadlocks nestled in. All of it loosely bound together with a thin green band.

She enters into the apartment fully and looks at Caden and Mira sitting on the couch. She shows no sign of surprise at all. Merely smiles and says, "Oh, hi," and then,

turning to Theo: “Why didn’t you say you had guests.” She turns back to the two and says, “Excuse me. I’m Claudia.”

“Caden.”

Mira stares at Claudia, showing no sign of speaking.

“This is my sister Mira.”

“So nice to meet you, Mira.” She says it in a way that makes Caden certain that Claudia has instantly seen Mira for who she is: not direct as to an adult, not mildly jocular as to a teenager, not a sweet cajoling as to a child, but instead in a manner as elusive as Mira’s own nature. It could be only his imagination. It could be that he’s become infatuated with Claudia just in these few seconds and readily finds any interaction that she has with Mira to be a sign that she, Claudia, can ease his concern that if he were to be picked up, Mira wouldn’t have to return to their parents, that maybe Claudia could look after her.

As he watches her stroll into the kitchen, sniffing out her sandwich, mothering Theo, muttering to him, he realizes that there’s an element of appeal beyond her appearance. Something unsettling. Intimidating—

While Claudia eats at the dividing counter, Theo tells her about Caden and Mira’s situation, and about bringing them in to get a job at the store. She’s a thoughtful listener and she keeps her thoughts to herself until Theo is finished speaking, which, to Caden’s relief, doesn’t take long and skirts the fact that he, Theo, still has no clear idea about who the two are or where they’re from or what their history is. But now, Caden can feel that his identity will soon be scrutinized.

Claudia, nodding and chewing, turns on her stool and speaks with a cheek bulging with her latest bite: “Did Theo tell you that the Magnolia is a dump and in a perpetual state of chaos?”

“I didn’t,” answers Theo.

“Well it is. But the owner has been wanting to do a big overhaul, clean everything up and get it all organized.”

“Is that why you’re hiring?” Caden says.

“We’re hiring,” Claudia says over Theo, who is trying to answer too, “because we recently lost a guy.”

“That was Tom,” says Theo, seeming eager not to get left out of the conversation. “He got arrested and put in jail. Reportedly—”

“—Purportedly.”

“—Purportedly, he was using the store as a front to sell drugs without us knowing. But he said he never sold as much as they said he did. Either way.”

“So what we’re trying to says is,” says Claudia, “we’re real laid back at the store, and as long as you’re not involved in any wildly illegal activities, we’d like to have y’all, if y’all are interested in a job.”

Caden doesn’t know what to say. All he can think of is how he’ll be breaking her one and only stipulation the moment they take him on. Their only innocence will be in his secrecy.

“You’re not going to give the third degree like you gave me when I got hired?” says Theo.

“I’m not trying to scare them off like I was with you.”

Theo twists up his face and flips Claudia off.

“Real nice,” she says and stands. “Well, now that we’re good and late, we should get going. Y’all ready.”

Caden looks down at himself, at the clothes he’s worn and slept in for three nights now, and at Mira, whose equally is disheveled and is exuding her alien smell quite strongly.

“Y’all look fine,” says Claudia assures. “You’ll find that if you try to look nice you’ll feel awkward and out of place.”

They climb into Claudia’s car, everyone moving aside some sort of clutter, and drive off. When they get there, Claudia and Theo move slow as they both bend back into the car and rummage around, taking up various items.

“Why’s Nick here?” Claudia says to Theo. “Did you talk to him already?”

“I didn’t tell him.” Theo turns to Caden and Mira walking patiently behind him and says, “The owner’s here. You get to meet him.”

Claudia opens the front door. From the porch steps where he’s still ascending, Caden sniffs the palpable air of incense, cigarette smoke and must. Upon entering, he’s aware of two men across the large room at the glass counter but it takes him a moment of squinting and blinking to adjust to the sudden dimness. In this sensory gap, a clench of fear comes over him that this is all a part of him getting caught in an elaborate scheme set up by the authorities. Broken parole, grand theft auto, crossing state lines, kidnapping.

He hears a man with a deep grizzled cigarette voice saying, “I didn’t even know we’d ordered any more damn shirts. Since when’ve we been ordering new tees without letting me know?”

“Not first thing in the morning, Quinn,” says Claudia.

“Got new recruits,” says Theo, eager to break the news.

Caden, seeing better enough, steps up with his hand out and introduces himself and then Mira.

Quinn shakes Caden’s hand but says nothing. His face straining, he looks at Theo.

“It’s basic mathematics. We fire one, we hire one. We fire two, we hire two. How many did we fire? One. How many do we hire, then? One. And how many do we have here? Two. One, one. Two, two. One, two? Uh-uh, Theo. One, *one!* Goddamnit!”

Caden’s getting ready to leave when the second man at the counter clears his throat and says, “Quinn, if you don’t settle down, it will be two.”

Quinn goes against everything Claudia and Theo have said about the type of atmosphere to expect here, which creates a sudden and deep sense of intrigue for Caden as to the nature of such people like Quinn who, for one reason or another, can’t control themselves from their anger.

“Why don’t you head upstairs,” continues the man who Caden assumes must be Nick, “and take a chill pill. Or a Quaalude, or whatever you take.”

Quinn breaks his glare from Theo by looking straight up to the ceiling and sighs and says, “Shit.”

As Quinn makes his way back, Nick calls after him, “I should just slap you, you know?” And then he looks at Caden and Mira both and lets a broad smile grown across his face.

Caden reintroduces himself and Mira, and apologizes.

“A friendly word of advice,” he says. “Don’t apologize to Quinn when he’s like that. I’m Nick. Proud owner. And my concerns aren’t where Quinn’s are. We did let go of only one employee recently, but numbers don’t always dictate my reasoning. In this case, I trust Claudia and Theo good enough. So I say welcome.”

Caden’s first impression of Nick will have to be processed later, because now he’s still recovering from the shock of Quinn’s reaction.

Quinn comes back down within minutes, calmer, and apologizes to Caden and Mira—not Theo—and presents the employment forms, and as quickly as Theo said, the two are hired. Perhaps still ashamed, Quinn leaves the store altogether after gathering their forms, leaving Claudia and Theo to run the two through the routine.

The fact that they’re both now working fulltime on payroll makes Caden giddy to a point where he fears he might hyperventilate.

“I hope you love music,” says Claudia as her introduction to their training with subtle and parodic authority. She ambles through the front gallery inspecting the merchandise and carries on as if what she’s saying has been rehearsed. Caden and Mira follow her around. “If you’re not an encyclopedia of music, that’s fine. You can just pretend you are. Or don’t. I don’t know if it really matters either way. Honestly, working here is like tending a concession stand at a little-league baseball game or something because ninety percent of the customers these days are stoners just here to buy blunt wraps or something. And the people who do come here for music usually already know what they want and almost never ask for your opinion. A monkey could work here. I mean, Theo is—But you get it. So if I get all formal-sounding it’s really just a pretense because I’m supposed to be your supervisor or something, but—” Inaudible grumbling.

Caden feels so much relief at all this that he has to fight to keep from laughing.

“—But anyway,” she continues. “You’ll pick up on the musical stuff. It happens like osmosis. I thought I knew everything when I started. Now, I know twice as much. I mean, you’ll start spouting off names and dates and record labels and all sorts of trivia.” Her flowing ramble stops short and she grimaces. Caden can’t see what at. “We do have a roach problem. Which leads me to the gist of it—really probably the reason why Nick’s happy to take on two new employees—of why we’re planning this big, ambitious reorganizing project: to make the roaches feel unwelcome. Anyway, what I imagine we’ll have y’all doing for the most part is helping with the reorganizing project. And, Caden, Theo will show you the particulars with the register, but Mira, I’m afraid you’re too young to work at the register. Technically, you’re too young to even be in here, but we’ll keep you in the back and keep you mildly busy with...something.”

This whole time, they’ve remained in the front gallery. Caden is certain that this is because Claudia is ashamed to show them the rest of the store. Much like how he, as a youth, could never let his friends from school, the few he had, enter his own home, ashamed of the garbage piles on every surface, all of it slowly coming to view in the living room—mostly beer cans and fast food trash, overflowing ashtrays, clothes and toys in the walkways, plates with dried up dollops of ketchup, bowls with thick films of milk at the bottom, cups spilt over—the entire set of dishes in a half-radius around the couch—and on the couch, most shamefully of all, the two latent human beings, drunk and drugged, and sometimes like entirely evacuated fleshpods, abandoned by their life-forces in this filth of their own doing, and no longer aware of the cat-piss and refuse smell of their dwelling, and certainly not aware of their little girl, shinning and beautiful despite it

all, appearing from the hall to greet their son, home from school or wherever, to hug him and tell him she loves him and to tell him she's hungry, and unwittingly compound his sense of shame of home by multiples—if shame could be a quantifiable thing—at the sight and re-realization of the injustice of this squalid world in which she's forced to live.

“Well, you got to show ‘em the back,” Caden hears Theo say, picking up on the goading yet patient tone of it, still too sunk in what true dysfunction looks like—how his, Theo's, tone denotes his own awareness of Claudia's reticence and shame, which must mean it would be obvious to anyone, that Magnolia Records, in all its mess and drama, is regarded by Claudia as home, or as a place belonging to her, or her it, and, in a sense which Caden cannot identify with, a place that for Claudia is inescapable, thus requiring the changes within to offer comfort and pride. Or maybe the clutter reminds Claudia of another place in her life ridden as such, same as with Caden and his, and now he wonders if the two have more in common than either realize yet.

“Yes, I guess so,” she says. “Y'all ready to see the rest of y'all's—what do they call it—your ward?” She looks at them with a flash of a smile and then tips her head to the side for them to follow. The meaning of the word ward is not lost on Caden, and for an instant he speculates how Mira is no longer just his, but also Claudia's and Theo's. As an employee, she is now a ward of the store. The sense of relief in this is unsettling. Claudia leads them back. The carpeted floorboards sinking and moaning under their feet to where Claudia has to raise her voice an octave. Through the second gallery she says, “Miscellaneous mostly, as you see. Used CDs, here. Clothes. Posters. If you look under the CD shelves you'll see boxes, bins. They're all full of stuff. Who knows what anymore. If you look under almost anything you'll find something else stashed there.

Like here.” From the hidden center of one of three circular shirt racks, she pulls out a milk crate and in it is a cardboard box. She opens it. “Ah, assorted patches: Anarchy, Slipknot, Rebel flag, marijuana leaf, Jolly Roger, Hello Kitty. See, we’ve let the place go a little. I even sort of knew that this box was in there for like years, and I’m just now taking the time to look inside it. And now I’m going to tuck it back where it was for later.” She leads them into the third gallery and says, “Less miscellaneous, but all incredibly out of order. Mostly just CDs and VHS and DVDs. All used. But also look up there.” She points up to a poorly-installed wooden shelf about six feet up the wall holding a row of unopened action figures of various sources, mostly dark and violent cult comics, none that Caden can recognize, and above the shelf, squeezed in just below the ceiling, is what looks like an original impressionistic painting of a crab, quite appealing to the eye, but entirely out of place above the gothic action figures. Claudia looks at it all for a while and then shakes her head and continues, saying, “We’ve sold one of those toys, that I know of, and shortly after it was sold, someone had put up another toy to fill the empty gap, so I’m only guessing that there’s a whole box of those things hidden somewhere. This room has actually been my stronghold. Weird stuff gets put in here and I put it out. I’d like it to be only new and used CD’s, the used DVDs and only a select few of the VHS—meaning that most of these tapes need to go. And then everything needs to be alphabetized, which is a never-ending job in itself because customers come in and move stuff around all the time. And people like Quinn come in here with shipments of crap and just throw it all wherever. It’s a mess, and it’s all my fault, I suppose. We had a couple of guys who were better at this whole thing, but they got fired and left me in charge without explaining how anything was done. And then Katrina hit and the place was closed for

quite a while, the whole time Nick kept hoarding, and when it reopened everyone was still half-crazy and getting their lives back in order. I'm still learning the ropes, let's say. Slowly learning. So those are the four things we need to do first: weed-out, quality check, document, alphabetize. Great. Let's head up."

She leads them up the narrow stairway with her skirt gathered up in her hand. Seeing her ankles feels like an intimate moment for Caden before he reminds himself that it's only his perception, that Claudia is not aware of how this makes him feel, that following her up the stairs hasn't changed anything between them.

At the top she says, lightly, almost as if relieved to be upstairs, "Vinyl. Finally. The sole purpose of the store. This room, as you'll see, doesn't have that same psychotic neanderthal vibe as the downstairs. This is the only room that Nick respects, thus we should probably do the same. He loves these. They're his, technically. An extension of the record collection he has at his house. However, they're not documented, checked for quality, prioritized or organized—not most of them, at least. So again, these will be our tasks, indefinitely. And while it's not a bunch of miscellaneous crap, there's still a lot of work to do." She lifts the blue draping that hides the underneath of all three rows of tables that hold the wooden display boxes full of records, and behind the drapes are more boxes, cardboard ones. "And voila. More vinyl."

Caden walks along the rows of tables lifting the drapes as he goes.

"These are all his?" he says.

"In a way, yeah. He buys them all pretty much out of pocket. He doesn't even know what's in them. I don't know where he gets them. He just shows up every now and then with another box. More and more recently, too. Like I said, he's a hoarder. Vinyl

being his big thing. And then books. Jesus. I'm surprised this place isn't a book store too. He has thousands of books at home."

Caden starts flipping through the albums in the display boxes feeling Claudia's eyes on him.

"If you can handle it," she says after making him mentally squirm under her gaze for a while, "I'll have you listen to every vinyl record up here. Mira too," she adds with a sudden smile, large and exposing her two feline eyeteeth. "You look like you have good taste in music. You like the Beatles?" she asks Mira.

Caden braces.

"Yeah," says Mira.

"Me too. So does everyone though. You like David Bowie?"

"Uh-huh."

"Awesome. So do I. How about Captain Beefheart?"

"Not really."

"Me neither," Claudia says and laughs and goes to give Mira a five, which Mira reciprocates. "This chick is great," she says to Caden.

He smiles, having no idea how Mira answered those questions. He knows she doesn't know those names. Wouldn't know their music by ear either. All she's been exposed to is the country their parents listened to. He realizes that Mira must have been intuiting the answers that Claudia was looking for, perhaps reading her facial expressions, tone of voice and inflections. He almost cries he's so amazed by this possibility, and the unexpected beauty of seeing her react to another person that way. Something he's never

seen but always dreamed of. Years of daydreams and hope-glutted ruminations fallen together.

“Onward,” says Claudia in her continuing joviality. They enter a hall through a shell-curtain hung in a doorway, a sign near it says, Customers Only. Down the hall she stops and, shielding her eyes with her hand, she opens a door. “Storage room,” she says. “I can’t bring myself to look in.”

Caden looks. Clutter from top to bottom, front to back.

“It’s best we just forget that all this is here for now, ok? Just forget I showed you.” She shuts the door and moves to another one but doesn’t open it. “This is utility and cleaning. Mira, you’re awesome, which is why I hate to do this, but I’m putting you in charge of housekeeping. That’s vacuuming, dusting, trash maintenance and that’s about it. It’s not much.” She smiles, soft and warm. “You’re awesome.” She turns to Caden. “I love her already. I’m stealing her.” She parts another shell-curtain into another room. “Here’s the breakroom. To me it’s like having a locker-room inside a locker-room. On the other hand it does serve well for people who want to smoke pot or do whatever with privacy. So maybe I’m just being uptight about the redundancy of having a breakroom for a job where you do practically nothing all day. And that’s it! Congratulations. You made it through orientation without running away screaming and pulling your hair out. How about we go down and check on Theo?”

Chapter Five

Their days have fallen into order after being taken in at The Magnolia and at Theo's. Every day Caden reminds Theo that he will return the favor. As the weeks pass and Caden's overwhelming dread of getting caught have tapered, especially after parking the Neon into the far corner of the little residential parking lot behind the Maison Rouge apartment building and disconnecting the battery and claiming that it was the alternator that had blown, and that he'd get it towed only when he had earned enough money to get it fixed, all to ensure that it remained off the street and out of danger of being spotted by law enforcement.

Very little progress has been made at the store in terms of organizing, which doesn't seem to bother anyone except Caden. He's concluded that Theo and Claudia prefer it disorderly and they only complain about the state of it in order to save face for anyone who might be judging them for their slovenliness. A few times a day Caden approaches them for advice on categorizing a stack of CDs or DVDs. Usually they seem resistant to even thinking about answering his question, and by now he's taken to figuring things out on his own, and while he shuffles through the insurmountable collection, he'll frequently guide Mira along, instructing her on her cleaning duties.

With Theo being the only other fulltime employee, Caden will sometimes go for hours without seeing anyone else while toiling in the back. He enjoys the quiet and the solitude. He finds it warming. His task of analyzing, identifying and organizing the music is pleasurable. Claudia was right. He feels like he's absorbing the musical knowledge without even trying. Sometimes he'll stop organizing and simply read the names and the titles. He does so now, upstairs, familiarizing himself with the vinyl, he hears the metal

crunch of the back door opening. He looks down the hall, but because the hall is so dark the sunlight flooding in keeps him from being able to identify the person casting a silhouette in the doorway.

“Hello?” he says, preparing himself for this to be an intruder.

“Hey there.”

The voice is Nick’s. His wizened relaxedness, but a little tension remains with Caden. He’s only seen Nick a few times and has never had a full conversation with him. They’re still essentially strangers to each other.

“Just you up here?” asks Nick.

“Just me.”

“Come, then,” he says in whisper and with a headnod toward the breakroom into which he enters, adds, “Come see this.”

When Caden turns into the breakroom, Nick is already sitting at the table picking a few boiled crawfish out of a paper bag lined with a plastic bag and placing them on a splayed-out newspaper.

“There’s not enough for everybody but I’ll let you have some. Come sit. Hurry. If they catch us, I’ll feel guilty. But if they never know, then they won’t feel excluded.”

Caden sits and pulls out a crawfish.

“Isn’t that strange?” Nick continues. “I’m only ashamed of my deceitful actions if those being deceived *feel* the deceit.” He sucks the juice out of a dismembered claw. “Not my actions. *Their* feelings. Children are like that. Hiding things. Which I guess makes this childish. But there’s only enough here to satisfy two. And I know them.” Pointing at the floor with a dripping finger, chipped and faded purple polish on the nail. “They’re

fiends for this. So of course I have to hide it.” He pops a tail in his mouth. “Hm! Normally I’d just go home to eat shamefully like this, but I’m dropping off books.” He looks around the floor as though looking for the books, and then seems to remember that he hasn’t brought them in yet, and then he continues with another crawfish. “No. I don’t think it’s childish or deceitful. They’d do the same to anyone. Everyone would do what we’re doing. We’re not bad. Hiding from them. Something like this should betray a lack of integrity, the virtue of sharing. But, no, I don’t think so. I love this behavior. It’s honest in that it’s human.” He stops at last and looks at Caden. “Don’t like crawfish?”

“Never had them.”

“Well, let me show you how to peel ‘em.”

After guiding him through the process a couple of times, he continues to dismember and devour. When they’re finished, Nick balls the newspaper around the shells and squeezes the ball into the paper bag and puts the bag on the landing right outside the back door. He returns and removes two beers from the fridge and gives one to Caden.

“So where are you two from again? Did you ever tell me?”

“Mississippi.”

“Where in Mississippi?”

“Outside Oxford. Northern part of the state.”

Nick nods and says, “Right. Oxford.” He lifts his beer up but doesn’t drink from it. Instead, he swirls a finger around in the condensation left on the table. “Oxford,” he says, drawing out the ‘r’ sound in his raspy throat. “You’re from there?” he asks shortly.

“Yessir. That’s where I’m from.”

“I had a past employee from there.”

Now it’s Caden who fails to respond, becoming trans-like.

“This was a few years before Hurricane Katrina.”

“Was his name John-Robert Mayhew?”

Nick waits a moment and then sets down his beer and says, “Well, no, but his name was Rob.”

“Rob?”

“Rob Gonzalo. Why? Are you looking for a John-Robert Mayhew?”

“Yessir, he’s my brother. He lives here somewhere.”

“I thought you’re a Carlisle?”

“I am. He’s my half-brother and he kept his mother’s name, Mayhew.”

The two are silent for a long time. Their eyes drifting around the room.

“What if your Rob and my brother are the same person?” says Caden.

“Yeah. What if?”

“Well then you could maybe help me find him. I looked for John-Robert for a long time before starting work here. I couldn’t find him. All that I know is that he worked at a music store. What if it was this one and he was just using a different name for some reason. Maybe he was trying to reinvent himself?”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he didn’t like the life he had before coming here. So maybe he thought a new name would help him distance himself from that life?”

“Okay. Let’s say it’s a possibility. Does your brother have black hair? As black as yours and your sister’s?”

“Yes. But his eyes are black.”

“I remember Rob’s eyes being black, certainly. Two black sharkeyes.”

“Yes. It has to be him, right?”

“Tallish? Skinny?”

“Skinny, yeah. But I haven’t seen him in over ten years. I don’t know how tall he is.”

Nick leans back in his chair. He rubs a hand through his hair and puffs out his cheeks in subtle shock. Caden, however, dangles at the edge of his seat. He can feel the adrenaline in his heart and in his chest, making him feel like he’s sinking into himself and railing back out anew, wavelike. “This must be him,” he says.

“It must be,” Nick chuckles once.

Caden laughs and claps his hands together and says, “Well, where is he? How can I find him?”

“That I don’t know.” Shaking his head wide and his demeanor turning downward. “It’s been so long. Last I knew of him, he seemed deeply invested in the city. But that was before Katrina.”

“But he might’ve come back. If he has, then where would he be? Where did he go? He must’ve come back. Or left contacts somewhere. Someone’s got to know where I can find him.”

Nick’s brow furls deep, almost as with anger, so Caden eases back, reminds himself to be patient. To be calm.

“To be honest, I can’t say who can be contacted,” says Nick, slow and choiceful of his words. His eyes glancing about, occasionally falling on Caden. He’s watchful and

starving for the old man's words. "But I do believe that he returned to the city in the aftermath of Katrina to do his part in rebuilding. I only believe this because of my own assumptions, not of anything I've heard. I do remember him being a positively opportunistic type of guy, and I can't see him overlooking the opportunities that were available in this city after the storm. But I'll tell you what, I'll start looking around for you. There's nothing I love more than seeing family coming together." At this, Nick drains his beer and stands. He slaps a hand on Caden's shoulder and says, "I've got to get moving. It's good to have you with us, Caden. I'll see you soon."

He turns and leaves. It isn't until after the back door crunches shut that Caden says "Thank you." He can't turn out of his mind the oddness of Nick's sudden departure. As though he were suddenly afraid to sit around and speculate about John-Robert. But blanketing this was the relief of this new lead.

The fever of summer has finally broken and now New Orleans is in its first cold front of autumn. While it's expensive to keep the inside of The Magnolia cool during the summer, it's impossible to keep it warm during the winter.

Theo sits at the register, perched on the stool, reading the news on his phone. He's wearing a wool trenchcoat that he bought at the thrift store on Freret Street two days ago so it still smells musty, and everyone has already made fun of him for it, especially Claudia, but he seems determined to keep wearing it. Next to him is Claudia leaning her hips against the counter as she checks the sales log from the previous day. She's just gotten in from her other job and she's still buried in her coat, scarf, gloves, beanie. Mira wanders up from farther back. Her hair is rattier than anyone has ever seen it. Greasy and

wiry, and there appears to be a few thin dreads forming from behind her ear. Her face is red on one side and the skin around her eyes is pillowy, and the cotton blanket that she's been sleeping just now with is wrapped around her shoulders.

"Mira," says Claudia in greeting without looking up, and her tone of voice is lethargic and familiar. "Caden's in the back?" she asks.

"Yeah, somewhere," says Mira

"Sorting the new used shit?"

"No," says Theo without looking up. Lethargic and familiar too. "He's in the breakroom with Nick."

"What's Nick here for?"

"I don't know," says Theo, barely enunciating a single consonant.

"I-duh-no," says Claudia, mocking Theo's laziness of speech.

"I-uh-oh," says Mira, mocking Theo with even greater exaggeration followed by a cackle.

Upstairs in the breakroom, the coldest room in the store, Caden and Nick huddle over mugs of coffee, taking turns speaking in between long periods of silent contemplation.

"She needs dental work, too," says Caden.

"Does she have tooth pain?" says Nick.

"Some sensitivity," says Caden and then waits and then says, "But it's got to be getting there. Just big black holes in her molars. The back ones."

"You know I'd give you the money."

"I know."

“I’m in the hole, as usual.”

“I just think I might be getting another job. That’s all.”

Nick winces and slides back in his chair.

“I hate to see you go. I mean, I wish I could do more for you.”

“I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere. Just adding. Not subtracting.”

“So you think you’ll find a day-job and then work here nights?”

“If I can make it work out that way. I think it would really help me out financially.”

“I hate to see you work so much.”

“To be honest, working here isn’t like work. It’s like hanging out with friends, but with a paycheck.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Really. We’re supposed to be a family here. That’s how having a job is supposed to be. Not something you hate, like grade-school. Going to work should be like home away from home.”

“Well, that’s the truth here. It’s been a blessing.”

“Well, if you end up working elsewhere during the day, Mira can stay here while you’re out.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Caden nods, but his demeanor changes from warm to terse. “Have you,” he starts then thinks then continues, “Have you maybe heard anything or remembered anything about my brother?”

“Okay,” he says at last, putting down the mug.

“Okay what?”

“This isn’t easy to say. I have thought about it a lot. Running through my mind what’s there. I sincerely believe that it’s best that you don’t continue trying to find Rob.”

Caden looks at him sidelong and waits.

“I’m not saying this because I’m lazy and don’t feel like helping, or because I want you and your sister all to myself. It’s that it’s possible that he has moved on to a morally ambiguous lifestyle that wouldn’t be good for you and Mira.”

“Morally ambiguous? You’re talking to an ex-con.”

“Yes, I’m aware, but all that that means is that you live in a persistent state of having once been a criminal because of one thing that you did once a while ago.”

“And Rob?”

“He may be living in a persistent state of a criminal because of the things that he does over and over on a daily basis.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Technically, I’m not telling you anything.”

“It seems like you’re telling be something huge that you were keeping from me.”

“I’m saying that I can’t say for certain who Rob is or what he does know.”

“What can you say?”

Nick tightens his scarf and sinks his head down into it and emits a short shallow moan.

“Nick.”

He opens his mouth but no words come out.

“His last year working here was ninety-nine, or two-thousand maybe. I can’t remember. But we weren’t making any money at the store. I’d just lost my position at Loyola and hadn’t gotten the job at Delgado that I have now, so money was going and going. It got to a point where I had to lay off everyone except Quinn, which was painful because I had had everyone on for quite a while, but what eased the pain was that everyone had safety nets, except for Rob and except for me too. I lost my house—this old one I had for fifteen years right over here on Dublin—and I was in an apartment with most of my belongings crammed in up here and, at the time, I still had my old farm up in Tangipahoa, and I was just preparing to sell it all when it became obvious what the better option was: to lease the land to some modern-day share croppers I’d met a few years’ prior whose farming interests precluded regulations or the law, and consisted mostly of marijuana and psilocybin mushroom production. Their operations were very organized and professional. They gave me cash which I laundered through the store. Rob worked for them, but on paper he worked for me. They used my land for growing, they used my store to filter money, and they used my employee as a henchman. In return, they kept me afloat. High atop the surface. After some time, the operation found a new location—as they moved around frequently to evade detection—and when they did, Rob went with them. Never came back.”

Caden and Nick watched each other for a moment until Nick shrugged and glanced away. Caden’s face a bitter smirk.

“I’m sorry Caden,” he added almost without breath.

Caden shook his head and rolled his eyes away.

“You must realize how hard it is for me to say what went on then. How I’m so entirely implicit in who your brother is now. Who he must be. And I had known long before about his predilection to it. I knew, Caden. I’m sorry.”

Caden shakes his head again, his eyes reddening.

Chapter Six

Mira is foraging for food in Claudia's kitchen while the others are in the living room testing the quality of a used VHS copy of *Taxi Driver* for the store. She pulls open a bag of salad greens and eats the individual leaves of spinach straight from the bag using her fingers. She sits down close to Caden, so close that he has to wedge the side of his body out from under her and shift a few inches in the other direction, closer to Claudia.

"Our little bunny rabbit," says Claudia without taking her eyes off the TV.

Thirty minutes pass and the bag of greens, which held enough for four salads, is empty and is dropped upon the coffee table between Caden's propped up feet and Claudia's. Both pairs of feet are bare and both are dirty from throwing the frisbee barefoot at the park earlier that afternoon.

"You better eat some cheese, little one," says Claudia, "or all that roughage will go right through."

"There's no more left," she says.

Everyone is still too focused on the TV to look at each other when they speak. Mira especially. She doesn't even blink, not until Theo, who's draped across the lounge chair next to the sofa, begins to snore, at which she laughs despite her efforts not to. The noises she creates trying to control her laughter are unusual enough to break Caden and Claudia away from their TV absorption. They watch her as she struggles through a series of chortles and hysterical whimpers and snorts. Her face is red and veiny and a slug of clear snot has flipped out of her nostril and rests above her lip without her seeming to notice. Theo's snoring stops and she recovers, but then it starts again and so does her spasmodic laughter. Claudia and Caden look at each other, amused and pleasant.

With it being spring now, the cockroaches have come out in full. There were just as many in the detention center so Caden is comfortable with the fact that just because he can't see any right now doesn't mean he's not surrounded by them, either they're already hiding somewhere in Nick's hoard, or they're somewhere right outside, looking for a way in, trying to get in. Without warning, a memory of the man in the Home Depot parking lot comes back: of his breathless groaning and blood-foamed spittle. This leaves Caden's heart weighted down as though there's lead in his blood. He wonders if this will ever leave him.

He gives a cardboard box a light kick and listens for any scurrying and then slides the box out from under a CD rack where it's probably been sitting for several years undisturbed. He waits again for any cockroaches that might jump upon his foot and run right up his leg. There's no movement, but he's skeptical. He kneels and removes his pocket knife.

"Bwaw!" shouts Claudia, sneaking up from behind.

Despite being a skittish person, Caden doesn't startle from this, and he wonders about that. Why didn't he flinch?

"Boo," he says as he tries to think of something with actual substance.

"I see you finished the VHS catalogue," she says, encircling him and the box.

"Catalogued and shelved."

"And now this box? What's in it?"

"I think it's a mystery box."

She remains standing there looking down at him curiously. She washed her hair this morning which makes it especially frizzy, almost like a sponge helmet. He's trying to find something to say, but this is all that his mind comes up with and it wouldn't be a good thing to say, he knows, so he keeps looking up at her. It's such a fun angle to see her from. She has about a dozen faint freckles that spread across her nose and cheeks, almost in symmetrical order, and he's noticed that they disappear in winter and return in the spring. She looks up as though struck by an idea, and says, "I forgot to clock in. I'll be right back."

While she's clocking in, Caden returns to opening the box, certain it will be useless junk only worth throwing away. He slices through the tape and pulls the flaps back. Inside are stacks of pornographic DVDs. Nick's, of course. This is not the first of such a box that he has come across. He never knows how to bring up the topic, especially with Claudia, so he closes the box and pushes it back under the rack.

"Anything good?" asks Claudia from the gallery as she approaches.

"Not really."

He stands up meeting her eye to eye. There's an expectant look on her face, which is somewhat characteristic of her, and it always gives him a conflicted feeling. He enjoys the optimism that it betrays, but it also makes him anxious, feeling pressure to provide her with something, but he can never figure out what, can never provide what she is expecting.

"I think I've decided to start going through all the used vinyl upstairs," he says, finding a way to ensure that he doesn't explain what's in the box.

"Oh, boy," she says with a flash of her eyes. "Nick will love that."

He starts for the back and is glad to hear her following. As they climb the stairs, she says, “Oh, and before I forget,” having to project her voice above the creaking racket, “Darryl called.”

“Darryl?”

“The landlord.”

He’s never seen or met Darryl, and Darryl has no idea that Caden and Mira have been living with Theo for the past seven months.

“Okay.”

At the top, Claudia catches her breath before continuing. “He’s wondering about your car. He’s noticed that it’s just been sitting there in the same spot.”

“Is that a problem for him?”

“I told him it’s mine.”

Caden tenses. His stomach sinks. Theo’s harboring a fugitive. Now Claudia is claiming ownership of a car that he has stolen, that’s maybe linked to murder.

“What?” she asks. “It’s not a big deal. I thought it’d be easier that way. He’s off the case.”

“I should’ve done something about that car a long time ago.” Cinematic clips enter his mind of driving the car into the ocean, or lighting it on fire somewhere out in the countryside. He’s disgusted with the car, and himself.

“Just leave it there. It’s no big deal.” Claudia moves into his line of sight with a stern, half-cocked smile. “I never knew anyone could be so defensive about a broken down car.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles. “I just—”

Claudia walks down the hall and removes a square folding table from the storage room for sorting the records. They put a box on the table and divvy the records between them and they start sorting them by genre, checking the quality of each one as they go along. They set a separate pile for any with visible scratches that will need to be tested.

“Caden,” says Claudia, breaking a prolonged silence. “How come I know so little about you?”

Again, he tenses, wondering if the event with the car has led to this inquiry. She’s onto him. Her curiosity has been triggered by the damn car.

“You know stuff about me.”

“I know a fraction of what you know about me. You never talk about yourself.”

“There’s not much to say.”

This seems like a valid excuse. One to end this. And to add a sense of finality to this, he turns away with a stack of records to distribute along the aisles, but Claudia follows with her own stack. The genres of their chosen stacks are located on the same case but on either side, so they’re facing each other as they insert the records into the cases. Caden can sense Claudia’s eyes on him but pretends he can’t.

“Did you play any sports growing up?” she asks.

He shakes his head.

“None?”

Quickly, he stops and looks up and says, “Well, soccer.” Which is a lie.

“What else do you do?”

He ran away from home a lot. Sometimes camping out in the woods for day with no food or camping supplies and one time he got lost and almost died.

“I played football but not with a team. Just backyard football with friends.”

“Go on.”

He beat up other kids and he hated his parents. He lit fires and broke others’ belongings.

“I was in boy scouts for little bit. And I sang in the school choir but my voice went flat when I hit puberty.” Drew violent images on the walls. Stole whatever would fit in his pockets. Tried to make people feel as miserable as he did, which he now knows would have been impossible because a person’s miserableness is not knowable. “I played video games some. Read books. Did a little paintball. Camped a lot.” He can’t help but smile now because he has finally spoke the truth, the part about the camping. “Just a bunch of regular stuff, you know.”

She doesn’t seem satisfied with this and he wonders if she knows it’s all fabricated. She’s quiet for a while, mulling it over—or bored and drifting off to some other thing to question.

“So what happened then? How come you had this whole other life and yet none of it seems to exist. I get that you’re starting fresh here, but how come nothing followed you over?”

“Mira did.”

She begins to speak but he cuts her off.

“There’s no reason for anything. We just decided to move here because we were bored with rural Mississippi.”

She’s quiet again, re-assessing, and then says, quietly, “I don’t know, Caden. I’ve always felt like y’all are running from something. It’s fine if you’re running. Good if it’s

from something bad. But I feel like we know each other well enough now to trust each other.”

“Running, sure. From boredom. Rednecks and bigotry and stuff.”

She shakes her head, says, “Running, but also hiding.”

Caden is struggling to accept that this is happening. How tenuous his concealment had been all this time, and yet he’d forgotten just how exposed he and Mira could be. But, he wonders, is this a bad thing? Isn’t she someone she trusts, as she says? Hasn’t he thought the same thing numerous times already, that it would be a relief not to have to hide so much. And yes, he trusts her, but are there hidden consequences of her knowing what he really is? Not just the part about the running from the law and the potential murder of that man in the parking lot, but also all the general brokenness of his life. The madness and anger that never goes away. Would she reel from him? Would she look at him differently forever? Cease to be his friend?

“Maybe so,” he says. “I don’t know. If I really am running and hiding, then it’s from something that I’m not aware of.” He smiles.

She rolls her eyes. “Well I guess you’re a mystery to both of us then?” She keeps her eyes diverted from his direction entirely.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

They work in silence. Half an hour passes. There’s sudden rustling in the breakroom and Mira comes out of it. She has a hand pressed over her mouth as though she’s just seen some horrific event. Her face is red and her eyes are wet with tears.

“Mira,” says Caden, dropping some records on the table and running to her.

“What’s wrong?” says Claudia to Caden.

Mira moves her hand away from her mouth and presses a fist against her cheek.

“It’s your tooth,” says Caden.

“Didn’t she just get her cavities filled?”

“Only two of them,” he says, looking at Mira, trying to discern just how much pain she’s in. “She needs three more. It’ll be a while before I can pay for that.”

Claudia has an arm around Mira and is petting her hair. “Okay,” she says. “I’ll take her home.”

“Are you sure you can take care of her?”

Claudia looks back at Caden, frowning, and says, “Do you think I can’t?”

“No,” says Caden. “I don’t think you can’t, Claudia. Thank you.”

Later that day, Quinn comes in. He’s no less a stranger to Caden now than he was seven months ago when he first met him. He comes in from the back. Caden is in the front with Theo keeping each other company. All Quinn does is yell at Caden about Mira who’s always asleep in the breakroom. He threatens to fire both of them. And then he leaves out the front. This yelling at Caden is something Quinn does three or four times a month. His threats are no longer heeded, but Caden still finds his general hostility alarming. He feels that if Quinn were to learn the details of his past, then he would most likely alert the authorities. Perhaps this is the reason he shouldn’t tell Claudia what she wants to know.

Nick has brought in po’boys for everyone and they are gathering in the breakroom to eat.

“Stop what you are doing and sit,” says Nick to Claudia who’s making sure everything is in order. She sits in between Mira and Theo.

Theo takes a beer from a case on a milk crate that’s upturned on the floor between him and Nick and he hands it to Claudia without speaking. Claudia has to wipe the can because of the gravy that Theo’s hand has left on it.

“No worse than she is,” he says in defense of his sloppiness, nodding to Mira who has a debris field of lettuce and bread crumbs all around her table space, ketchup smeared on both of her cheeks. Mira looks at him and smiles.

“Shut up,” says Claudia.

Caden is watching her with furtive glances. Nick is already halfway through his po’boy and grabbing for a second beer. He pops it open and pours some into his foodpacked mouth.

“I don’t get that,” says Theo. “Doesn’t that mess with the flavor of everything? Drinking beer with food in your mouth?”

“It does,” he says, “but in a good way. It creates an all new flavor. It’s an acquired taste. Plus, my salivary glands aren’t what they used to be. They can’t keep up with my appetite. Physically, I may be aged, but I still have the hunger of a young man.”

“It’s gross,” says Claudia, preoccupied with redressing her po’boy: taking the shredded lettuce off to remove the pickles and shave away some of the mayo, and then adding ketchup and then putting the lettuce back in place, and removing some of the shrimp so to be able to shut the bread all the way together.

“I guess so,” says Nick, resigned. “I guess I can’t argue with that.”

Claudia looks down at her po'boy for a moment without moving, as if praying. There's a brief silent struggle as Caden reaches across himself to wipe Mira's face with a brown napkin. Theo lowers his mouth to muffle a burp which he catches in his fist and says, "Excuse me," politely, but Claudia sneers at him nonetheless. Mira belches too, scant yet loud, and says, "Scuse you," to Theo. As everyone laughs, they exchange with each other glances that are quizzically amused, especially Caden and Nick who study the expressions in each other's eyes, communicating something mutually understood. Theo blushes and reaches for another beer which foams over onto the table when he opens it and he flusters for a napkin, his crimson deepening.

Nick breaks the silence of the awkward moment by saying to Claudia, "How are your classes this semester, sweetie?"

"Fine, I guess," she mumbles downward.

"What are they again?"

"Art, lit., philosophy."

Nick looks up at Caden with a proud smile and says, "A well-cultured gal."

Claudia straightens and gives Nick a deadpan stare, her head atilt. Nick looks back at her beseeching, a barely-perceptible shrug. Claudia returns her focus to her food, posture straightening, and says, "Like any of it matters anyway."

"Don't be so pessimistic. It's refreshing to watch a young person like you with such pursuits. Going to school for the sake of wisdom and knowledge instead of going for the sake of money."

Claudia nods, her eyes shifting around. Nick nods too as he drives his teeth through the French bread of his po'boy, but then his eyes widen and he tries to speak through his food.

“Which reminds me,” he says after swallowing, and he turns to Caden. “I found a job for you. A friend of mine informed me. Part-time at a place called Planter’s Row. I don’t know the details about the job, but I do know that you have a good deal of experience with plants, so it’s a good fit, right?”

Caden nods, says, “So it’s like a plant nursery?”

“They do everything. They have a nursery, but also they do landscaping, weddings, events, private gardening, maintenance, everything really. Big place. Real big. High profile. Lots of employees.”

“How do I apply?”

“I’ll give you the address. Head over there and apply in person.”

“Now?”

“I’d jump on it sometime this week.”

“But what do I do? What do I bring? Do I need to bring papers or something?”

“At most they’ll need your driver’s license.”

“What would they want with it?” His hands fidgeting around his beer can, leaving deep indentations in it, his shoulder’s jerking and hips shifting in his seat. “Mine’s expired. I can’t use it.”

“Just for identification formalities.”

“Will they run it through a computer or something?”

“I wouldn’t sweat it. I can’t imagine they’re too stringent about hiring.”

“If you’re worried about a background check, I wouldn’t sweat it too much,” Claudia says. “This place has like a dozen illegal immigrants and probably just as many ex-cons.”

“True to that. In fact, your use of Spanish makes you particularly a shoe-in. There’s nothing to sweat. It’s perfect for you. Plus, you’ll probably get an employee discount which I can use you for—spruce up these garden beds out front.”

“Nice,” says Claudia.

“It’s true,” continues Nick. “I’m not going to hide my motives, especially not if they’re decent and agreeable. Claudia, don’t you agree that those garden beds need some beautifying?”

“I’ll check it out, Nick. Thanks,” says Caden.

It’s few days later. Earlier, Caden had walked into the breakroom to find Quinn on the floor looking dead in his own vomit, but he wasn’t, and so later this same evening Quinn’s doctor has now allowed visitors in, and the only ones here are Nick and Caden and a woman who Caden has never seen, nor can he even guess who she might be, and he’s surprised by her words when, through the soft weeping in her voice, she introduces herself as Leslie, Quinn’s wife.

While Leslie is having a private moment with Quinn, Caden leans over in his chair in the waiting room and says to Nick, “How come I never met Leslie before?”

Nick rubs his face and says, “Quinn has his own entire life outside The Magnolia. To him the store is like a mini side project. Just a small piece of his income. In fact, I’m

always anticipating him cutting us out of his own little intricate world. I sometimes wonder why he doesn't."

"Yeah, but, I've never even heard of any one speak of her."

"Do you hear anyone talk about Quinn at all?"

"No, but, he's got a wife? I mean, what the hell."

"Don't feel left out, Caden. Nobody knows much about her."

"Why?"

"Quinn has a schizophrenic life style. By that I mean fractured, fragmented. Have you heard the saying, I keep my personal life separate from my professional life?" Caden doesn't answer. "Well, Quinn keeps all lives separate. And he has a many little lives. Several personal lives. Several professional lives. None of them overlap, maybe so as not to cross-contaminate with his anger management issues and drug abuse. At least not always, as we sometimes see him bringing drugs into the breakroom. Leslie is his domestic life, and he keeps that hermetically sealed, most likely for the sake of their relationship. She's a lovely person. Way above him, if you ask me. Quite lovely. Everything else in his world is hard and cold and ugly, rotten, you know. He's let the worst get to him. I fear for him. I do. Especially in moments like these when you remember how easy it is for these people in our lives to just—see death."

Caden gets the Neon started again and drives it out and parks it several blocks away from Carrollton Avenue. He pulls a cover over it and walks back to the apartment.

The next morning he takes the bus as close to Planter's Row as the line will take him and walks the remaining few blocks. He's wearing a Planter's Row t-shirt, new

boots, a cap borrowed from Theo. He has his lunch in a minicooler. He clocks in and a coworker drives around from the lot and picks him up and they drive out into the city, spending the day maintaining flower beds and gardens.

In the afternoon he returns home by bus, showers and takes the streetcar toward the river and gets off at the end of Carrollton, walks the remaining blocks to The Magnolia where he hugs Mira, clocks in and works seven or eight or nine hours. All this time, he wonders how well his mind can withstand this routine. How long will it take to break him down even more?

Chapter Seven

It's Friday night, Caden's night off from The Magnolia, a time he chooses to spend watching TV with Mira.

"You'll be seventeen soon," he says to her. "You know that? We can have a party with cake." He leans toward her a few degrees, trying to incite a smile from her. "Balloons. Claudia says it's your sweet seventeen, which means we should have a special celebration."

He hates talking to her like she's a child but sometimes he feels he must, especially when she's silent like tonight. "You'll be getting presents. What do you think you'd like? Huh, Mira? What kind of presents would you like? Some clothes? Some new clothes? A new bathing suit for the next time we go to the beach?" Yeah, he thinks. Nothing. "How about a robot? A robot puppy like the one we've seen on TV. Or how about a robot human? Huh? I'm sure if they can make robot puppies then they can make robot humans. Don't you think? A robot that will do your laundry. Serve you dinner. Do your job. Wipe your ass." Still nada. Hermanita timida. "I got it. I know just what you want. An ice cream factory. One that dumps ice cream right into your mouth, right? You gotta want that, right? I'd want that."

Nothing. Nothing and nothing.

He reaches out and pinches at her sides to tickle her. "Ice cream candy machine," he says in a robot voice and she squeals and squirms and rolls away from his reach and resumes her inexpressive state.

Nobody and nobody.

He gets up to pour another whiskey and stands at the island counter in the kitchen, drinking, while he watches Mira sit, absorbed in the TV.

The following afternoon, Claudia is sitting on the front steps of The Magnolia, getting some fresh and watching cars rattle by. The front door opens and she knows it's Caden by the sound that the door makes when it shuts. He lowers himself down next to her without touching her.

“Congratulations, by the way,” she says.

He looks at her but says nothing.

“You made it a full year at Planter's Row.”

He examines her expression, probably trying to determine her sarcasm.

“I mean it. Considering the shitty way they treat you there. Plus working here. Plus taking care of Mira like a champ. I'm really impressed. I'm proud of you. For real.” He's still look at her like she's speaking the language of a crustacean. She wonders if anyone has ever congratulated him before. “You're welcome, dick,” she says and nudges him, pretending to try to hide her feigned offence.

“Thank you. Thanks, I mean it,” he says.

“Yeah. Sure thing,” she laughs, always amused at how undeveloped his social skills are.

“What?”

“Nothing. It's that sometimes I forget that you had a frontal lobotomy done.”

He says nothing to this because now she's really offended him. She searches for something to cover her tracks but gives up knowing he'll get over it soon enough. They

sit quietly, watching Mira who's been across the street this whole time pursuing whatever rock or leaf or insect that catches her interest.

"It went fast," says Caden at last.

"Time does fly."

"It's like everything plateaued." She realizes now that he's in his introspective mood, not his ornery mood. "It makes me wonder if all the remaining years of my life will be just like the past twelve months."

"Would that be bad?"

"I guess I'd be fine with it. I want more for Mira, though. This is just the beginning of how I want things to be for her."

"I'm sure things will always continue getting better for her," says Claudia, keeping her eye on Mira as she slowly strolls down the block. "One way or another. At least in the meantime you can say that she's happy right now."

"Can I?"

She laughs once at this. A sudden, earnest laugh. But he jerks his head and examines her face sternly. "Oh, come on," she says. How can he be unsure of what is obvious? "Look at her, Caden. She's blissful."

"Now. Other times—lots of times—she's catatonic. You can tell the difference. I know you can. Between functional bliss and catatonic nothingness. Right now, if you ask her something, she'll answer. She might even volunteer her opinion. Other times, she goes somewhere else completely. She does it a lot. And I'm scared of where she might be going. What is this whole experience like for her? Because she's such a mystery, it's

impossible to really know if she's happy. What if this bliss that we see is just brief fleeting moments, and the rest is hell?"

Claudia listens while he says this. She hears his words and understands them. But she can't find it in her heart to share this conviction. She can't believe that this beautiful young woman with so much warmth and light in her heart can be living a life of misery.

She slides over, sidling him, and puts an arm around his narrow waist and lowers her head onto his knobby shoulder. "Just keep being who you are for her," she says.

Three days a week Caden maintains the plants on the roof of the Roosevelt Hotel downtown where there's a pool and cabana bar.

Today is one of those days, so Caden trudges along the outskirts of the large pool deck, feeling the weight of the hose he carries on his shoulders, feeling the heat of the sun draw sweat from all his pores despite it only being ten in the morning, feeling the smoke from the cigarette that dangles from his lips as it wisps into his eyes and sting and draws tears, and feeling the awareness, if not the eyes, of the half dozen sunbathers dispersed around the pool. The sunbathers' awareness is thick—yet utterly of his own imagining—and the fact that they are wealthy in ways he can't imagine while he is poor in ways they probably can't imagine conjures a frantic almost panicked sense of defense against any feelings of inferiority to these people. A self-defense quickly over-compensates to the point where Caden looks down on these people as rich nothings. Their spirit and meaning sucked out of them by their money, by their pursuit of wealth.

He yanks at the length of hose dragging behind him and burns his bicep on his cigarette while doing so. He thoots the cigarette from between his lips and tugs harder at

the hose, curling waves along the length of it to break it loose from where it's caught at the corner of a flower box some ten yards away. Finally, he has to drop the coiled lengths of his shoulder and go to where it's caught and yank it there a few times for adequate slack.

Sean, one of the hotel managers, appears on the pool deck, walking from the entrance toward the cabana, but when he sees Caden he changes course and heads in his direction and Caden knows that it's not to tell him something good. This man only has criticism. He's incapable of encouragement. A common characteristic among the people he encounters on this job, making The Magnolia feel even more like a safe haven.

Caden looks away from Sean. Waits for him to address him from behind. Stares at the Cathedral spire across the street. He hears the man's voice and pretends not to hear.

"Excuse me," he says again and Caden turns to him with a swift smile. "Excuse me," he repeats again for some reason.

Caden wants to continue not speaking, seeing how long he can hold out until Sean becomes frustrated, but he gives in, says, "Morning, Sean."

"Look, I got a complaint about some plants on the mezzanine—" Before Caden can even open his mouth to respond to this, Sean raises his hand and says, "Wup. Now, I know you do outside plants, and that your team has people doing indoor stuff, and you like to keep the two separate, but I checked out this plant and it is looking super janky. Okay? And we have a huge conference today, so that plant needs to be taken care of now. Okay? Now."

"Sure. No problem," says Caden. "What is—"

Sean cuts him off again. "Wup. Now."

“No it’s just that, what is janky?”

Sean looks at Caden, and then turns and leaves, saying, “Just fix the plant, sir. Now, okay?”

The sunbathers are staring at him from behind their sunglasses. More aware of him now than ever.

Sean does a round around the pool deck to inspect the plants. It’s purely for show, this inspection. Along the row of bougainvilleas he comes only five or six feet short of the roof edge. The barrier is only four feet tall or so. Sean peaks closer at one of the bougainvilleas and then looks over to Caden and seems startled to see Caden still standing there, staring at him. Sean ratchets his posture a notch and heads for the exit, saying something to the towel boy on his way inside.

After a while, Caden exits the pool deck through the same door Sean exited through. Where guests exit through. Not where he’s supposed to exit through, but he does it anyway, making a point of it—childishly. He should always be the opposite of this. Should always know his place and follow order. Make no waves. Cause no attention to detail. Anything could lead to getting caught. He stops and turns and goes back outside, strides over to the service elevator in the kitchen behind the cabana. Slams the elevator doors up and down because this is the only way to make them work. It lowers slowly. A half-formed image, like a distant dream-image, or a scene of a half-forgotten movie: getting stopped by a police officer for some minor offense he didn’t realize he was committing—no seatbelt. And then never seeing her again. Never seeing her face. Never hearing her voice. Never knowing if she’s all right. He walks into the mezzanine. Dark and low and dusty old corridors. A rapus palm has only a few live palm leaves left and

the rest is dead—neglected, starved, underwatered then overwatered and never seen the light of day. He grabs the pot at the rims and drags it out into the service stairwell to leave it there for one of his coworkers who works on the indoor plants.

Caden takes a box of tested, used CDs out of Theo's car and carries it in, goes through to the back gallery and proceeds to place each one in its alphabetical position on the CD shelving, often having to readjust entire sections in order to fit just a few new cases. As he does so, Nick approaches from the front. He stops next to Caden and watches quietly while picking apart a banana and eating it in small bites, and then he continues toward the staircase.

When Caden eventually wanders into the breakroom, Nick is there, drinking a beer and watching *La Strada*. He's sitting with his chair pushed back on two legs and his feet crossed at the ankles and resting on the table.

Caden grabs a beer, sits and starts watching too.

"Claudia tells me you seem to take genuine pleasure from organizing things around here."

"I really do, yeah."

"I'm just happy someone's keeping up with it as time goes by."

Nick pulls long from his beer and is quiet for a while.

"I've been thinking. When you mentioned the other day about legal concerns. It's more than just taking care of your sister, isn't it?" He pushes his hair behind his ears while Caden tries to drink but his hands have begun to shake. "You're on the lam, aren't

you? When you sprung Mira and fled down here, you broke parole. You really are a fugitive.”

“Yes.”

“Jesus. Does she know? Claudia?”

“No. I don’t think so. She can’t know.”

“For her safety.”

“And so that she won’t run from me.”

“You think she would?”

“Maybe not actually run, but it would change things. She would see me differently.”

“Maybe so. Theo know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good. Don’t tell him either. You know about accessory and deniability?”

“I know about it, yes.”

“You never told me any of these details either. I know nothing. If, say, the FBI shows up, I can’t help you. I have a past too, you know. In fact, I’ve been in a little trouble for harboring a criminal before. Not that your situation is in any way similar. Back then I got away without any charges, but if things were to arise with you, it would be a lot more difficult for me to plead ignorance.”

“I understand.”

There’s a silence during which they finish their beers and start new ones.

“I also think about your family quite a bit, you know. Where you’re from.”

“How so?”

“Rob was quite the opposite of you. You, demure. He, garrulous—in an endearing way. Although he never liked to talk about himself with others. As far as I know, I was the only one he opened up to about his past, his feelings, whatnot. I think I was the main audience for his rambling, personal or otherwise. We had a report. I’m a good listener and he had a lot of things that needed to be said, about his childhood, about his parents. Agnes, your mother, raised him. And, of course, John. He spoke to me about him at length, actually. Even back then, John was reprehensible. But, you know, Rob never made himself out to be a victim. He was incredibly strong-willed. As far as I could ever tell, he thought of himself as a perfect human being. Even as he sunk into the life of crime—especially as he did so—he believed he was destined for greatness. You could read it in his posture. He thought he owned the world.”

Caden stares at Nick in the eyes for a moment and then says, “Whatever he told you about my family, can you keep it a secret? I don’t like people knowing the details where I’m from.”

“I wouldn’t speak of it to anyone unless you asked me to, Caden.”

“Thank you,” says Caden while rising to a rigid posture. “I got to go.” He walks out before Nick can say anything back.

The following morning, Monday, and Caden is at work for Planter’s Row. His first stop is at The Court of Two Sisters restaurant in the French Quarter.

Before Stan, his coworker, drives the truck to the front entrance around the block, Caden is dropped off at the rear entrance on Royal Street. Once through the wrought iron gate, he’s conducted along a paved walkway into a courtyard for dining. It’s surrounded

by three or four oddly constructed old buildings, each two or three stories. All are made of brick, and between the bricks, in the mortar, grow sporadic tufts of moss, and even the bricks seem tufted, being softened by the humidity and the decades or centuries: the hard red brick turned chalkish. As ever, Caden sweats, and he doesn't know what to do with his hands, putting them in his pockets seems most comforting, but when he does so it offers no comfort, feeling worse than standing here with his hands by his sides, but those are his only two options. He has his clippers in their holster. He doesn't know what to do with them yet either. He never knows what to do at this location. The entire courtyard is overgrown by design and cutting anything could be cutting the wrong thing. He scans the overgrowth. There isn't anything to be done but to cut it all out and start anew. He puts his left hand on his clippers in their holster. There's a fountain in the middle of all this. The wisteria—"This all wisteria, here"—created a canopy and was constantly shedding its leaves which are currently being cupped out of the fountain by one of the cooks who has meandered out for a smoke between brunch and lunch: a silent smoker whom Caden feels comfortable with, feeling inconsequential especially in determining what to do with his hands. The cook doesn't try to speak with Caden which is comforting too. Nor does he ever look up from the water to acknowledge Caden's presence: the graying, bearded man merely cups with his foot-like hand, cups and cups the wisteria leaves out of the old fountain until his cigarette is down to the butt, at which time he returns through the door he came out of. Now alone in the courtyard, he's back to not knowing what to do with his hands.

Stan and the assistant manager appear from somewhere. Stan eyes Caden as he listens with a skeptical smile to the defeated complaints of the haggard man's cigar-

plugged mouth: “And it’s never enough money. It’s enough for nobody. It’s all on me, and I ain’t got any of it. I ain’t got nothing. Just alone here, and going fucking nowhere, man. Just dirty and old. A lot of nights, I think I’m just going to kill myself, man. Yeah, just fucking kill myself, you know. I really think I’m going to blow a hole in my head, you know. Fuck, man.” And then they’re gone. Disappeared through some other hidden portal into the courtyard, hidden by overgrowth and an unassuming confluence of brick walls of separate but closely adjoining centuries-old buildings. It’s as though the two buildings have stood so close to each other for so long they’ve partially conjoined, making it difficult for the unfamiliar eye to distinguish their separateness.

Caden wants to follow them. He wants to see where the corridors lead, and he wants to hear more of what the man is saying to Stan. Is he earnestly discussing suicide this early in the morning? So loud and open and to a man who never seems to be aware of another person’s inner life, ever. Everything is always a mystery this early in the morning, especially when dealing with people who work in the French Quarter. He pulls out his clippers and snips at a tangle of dead, dry vines, slicing his thumb on the first snip. Everyday is a new cut, more blood smeared on his shirt and jeans. He pulls at the clippings and feeds them into the plastic bag tied to his belt. With the tip of his clippers, he pinches up a wet cigarette butt from the soil bed and drops it in the bag, feeling like blowing his brains out, too. The crazy old man just spouted it out like he was observing the weather. So strange. Stranger still that Stan just listened with his half smile, maybe not even listening, just looking at the plants and thinking about fondling some young girls titties or some other perverted thing, as it seems is all he thinks about: “Prettier than a naked sixteen-year-old with big titties,” he’d said the other day. “Or small ones. It don’t

matter. Perky little titties to fondle and skeet on.” Well. He doesn’t want to judge him, but he would like to hit him. But they’re just words. Probably just saying these things. Stan’s a blend of disrespectfulness and sound moral code. His words are vile but his actions are fine. So where’s the line, then? There is no line here. There is no line anymore. It baffles him. He feels the need to explain this to Claudia sometimes, to Nick. To help explain himself. This world out here is all blurred lines, but there used to be one.

Stan comes out, alone, walking fast, looking at the plants. He passes Caden, slowing down, and says, “Yes, sir. Good work. Let’s get outta here.” Caden turns and follows him quickly back out onto the street where the truck is parked.

Later this same day, Theo could tell that Caden had been having a hard go at it. His face is sunburnt and sagging a little bit and there’s still that sore on his upper cheek, some sort of skin infection that he got from working with bacteria-infested dirt all day—there’s another sore like it on his upper arm. His hair is greasy and matted like a seal’s fur. And he can’t keep his eyes open all the way. He reaches down to pick a cig out of the pack on the counter and Theo notices that there’s dirt underneath every one of his fingernails. He smokes the cig down in less than a minute. Theo can’t stand seeing him sitting here obviously miserable and he considers telling him to take the afternoon off. He can’t stand watching him suffer all the time.

“Hey Caden, man.”

“Yeah.”

The phone rings and it slightly startles Theo.

“Fuck,” he says, and answers it and says, “Magnolia Music House. Uh-huh. Yup.”

“Who’s that?” says Caden.

“Some old guy seeing if we’re open.”

“I love it how our more loyal customers have wizened up,” says Caden while picking another cig out of the pack. “They know to call before coming here because they know that just because our hours say we’re open, we’re not always here.”

“Yeah, you can always weed out the crappy ones from the good ones. The crappy ones show up at one in the morning to buy some whippets and then raise hell when they can’t get in.”

“These fucking things,” says Caden, chuckling silently as he reaches for a box of nitrous cartridges. He shakes it a little to hear the metal clinking. “How is it legal that we’re selling this shit if people are just using it to get high?”

“Loophole, I guess. As long as we advertise it as a kitchen accessory.”

“Yeah, we shelve our kitchen accessories right next to where we shelve our blunt wraps and rolling papers and synthetic weed.”

“And over there we have our three-foot glass bongs for *smoking tobacco*.”

“Wacky tobacky bongs, bitch.”

This conversation is one they have every several weeks. With this job, meaningful conversations are sent through conversation loops. Only every tenth conversation is original or has any depth of thought to it. However, after a certain number of times that a conversation has been repeated, a certain type of meaning attaches to them based off the repetition itself, as though every time a conversation is repeated it’s another notch in the belt for times spent with a person. The repetition becomes a measure of friendship. Theo notices that Caden’s playing his part with a little extra edge to it today. Despite his

ragged appearance, his voice has a strange energy to it. It's strained. Like the voice of someone else. Like there's someone inside him who's too happy and energetic for his own good and is trying to get out. He keeps climbing onto the stool and then hopping off and pacing the length of the counter. He tosses the box back and forth between hands, smiling at the metallic clatter that it causes, smiling at the clatter but keeping his grinning eyes on Theo as if he's showing off some new, cool trick.

"Why don't we ever do these bitches?"

Theo laughs and says, "Have you ever done whippets before?"

"Nope."

"They can really mess you up?"

"But it's a short high, isn't it?"

"Real short, but you're fucking incapacitated."

"I want to be incapacitated."

"It'll make you braindead."

"That's exactly good."

He's turned to the shelf looking for the valve that's used to release the gas into a balloon.

"You sure you wanna? It kills your brain something fierce."

"Yes. Good. Help me out here with it. How do I do this?"

Theo takes the cartridge, valve and balloon and then assembles them all together, blowing up the balloon to the size of a smallish watermelon.

"Now you just inhale and then exhale back into the balloon and do that a few times, holding your breath each time you suck in."

“You do it, so I can see,” says Caden, still with that grin, like he’s got a benign demon in him.

“Fuck you, I don’t want to do this shit.”

“Just once to show me how.”

Theo waits for a moment and then says, “Fucking asshole,” and then inhales the nitrous into his lungs, and then blows the contents of his lungs back into the balloon, re-inflating it, and then re-inhales from the balloon, then re-inflates it, then re-inhales, re-inflates, re-inhales, and then the balloon drops away from his mouth and he blindly stumbles backwards into the glass case, knocking over a cup full of pens, his hands slowly rising to his temples to rub the whomping sound out of his brain, to rub time and space back into the vacuum of his mind, trying to catch back up with the progression of the world that has sunk into corner shadows, but there’s no oxygen in his blood, no oxygen in his muscles, so he doesn’t have the strength to actually rub the temples, merely press and hold. When his mind comes back around he realizes that Caden’s watching him, his head lurching forward, his eyes keen and wide. A small smile—the benign demon underneath still.

“Yeah?” says Caden, as though able to see the precise moment as the one that Theo can think again.

A slurred chuckle rolls out of Theo’s mouth and he says, “Dude, yeah. Fucking yeah, that’s intense.” And then he hears another cartridge crack open in the valve and the gas hissing into the balloon. As his vision and head continue to clear, he watches Caden go through the motions, inhaling and exhaling from the balloon. The balloon drops, the

valve clattering, and Caden folds downward, dropping, the sound of his head bouncing on the old spongey floorboard.

It takes a moment for this to seem real, but when it finally registers, Theo drops to a knee, cradles Caden's head saying, "Caden, look at me. Wake up. Look at me." With the sum of his senses still slowly rising, it takes a moment for him to consider the possibility that Caden is in danger of dying, but once it becomes a thought, it's all that there is and he says, "No, no, no, no, no. Caden! Caden! Caden! Look at me. Open your eyes." He's cradling his head, patting his cheek. He starts hyperventilating, going, "Huh, huh, huh, huh." He lurches forward intending to rise and run for help, but he can't get to his feet. He swivels around at the waist looking for the phone but can't see it on the counter. What he does see is his cup of root beer from his lunch at Frostop, so he grabs that and empties the contents—mostly ice and melted ice—onto Caden's face and he releases a hard cackle upon seeing Caden's face react, flinching and twisting, trying to get the liquid out of the corner of his eyes and away from his nostrils.

He groans a few times as Theo helps him up against the counter. "Holy shit," he finally says. "That was pretty good."

"For you maybe," says Theo, with a mixture of post trauma and insult. "I thought you goddamned died."

"You can die from this?"

"Yeah," Theo scoffs. "That's pretty much how it works. You're killing yourself with it, and then you stop right before you kill yourself all the way."

"And they really allow us to sell this to people?"

Theo laughs, immediately noting to himself the drastic evolution this particular looped conversation has taken.

“Why are *we* selling it?” Caden says, feeling his face with both hands.

“People love it.”

“I guess I can understand that.”

“It’s pretty intense, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was amazing.”

“But now it feels like your brain is filled with sand, doesn’t it?”

Caden groans. “It feels like my brain is filled with hot dog piss. But I kind of like it.”

Theo laughs. “Me too.”

The front door opens and shuts. Theo just makes it up to the stool right as the man reaches the counter. Caden is still sitting on the floor with a sheepish, sidelong grin. He’s not even trying to get up. Theo watches the man as he slowly walks past, looking down at Theo with a sharp unreadable stare that’s familiar and stills him, a pondersome recollection summoning him deeper into his memory banks.

He’s not the same one, Theo thinks as he scans his past impressions, but he looks like the same one. Not in facial features but in aura. He might be one of them. How long ago has it been since those two men came here?

A few weeks. I was sitting here, right here, facing that way, yes, stoned—very, very, just ripped, fortunately, or I would have freaked right out of my fucking balls—and I was facing the door. I was smoking a cig when they came in, and they had some hard questions for fucksake. But they were older. One was flat out old. Grandfather old. And

fat. But frightening. I knew right off they weren't here to buy anything. And it was obvious they were here to ask questions, because it was dead obvious that were goddamned motherfucking spook-job whitey-tighty-wearing fascist pigs. The young, balder one was looking around as if inspecting for cleanliness. The fat one just looked at me as they approached. But didn't say anything for a long while, which added to it, you know.

Evening, he said.

Hey

He didn't say anything more. His hands were placed on the glass case and they were fogging it up in fat handprint shapes. He scanned all the weed paraphernalia items, but he still said nothing, which was so unbearable at that point in time.

And so I said: Are you looking for something in peculiar?

He stared. Looked once more at the glass pipes. Looked back up and stared and did something with his mouth that made bristly waves pass through his mustache.

We are, he said finally.

Someone, said the younger one who still hadn't stopped inspecting things.

Someone, repeated the fatter one.

Someone like who?

Someone who worked here, answered the fat one.

Someone you might know, added the younger one, now looking up at the poster above his head, his throat stretched back making his voice go deeper and flatter.

Tom Amy? just fell out of my mouth out of someplace innocent and stupid— because Tom's not wanted by the feds, I know this, so it's not a big deal his name

bounces about—and fuck, I just feel guilty and stupid for saying his name just like that, like it was my death or his name. But I said it just like that.

So the other one, the one looking up at the poster, flung his head around and stared sharply for a moment, and then bit his lower lip, flicked his eyebrows up and down and then dug a black notepad out of his pocket, producing a pen from the front pocket simultaneously, and then quickly jotted what was most likely Tom's name, and then he flipped the notepad shut and tucked both objects away.

While the younger man was doing this, the fatter one was saying, No, not that one. We're looking for a different someone.

We're looking for John-Robert, said the other one all smiley at me.

The name didn't ring a bell immediately, but it did begin to ring, only slowly—first I had to finish overcoming my relief that these spooks weren't here to bust me for pot—and so the two waited while these things were worked out in my head, but then the fat one lost patience and said, almost blurted out, So you know him then? John-Robert Mayhew?

Sure don't, I said, which was true because I still hadn't remembered, but also I was feeling bad about spouting Tom's name and so I was trying to be more careful, trying to exercise the filter that Claudia and everyone else is always telling me to use.

How about Rob Gonzalo?

Gonzalo? Yes. Yeah, yeah. Rob Gonzalo. That's right. I remember the name. But I never worked with him. I never met him. I've heard people talk about him though.

People?

Yeah, you know. The owner mostly.

Would that be Nikifor Bălan?

Yeah. Nick.

Nick. Does Nick still own the business?

Yeah. Still does. He's rarely here though.

So he's not here right now?

Nope.

There was a pause. The fat one turned his head to look at the younger one, then turned back around and sent a few more waves through his walrus mustache.

What was the last you heard of Rob Gonzalo?

Nothing. I've only heard about him as an old employee who left.

What about his brother?

Half-brother, said the younger one correctly.

His half-brother. A man named Caden Carlisle.

This scared the shit out of me and I didn't have to try to remember my filter because words just came to me without thinking about it and I said, I don't know anything about him having a brother.

You've never heard the name Caden Carlisle?

No, sir.

The fat man stared at me for a long time. The younger one kept staring too but at something else in the store. Neither of them moving. I couldn't take the silence so I asked if they were NOPD, trying to sound genuinely interested.

No. We're not.

Then, then what?

Ignoring me, the fat man turned to the younger. He must have made a gesture because the younger one nodded and turned and then they were gone...

They were definitely fucking spooks though, Theo thinks. And he lied to them. In the weeks that have passed he has realized that he always knew Caden was involved in something. He didn't have a guess as to what, and it's still uncertain, except for the fact that it involves Rob, the man he knows to be a serious drug dealer. It's no surprise that the feds are looking for Rob. But why Caden? Even if he is his half-brother, Caden isn't a criminal. But he's clearly involved somehow though, and this is why he lied, for whatever it was worth. For all he knows he might've given Caden away altogether by being a shitty liar.

He tries to wonder what it could be, sifting through made-up details of an organized crime family, of drugs and guns and money and violence. It all seems too unlikely. Caden's too poor and dysfunctional to be in organized crime. Whatever it is, he can't help but wonder if it's wrong to feel betrayed for being left in the dark. He can't help but—

Caden has leaned forward, trying to get into Theo's field of vision.

“Hot dog piss.”

“The piss of a hotdog.”

Caden laughs, “No, *hot* dog piss.”

“The piss of a dog that's hot.”

Caden laughs again, his silent inward laugh that makes his eyes quint real narrow into thin black slits, and all of his teeth showing, and the only sign of his laughing is his shoulders bouncing up and down. It's an endearing laugh.

“Have you done this shit a lot?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Don’t think so?”

“Well, some might say that once is a lot.”

“Do people ever get addicted to it?”

“I think so. Not like heroin or cocaine though.”

“You’ve done that stuff haven’t you?”

“Cocaine for a while.”

“You were addicted?”

“No. I just liked getting high.”

“You can do that without getting addicted?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Can you get some right now?”

“What’s the deal, man? Getting all druggy all of a sudden.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. But it’s something, though. Definitely. I can feel it. I just don’t how to explain it.”

Theo feels vindicated by Caden’s admission to his change in behavior, but unsettled by his inability to identify its cause. Furthermore, Caden seems unconcerned. This seems a cause for concern and some sort of attempt to figure out what’s up with him. Maybe he somehow knows that he’s got spooks looking for him, and the pressure is building, causing him to breakdown like this. He wonders if he should text Claudia. Have her come over under some bullshit pretext.

Caden reaches up to the countertop behind him and feels around for the box and pulls it down into his lap and prepares another cartridge and balloon. Theo coughs in the middle of a drag from his cigarette and scans the store just in case someone has come into the front gallery without his noticing.

“That guy’s still back there,” he hisses, bending toward Caden who’s already inhaling from the balloon. He finishes the routine right as the customer comes back around. He steps up to the register with a couple of albums to buy and all Theo can think to do is ring him up and pretend like Caden isn’t on the floor right behind him, eyes rolling around, his head bobbing up and down. If this man is the same as those men who came by then. He’ll be taken away by the end of the hour. The man doesn’t say anything or look up from the price display. There is no way he doesn’t see Caden. The faster Theo tries to move the more he fumbles. “Need a blad—a bags? Would you like a bag for that, sir?” The man shakes his head no, taking up the albums, and leaves looking slightly offended and disapproving. If it were a spook, he wouldn’t give a shit what Caden’s doing. He wouldn’t seem like anything. He’d be blank like the others. It’s a good sign. Theo usually doesn’t care what actual customers think. They’re either uptight shits or total degenerates like himself. Either way, the customer’s opinion never crosses his mind—only the spooks make him self-conscious. When the front door closes, Theo turns and takes the box away from Caden.

“You fucking cunt! What in the hell is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this, you shithead?”

It isn’t until Theo says this that he realizes how angry he is. Judging by the anger in his voice, he’s furious. Also, he realizes he’s never gotten mad at Caden before, never

raised his voice at him, and he wonders if this might be somewhat hurtful to him. Maybe he was the only person in Caden's life who had never yelled at him before, and now he's back down to zero. The sad look on his face seems to express exactly this.

He sighs and says, "Fuck," and rises from the stool and lowers to the floor beside him and waits for a moment to make sure with himself that he shouldn't continue being pissed off. Finally he says, "Man, fuck that. You know I don't think anything is wrong with you, right?"

"No," says Caden. His voice is distant. "But you're right. There is. Big time."

"There's a lot of people who don't think that."

"No. No, one knows me well enough to make that decision."

"Man, I think you're wrong. Look, you might think you're fucked up in the head. You might *be* fucked up in the head. But I don't see it. All I see is what you say and what you do. And none of it's wrong."

"This?" says Caden. "What I'm doing right now doesn't seem bad?"

"A little. But no worse than what I've ever done. Or Claudia. One night, a few years ago, she was running around with mascara smeared all down her face, screaming at strangers about how she's not pretty enough, one of her boobs fell out and she didn't realize it, and then she passed out in someone's front yard on Broadway—you should've seen it, but don't tell her I told you, right. Even Nick's had some lousy, shameful moments. And, I mean, fuck, look at Quinn. He's all wrong, all the time. Nothing but bad, and not even the good kind of bad. And me and Claudia, one time we both got too high to run the register, and it was Christmas, so people were coming in out being like—"

Theo realizes that his understanding of Caden's dilemma isn't complete and the thing he's missing is a large part of the problem. Despite this, he grasps. He doesn't need to know the missing element. Can't know. So what can he do? He can build upon what he knows. Adding something good to that mysterious bad. Some tangible good to some intangible bad.

"She doesn't think anything is wrong with you either," he says, nodding in the general direction of the Maison Rouge. "Ugly as you might be, Claudia's into you."

"Yeah." Caden shrugs and says, "I don't really know what to do about it though."

Theo laughs. "If there's anyone who's as confused by women as you, it's me. But for one thing, she gets grumpy when you don't notice her. And you that know she's pretty bi, right? Which means she's not usually *into* guys. Which means she's never intimidated by guys because of the lack of sexual tension. But she's intimidated by you. She's like a sister to me, so I can see it. You intimidate her, and sometimes you hardly seem to notice she's there."

"Not on purpose."

"I know. And she knows that too, but it gets to her like crazy."

"So what, then? If I start paying attention to her, she'll stop being intimidated by me and then lose interest."

"Go for it anyway. If you fuck it up, you're back to square one. Big deal."

"But it won't be back to square one. It'll be farther back. I'll be without the possibility of having someone who likes me despite me being me."

"You'll be back to the square you were at before you found out that Claudia has a thing for you."

“Which was a terrible square. One of certain, creepy, transcendent loneliness.”

“But you’ll at least know that someone like Claudia had been interested in you. You’ll have that extra boost. That’s more than I can say about the square I’m in.”

Caden tilts his head back against the cabinet door and sighs. “I’m going to fuck it up. I’ve never done this kind of thing before. I’m clueless.”

“Just be yourself, but attentive.”

“I’m not an easy person to just be.”

“I think that’s why she likes you.”

They sit for a while longer. Theo wonders if he’s telling Caden all of this in attempt to pawn him off onto Claudia—subconsciously of course—that maybe with the spooks and the strange behavior, he’s afraid of getting too wrapped up in it and ending up with some sort of responsibility that he doesn’t want.

They decide it’s time to start drinking, so Caden raids the upstairs fridge while Theo mans the register, finding it difficult to grasp the scope of their conversation.

It’s Friday night, so Caden and Mira are in Theo’s unlit living room watching a used copy of *Spirited Away*, Mira’s favorite movie. It’s her birthday today—born Miranda Bell Carlisle, August 13, 1993, 8:32 AM, seven pounds, three ounces, black hair, blue eyes, healthy—but with her party being postponed a day, Caden found this to be a good substitute until then.

It’ll be a surprise party. Balloons, cake, presents, a banner with her name on it. She doesn’t seem to suspect it. It’s possible that she doesn’t even comprehend the concept of celebrating one’s day of birth. It’s possible that if they all failed to

acknowledge her birthday she wouldn't get offended. It would only offend everyone else. The party is more for their sake than hers. They need to celebrate something good in their lives. When it's over, she might not remember that it happened, or she might remember but never know the importance of it, never know what she means to them. And they'll never fully know either, Caden realizes, because just as much as their minds remain hidden from each other, there will always be a shroud hiding consciousness from consciousness within the same mind, at all times, and perhaps this is the reason they remain mysteries to each other—because they are mysteries to themselves.

“Hey, you hungry?” he says, watching her while she sits like a statue, lit by the flickering light of the TV.

“Kinda,” she says without moving her lips or turning her eyes to him.

Chapter Eight

Claudia is alone at the The Magnolia because Theo is out helping Nick pick up a new shipment for the store. She's sitting on the stool at the counter, keeping herself warm with an electric floor heater that she brought from home. She draws a face on the back of an old receipt, unable to think past the interaction she had with Caden the day before:

... We all evacuated, she was explaining to him. I don't think I know anyone who didn't. And then we all came back and started cleaning up. No big deal. Except for the fact that everyone was traumatized. That in itself was what I found to be the most traumatizing: the fact that every single person you know and see has had this same horrible thing happen to them all at once. It was hard to wrap your head around.

What all did you lose?

Everything. Except for what I left with, like my car and some stupid clothes.

That wasn't the most traumatizing part? Losing everything?

No. That was just me. Just one person. I could handle my own sense of loss. But when you multiplied it by half a million, that's when I really broke down. We had all gone through the same exact thing and we all knew that it was a terrible thing, so we all knew each other's pain too well. It was too much and it was impossible to think of anything else.

Caden threw a mushy slice of carrot at the trash can but missed.

Suck, said Claudia, referring to the toss, jocular yet monotone.

Caden tried again with another slice and it bounced off the rim.

Oh-for-two.

He dug out a piece of broccoli, shot, and missed widely.

What, are you shooting with your opposite hand?

You know I'm a lefty.

I'm starting to wonder. Maybe your folks should've tried you out with your right when you were a kid.

I think their philosophy was to let me figure it out on my own.

No wonder, she said with a smile and flicked his ear as he attempted to toss again, saying: Oh-for-four.

He jolted around, his face a geography of anger, and he grabbed her arms above the elbows, squeezing with a lot of force, and held her there out in front of him, no longer identifiable as Caden.

She began to cry.

He released her, stood and left.

It's November, which means the store will be busier with Christmas shoppers because people start their Christmas shopping in November now. Because of the increased traffic, they can expect to see more of Quinn—at least several visits a week.

“Hey, Quinn,” says Caden while dusting off the books on a display table. Quinn barges along through the front gallery.

“Isn't your sister supposed to be the cleaning lady?” Before Caden can answer, Quinn takes the cigarette from Theo's fingers and smudges it out in the overflowing ashtray beside the register, and says, “It smells like lung cancer in here.”

“*You* smoke in here,” says Theo, instantly defiant.

“Not like a retard, I don't. Moderate.”

While watching, both amused and bemused, stoned and drunk, the scene with Quinn and Theo, Caden is slow to realize that someone else has trailed in behind Quinn and is standing just on the inside of the door leaning weight on one leg at a time in a pensive wobble.

Even as he becomes vaguely aware of this person he instead watches how the interaction plays out at the counter, but then Theo stops arguing with Quinn as though he's been shot by a small caliber bullet, looks over Quinn's shoulder, and in a long drawn out pronouncement, says, "Holy mutherfuckin' shit."

Quinn glances behind him and says in a muddled voice, "Oh, yeah. He's here."

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Caden looks from Theo's face of shock and disbelief to the stranger's face, one of guilt. Theo walks up to him. They shake hands and hug. Disinterestedly, Quinn goes behind the register, opens it and riffles through.

"Hey, Caden," says Theo. "This is my old buddy Tom. We went to high school together."

Looking at Caden with a grin, Tom shakes his head. "Not really. He's a few years younger."

"He used to work here. We both started at the same time."

The smile on Tom's face is small but genuine. Theo seems to be nothing but happy. Nonetheless, Caden can tell there's some bad history with Tom. It's like the two are floating around each other, happy for the reunion but sad about the past. Caden decides he won't try to figure out what it is. Tom seems like a nice enough guy anyway.

"How're folks," Toms says to Theo. "Their restaurant seems to be doing fine."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I pass by there quite a bit. You’re still not talking to them.”

“Nome.”

Tom nods and looks around. Caden wonders what he sees. What he doesn’t see.

“Things seem to be about the same.”

“Shit, you should go see the back. It’s all organized.”

“Really?”

“Caden’s been at it for like a year. He’s got a knack for it.”

“Claudia still here?”

“Less and less. She’s really trying to get her degree.”

“*Philosophy* still?”

Theo shrugs and nods.

“The hell is she going to do with that?”

“I don’t know. Sit around knowing things that other people don’t. Plus she’s doing a double major. Philosophy and psychology. Plus a minor in biology. And she’s taking a lot of math.”

“Okay, so...astronaut?”

“Yeah. Nothing’s changed.”

“And Nick is Nick, I imagine?”

“Same. He came in here yesterday looking like the circus threw up on him. Plus he’s learned how to sew LED lights into his clothes, so that’s been weird.”

“Good, good,” Tom rubs the back of his neck. “Will he call the cops on me if he sees me in here?”

“Or just kill you.”

“Nick wouldn’t kill anything. He’s—what?—Jainist?”

“I don’t know anymore.” Theo flops his hands up and down. He seems reluctant to discuss Nick. The thought of him has hampered his mood. So of course there’s some bad history. But it can’t be too bad if Theo’s still being so friendly with him. Theo’s an accepting guy but he doesn’t fall in with anyone immoral, not unknowingly, so whether Tom is bad or not, whatever badness his history had here, it wasn’t too terrible. But then, Caden wonders, why does Theo say that Nick would kill him? Hyperbole or not, what did he do?

“Well,” says Tom, rubbing the top of his head, the sound of his hand disturbing the bristles of his buzzcut hair tickle Caden’s eardrums. It’s obvious that Tom doesn’t intend on finishing this sentence. There’s silence.

“So are you here...” says Theo, trailing off a bit, but then says, “So what brings you here?”

“He’s with me,” shouts Quinn from behind the register, smoking a cigarette and reading through the inventory and sales log, moving money around and making notes.

“He’s tagging along with me today. I’m thinking of hiring him for the restaurant. I had to drop by just a sec to grab these spreadsheets and make sure you’re not fucking up.”

“What are you going to do at his restaurant?” Theo asks Tom.

“He’s going to take over inventory and food orders,” says Quinn. He must be listening closely to have been able to hear Theo from across the gallery. His attentive powers are intimidating. “Terry’s jack shit at it, always letting us run out of things. Tom, I know his resume. He has the right skills. He’s sharp. Plus, I know him. I trust him.

Don't I? Yeah, you fucked up here a few years ago, but you've got your head back on your shoulders and your ass back on your ass. Right? Everything's where it should be now. He'll be fine. Gonna make a man out of him. You keep your head out of your ass and your ass off the street and you'll do great. He'll do great." He looks up at Theo, cigarette in mouth. "Did Nick do the safe-box lately?"

"Not since last Wednesday."

"All right," he says to himself, slamming the register shut. "Let's run upstairs real quick, Tommy Boy."

Quinn spins around and heads back. Tom flaps Theo in the chest with the back of his hand and says, "Let's hang out soon." He reaches his hand out to Caden and Caden shakes it, thinking that whatever Tom and Quinn are actually doing is probably no good.

"That was weird," says Theo, moving back toward the cash register. Caden follows him and takes up a bottle of whiskey from the floor behind the counter and drinks some and passes it to Theo.

"What are they doing up there?"

Theo looks and him, says, "What do you mean?"

"Do they seem like they're into something sketchy?"

"Quinn always seems that way. But that's just Quinn. He's a fucking goon from Chalmette. And plus, he's always on coke, which you know just makes it worse."

For a second, Caden wants to pursue the topic of Quinn's coke habit on the off chance it might lead to him getting some, but the idea of asking Quinn for some of his cocaine terrifies him.

"So you think they're up there just to take care of the banking?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Then what was weird? You said that was weird.”

“No, just seeing Tom. It was like a blast from the past, man. I hadn’t seen him since the day he got fired from here. I never checked up on him to see how he was doing, so I wonder if he’s secretly harboring hard feelings. I kind of doubt it, but you never know. He seemed okay, being all chummy.”

“So, what got him fired?”

Theo says, “Uhhh,” while reaching into the cabinet to pull out the brunch sign. Caden hadn’t realized that it was that time and when he spins his head around to the Batman clock above the entrance, he’s happy to see that it’s true. He’s starving. So he lifts his flannel shirt from the hat-rack behind the counter while Theo works his hoodie over his head. They each take a couple more pulls of whisky from the bottle and then they leave, hanging the ‘out to brunch’ sign in the door window as they go, and as they clomp down the steps, Theo sighs and says, “Everything, I guess.”

It’s such a long wait for such a useless, uninformative answer that Caden can’t help being annoyed so he takes a moment to try to figure out a strategy to get Theo to cooperate with him, the sound of dead leaves under his feet and the sound of Theo puffing over and over trying to see his breath distracting him, and right as he decides to take the short route and simply ask what “everything” entails, Theo looks up straight ahead and says, “Where should we go to eat, anyway? Should we drive somewhere?”

Caden almost stops walking to start cussing Theo out—something that he sees characters do in movies all the time—but just as soon as he’s filled with annoyance he’s struck by the notion that since it’s obvious there’s a reason for Theo’s nonspeaking,

perhaps he should abide that reason as well and let Theo continue pretending that the conversation was not happening at all and instead entertain his idea of going somewhere different for lunch.

It's cold but they decide to eat outside at the Bud's Broiler on Calhoun Street. Outside, always outside. Working at The Magnolia, being in smoke and dust and dim lighting and musty smells and the claustrophobic mass of collected junk makes everyone working there occasionally yearn to be outside. Even Caden, who spends half his life working outside, finds that weekends alone are enough to send him seeking fresh air and sunlight, even if it's cold like today, and windy enough to blow their napkins skittering across the aluminum surface of the little square table, thin fries already cold.

"How're things going for you and Claudia?"

"Slow."

Theo nods, says, "Hm."

"Bad, actually."

Again, Theo nods. Doesn't seem surprised.

"Has she been talking to you about us?"

"About everything but. What'd you do? I mean, what happened? Y'all were hitting it off so well."

"I'm just a freak. You don't see it because you're a weirdo. But she's normal and that's what happened."

"You think about it too hard. Get out of your head. Everyone knows bad things happen when you live in your head too much."

“I’m not. I wasn’t. It’s just, I didn’t take her out on a proper date. Also, I got angry with her the other day. It was bad. And now she’s done with it.”

“She’s not done. She’s—” Theo lifts his burger just as a heavy breath of wind falls down on them, lifting up the burger wrapper, now unweighted by the burger, and slaps it against Theo’s chest, and when the wind blows itself out, the wrapper remains there, securely ketchuped in place on the blue fabric. “You gotta be shitting me,” he says, peeling the wrapper away, leaving a red-orange amoeba pattern soaking into his hoodie, shreds of flimsy wet lettuce dripping out of it.

Theo pinches an onion loop off his sweatshirt and eats it. Says, “She’s not done, man. She’s temperamental.”

“I know this, I know, but knowing it doesn’t help. Things aren’t better or easier simply by knowing this about her.”

“You have to act on it. Try to imagine what it’s like to be her. Not just in her shoes, but in her emotions.”

Theo’s been talking with Nick recently. It’s always so easy to tell and always irritating and sometimes infuriating, but Caden’s able to put this observation aside for now. He bites into his burger and says, “I’m pretty sure I do that—or try to—all the time.”

“And?”

“It’s fucking impossible. No amount of knowledge of Claudia’s emotional profile can get me deep enough into her shoes to help me figure out what I’m supposed to do to keep her on my goodside. It’s not happening. It doesn’t fit.”

“You mean to keep her in love with you.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she does love you.”

“Maybe so, on some level, but she also actively hates me, and shows no sign of letting up.”

“Well, you pissed her off. So, just keep apologizing and not pissing her off more.”

A sudden fleeting of all thought causes Caden to look at the disheveled, half-eaten burger framed between both of his hands. This is a number five, he thinks, but I ordered a number six, didn't I?

“Wait the fucking minute,” says Theo, slow and serious and almost with anger, something that's rarely heard in his voice. “You haven't apologized yet?”

Caden looks up, empty of any coherent thought, just a sinking empty feeling that someone gets upon realizing some horrible mistake they've made, sinking right down through the blackwater ocean of his emotional isolation.

Theo sticks a long fry in his mouth and then pulls a drink from his bottle of beer and says, “Caden.” He's watching him with a worried look on his face. “You didn't apologize?” He is now soft and concerned.

Caden looks out across the street.

“Why not?” says Theo, almost a whisper.

“I don't know how to,” says Caden, still looking out across the street—a dramatic pose that he's seen a lot in movies. He wonders why he keeps imitating movies. He's been doing it more and more over the last year or so. Or maybe he's just now noticing it. That it's something he's always done. But that seems less likely, being that he rarely watched TV growing up, and almost never while locked up. It's from testing all these

damn movies for the store. They've polluted his mind. Control has always been a deficit for him, something he monitors with concern, and any decrease of it goes noticed and lamented, and he certainly has less control of himself now than before because of TV's influence on the way he behaves. He's not looking across the street because there's something over there that he finds interesting. He's doing it because it looks cool—No, not because it looks cool (he has no way of knowing how it looks—in fact, he might look ridiculous with his head all crooked around and held in place with a hamburger hovering somewhere near his chin), he's doing it because it feels cool. It feels cinematic, dramatic. It feels like a pose that's appropriate for what's going on in his heart.

He turns his head back around, keeping his line of sight just above Theo's head, and he sets his burger down and leans back in his cold aluminum chair and tries to empty his beer. Theo has said something. Twice. But Caden wasn't listening enough to make out what it was, so instead of a response, Caden says simply, "You know what?" And then, in an odd, nasally high pitch, "Goddamn fuck it. All this living."

It sounds funny in his ears but Theo isn't laughing. Not even smiles. Mira would have laughed, he tells himself assuredly, knowing or not knowing what he was even talking about, she would've laughed because she sees the humor in all things humorous. It's her talent—among others. And then he jerks upright.

"What the fuck," he says.

"What?"

"Where the fuck is Mira?"

"What do you mean? She's at the store."

"With who? Did we just—did I just?"

Caden's up and walking. He can hear the aluminum clatter as Theo hurries out of his chair to catch up.

"Quinn. Quinn's there, man."

Caden almost drops down to start punching a hole through the asphalt. What is wrong with him? What was he thinking? He can't decide which is worse: leaving Mira alone and locked up in the store, or leaving her alone with Quinn.

He takes Theo's keys and drives them back, not speaking. He nearly dislodges the front door from its frame in the process of unlocking it and swinging it out of his way. She's not anywhere downstairs. Maybe she's sleeping. Been sleeping this whole time. It would still be unforgivable. Walking past the vinyl records he can hear words. The words go, "You should stop by sometime. I could show you around." And when Caden turns into the breakroom, Tom and Mira are at the table. Mira seems fine. Seems herself. A slight quizzical smile. There's a beer in front of her. For a glance, for a moment before Tom realizes that he's no longer alone with Mira, Caden can clearly see the look in Tom's eyes that is undeniably the look of strong sexual desire and anticipation. The glossiness and strain betrays Tom's intentions, and he isn't being nice to be friendly. Caden doesn't see any goodness here in this naked moment before his presence is known. Mira looks at Caden but doesn't say anything. Tom looks up and says, "Caleb, right?"

"Don't say anything," says Caden as he slowly walks around the table. He's calm and focused and knows exactly what he's doing.

"What's that?" says Tom.

"You don't talk to my sister. Not you."

“Oh. Wow. I didn’t realize.” His surprise at this seems genuine but it’s beside the point.

“No one talks to Mira that way. No one looks at her that way.”

As Tom begins to speak, his red lips fishlike and wet, Caden grabs him by the shirt collar and pulls him out of the chair. Tom windmills his arms and breaks free but Caden pulls him back and punches him on the upper jaw, making everything about his head and neck go fluid. Caden pulls him out through the back door. From behind, he can hear Theo shouting “Whoa, Caden. Whoa, Caden.” But Caden ignores this. He kicks the door shut behind him before pulling Tom down the stairs, and as he does so, Tom, half-resisting against Caden, says, slurred, “Listen to him, buddy. You’re acting like a lunatic.” To this Caden stops and says, “I said, don’t say anything to me,” and he pushes Tom forward, sending him airborne down the last four or five steps. He screams and then lands and then screams again. Short grunt-like screams that sound like the violent sneezing of a large old man. After Tom checks himself for any serious injury, he looks up and says, “What the fuck is wrong with you, you freak?”

Caden jumps on him to keep him from getting up.

“Everything, I guess,” he says, and then he puts him in a chokehold, hearing him choke and snort for air.

“Caden, stop,” says Theo. “You’ll kill him, man.”

From behind him, someone shouts, “Cut it out.” But before Caden can see who it is, he’s tackled to the ground. His head bounces on the loose gravel, pinching his ear. In the bustle, he realizes he’s being tackled by Quinn and is surprised by how strong and

agile he is. When he gathers himself, wiping blood from his stinging ear, Quinn is already up and squatting next to Tom.

“Is he okay?” says Theo, coming down the stairs

“He’s conscious.”

Theo steps towards Caden but doesn’t approach him all the way.

“Caden,” he says. “What in the hell was that?”

Caden doesn’t know what to say. He lies back down in the gravel, stars up at the cold, blue sky, and tries to gather a response.

As Quinn and Theo walk Tom away under each of his arms, Quinn looks back with a hawkish expression and says, “I’ll deal with you later, psycho-boy.”

It’s been two days since the fight. Theo has deliberated between Caden and Quinn, but now it’s time for Caden to apologize to Tom. He takes the street car down St. Charles to the Garden District where Quinn’s restaurant is. For some reason, the restaurant is where they want to meet to talk, presumably they’re too busy to break away.

On the ride, all of his recurrent fears, paranoias, concerns, anxieties, regrets play through in his mind, all of them circling around the fact that he was out of line, and that he is, as Quinn pointed out, nothing more than a psycho-boy. Of course, the pain of knowing that you’re a psycho-boy is much more bearable than the shame of having the world see it—especially in such a violent display. It’s made him depressed. Every few moments, whether prompted by a dark thought or not, his eyes prepare for tears. He’s been crying a lot. His face just swells with it all the time. That swelling feeling in the cheeks and nose and around the eyes. Sometimes he never even cries. The feeling just

comes and goes. Otherwise, he's quite calm. Feels a bland, flavorless calm. Something akin to emptiness or nihilistic apathy. Calm emptiness and light sadness. Crying. And the inner voice of hate.

It's a high-class joint so when he walks in he's hit with a self-consciousness for wearing a faded flannel shirt and blue jean work pants stained with blood and a beanie cap with a sewn-on patch of a hand giving the middle finger on the front. The hostess and the maître d' at the podium both look as though each one is hoping the other will speak first. Caden almost raises his hand to say hello but they stay in his pockets.

He says, "Uh," for a moment, half hoping they figure out who he is, that maybe Quinn told them that he's coming by, and that they'll remember and realize that that is why he's here and they'll send him back without him having to find the elusive words that explain why he's here—even though all he has to say is, "I'm here to see Quinn. I'm a friend of his." But even that is too difficult for him to summon at the moment. The pleasantly fragranced greeters remain pensive and clueless, and Caden remains anxious and silent, and he can only imagine how ridiculous his face must look, how twisted and frightened and crazed.

At last the maitre d', a very tall and gaunt and deathly-looking middle-aged man, says, "Can I help you, sir?"

"Uh, Quinn?"

The man straightens, his face rears back and he sucks in through his teeth, making a hissing noise—the hostess fidgets up and down, twirls her perfumed hair and looks away—and the man, after hissing, says, "I don't think—" but he doesn't seem capable of completing the sentence.

Caden waits. Loosely in his head, words gather still. Phrases that, with manipulation and strategy, will form the sentences that would make this interaction go more smoothly. But the words are still jumbled and the strategy isn't there.

“Are you,” begins the maitre d', but then says, “Do you know Mr. Quinn?”

“Yeah,” says Caden. “I work with him at The Magnolia Music House.”

Both the maitre d' and the hostess depressurize with this bit of information, their bodies falling back a little and then sinking into themselves as, presumably, their muscles relax and their extra pinned-up air leaves their lungs.

“Oh,” says the Maitre d', “then let me go grab him real quick.” He spins and walks into the dim sparkling light of the restaurant.

Caden catches the hostess glancing at him and she says, “We never see you guys here.”

Caden smiles.

“I mean,” she adds. “You guys from the store.”

Caden tips his head at her and tries a different smile.

“We know he manages there, but it's like totally different.”

Caden can't figure out what she's getting at and when he tries to smile more it feels more like a grimace torturing the skin and muscle on his face, and then tears well up behind his eyes again, and he wonders if this is when it all comes streaming out. He expects it to be. He has no control over anything. If he cries now, he won't even try to hide it. He'll just stand in front of this good-smelling girl, crying, probably silent, maybe smiling still, probably having to say to her, “Uh, no, it's okay. I've been expecting this to happen. It's just my emotions. They're very haywire. I've been this way since birth! Just

keep saying what you were saying. I'm listening." And then when Quinn would show up he'd probably just get taken out to the back of the parking lot, crying still, and get smothered into the asphalt under a barrage of punches to the head and body for showing up to the restaurant looking like a botched lobotomy patient, crying and smiling and smelling like rotten soil and pesticide.

"I've shopped in there a few times. I like it," she says.

The crying sensation is gone. His smile feels like it looks bad. He searches her face for a negative reaction, but she's good at not looking at him. She's working on something behind the podium, and he can't tell if it's just her phone. She's very pretty and probably not from New Orleans. Probably from the Midwest. And just now, Caden realizes that the music he's hearing, some soft jazz, is coming from a live band somewhere inside the restaurant. He's also been hearing a constant clinking and a polyphonic murmur of voices, so disorienting and mildly nightmarish—like it's coming from a dark hidden room, so secretive, and the people in it are murmuring to themselves like they're in a silent purgatory that stinks of perfume and buttery sauces—and in this silence and murmuring and clinking and soft fatty-skin jazz and fine smells and dark carpeting that pinches at the undersides of your tennis shoes, Caden realizes that this is the nicest restaurant he's ever been in. Or rather, this is the first time he's ever been in a nice restaurant. He's only ever known these atmospherics—clinking, polyphonic murmuring, nice clothes, etcetera—from what he's seen on TV. He's sweating now, so he takes off his cap and realizes that it's the middle-finger cap that Theo gave him. The hostess flashes a smile and looks back down behind the podium. Caden wonders what she's thinking, especially about the hat. He searches for a place to sit but finds no bench

or chair, which seems stupid. He sits on the windowsill, which is barely a ledge, but then the hostess says, “Oh, we ask that you don’t sit there,” so he stands, saying, “Sorry about that.”

“Sorry about what?” says Quinn, coming from behind the hostess. His voice is gruff, but when Caden sees his face, he realizes that the question was good-humored, as it’s a wide and smiling face, something Caden has never seen.

“I was sitting on the window sill.”

“Oh, yeah. We ask that you don’t sit there.” Still smiling, he slaps Caden on the back and says, “How about we head back to the office, Mr. Caden.”

As they walk through, Quinn seems to notice Caden looking around because he says, “First time in here?” He says it with a touch of surprise which Caden perceives to be feigned. “I thought you’d been in here before. Ha! One day I should have the whole Magnolia crew come in for a dinner-on-the-house.”

Caden cannot even begin to discern the level of sincerity behind Quinn’s words, but he’s assuming the sincerity is mighty close to zero. Quinn quickly summarizes the menu. Most of it Caden doesn’t even try to speculate about. Some of it he’s learned about from watching Theo cook.

“Sounds tasty, Quinn.”

“You bet. And then I guess the ambience speaks for itself.”

“I guess so.”

Quinn is silent for moment. He stiffarms the kitchen swing-doors. He says, “How about you? How was work? You’re still at, what, The Planter’s, what, Planter’s Gallery?”

“Row.”

“The Planter’s Row. How’s that work going for you? Working with flowers.”

“It’s fine. I like it.”

“Yeah,” he says and stops them at the office door which he opens with a key.

Inside is a windowless room, cinderblock walls on all sides. Against one wall stands a desk with a computer and scattered stacks of paper on it. Against the opposing wall is an old cotton fabric couch that looks comfortable, and against the third wall is a bookshelf cluttered with books and more stacks of paper. At the desk sits Tom who has swiveled around in his chair. He waits for a moment and then says, “Hey.”

“Hey, man,” says Caden, feeling reluctant to say anything at all, or to even be standing there.

From over Caden’s shoulder Quinn says to have a seat, his hand, like an arrow, pointing to the couch. Caden sits, and it is perfectly comfortable, but the pleasure is lost as Quinn shuts the door and then joins Caden on the couch. Sitting up straight and tall and reaching his arm across the back of the couch, Quinn says, “Well, gentlemen. Guys. Let’s just clear this up and get it over with. What happened on Saturday was too fucked up to just sweep under the rug, especially since the quarrel spans the two businesses that I overlook. That’s two businesses that I perceive as being jeopardized because of some fucked-up, stupid fighting. So, Caden?”

He looks at Caden with his head twisted around and his face big and red and fatty and his eyes bloodshot and bulbous. Caden hates that he has to be subservient to this face. He could pulverize it now and feel better about things. But it’s his turn to speak.

“I’m sorry, Tom. I don’t know what else to say.”

Quinn leans forward into his view, expectant of more, but there is no more, so Caden looks away from the face and looks at Tom who starts bobbing his head.

“I forgive you,” he says. “It seemed like you were trying to kill me. Which was crazy. But I swear to God I didn’t know about your sister. I didn’t know. Theo told me yesterday. You know, about her being different. I thought she was stoned or something. Everyone’s always stoned over there, you know. But it’s fucked up that I was doing that—”

“Which is why you’re off the hook so easy, in my opinion,” adds Quinn.

“Yeah, and that’s why I understand why you went apeshit. In fact, I respect that. I wish you hadn’t thrown me down the stairs and put me in a choke-hold. I’m a little traumatized to be honest. But I get it. I get why you did that. And to be honest, I’m just hoping that you don’t hold it against me. Because I feel bad about it. I would never do that. Not on purpose.”

Theo had already explained to Caden about Tom’s admission to coming onto Mira, and his ignorance of her mental state. But it feels good to hear it from Tom, and it’s lessening his own sense of shame and self-doubt. He feels like he’s being given another chance at being human.

Quinn, however, with his red head twisted around at Caden, looks displeased, and he says to Caden, “Anything?”

Caden shakes his head but then says to Tom, “Thanks. I felt pretty crazy for doing that, so being forgiven feels pretty good, actually. It’s refreshing.”

Tom is about to speak but then Quinn clears his throat and says to Caden, “You’re not exempt from acting like a crazy piece of shit. You’ve got to calm your ass down and

straighten yourself out. All right? Start acting like the *human being* you want to be treated as. I mean, what do you expect? You come into my restaurant looking like a bum. A walking, talking, breathing piece of shit-turn bum. You fucking smell like ass.” Quinn cuts himself off, looking away and shaking his head.

Tom smiles at Caden and gives a nod at the door. Caden agrees, so he gets up and shakes hands with Tom in a quick grab-and-release. As he opens the door, he says, “I’ll do that, Quinn.” And walks back out the way he came.

Caden gets a text from Nick saying, Breakroomgotfood, so he finishes taping a handwritten label to the end of a poster tube and slides the tube into the alphabetically corresponding slot underneath the badly aged rotary poster display. Nick has his sandaled feet propped up and crossed on the table—thick tie-dye socks underneath the sandals—and he’s wearing his typical denim pants that are so faded they’re nearly white. His black and grey sweater looks like it was hand-knitted out of two separate sweaters—one black, one grey. Around his neck is a thin purple and gold scarf, one that was probably intended for women. Also probably intended for women are the mismatched earrings dangling from his ears. On closer look, one earring isn’t an earring but a modified remnant of chain necklace that Nick had been regularly wearing last spring. He’s wearing his shades, which means he’s either higher than usual or hungover, but it’s unlikely he’s hungover because he doesn’t come to the store hungover. Even though it’s cold outside and inside, he’s eating an orange sherbet push-pop, investigating it carefully before slurping at its softening edges. This is the food he’s promised, but Caden doesn’t mind the deceit. He’s

not hungry and he knew from the start that Nick isn't here to eat. He could use a beer however.

“Ah, yes, Caden. Join me.”

Caden passes on a push-pop, but feels that denying Nick's offering now makes it inconsiderate to take a beer. He sits emptyhanded.

“I'm having anxiety about Tom coming around so much these past couple of months.” There's a pause. “At first I thought maybe it was just a phase, but you two seem to have really hit it off. What do you think?”

“Well,” says Caden, glancing at the fridge and then back down at the table where he sits with his hands placed palms-down and fingers bent at the knuckles—two eyeless white spiders waiting. “I guess it just never occurred to me that it would bother you. I mean, I know that he was fired from here, but—I guess I owe you an apology. I can work something out so that he doesn't come around anymore.”

Nick is waving this off, eyes pinched, head shaking. “There's more to it than that. You know why he got fired from here? Did Theo fill you in?”

Caden is annoyed and wants to say something sarcastic but instead shakes his head and says, “Selling drugs from the store.”

“Yes, using the store to sell drugs. Something I explicitly told him not to do. I even told him why it was so particularly important why he not sell drugs here. He knew. But he brought in large quantities anyway and sold them right downstairs.”

Now Caden feels bad. He knew this on some level, that what Tom got fired for wasn't benign, but has never considered with any depth how Nick would feel about him befriending someone who had betrayed him.

“But it’s been a few years and I’ve since forgiven him. So it’s not some grudge that makes me uncomfortable seeing you two together. The hard fact of the matter—the thing I always lament having to tell you—is that Rob was involved in it, from beyond the grave practically. The drugs Tom was distributing downstairs were coming from him—directly or indirectly, I don’t know—but he was, in a sense, your brother’s employee the whole time he was working here. I don’t know if, or to what capacity, he still works for him. But I doubt that Rob gains and loses employees lightly.”

Even through the shades, Caden can see sympathy and regret in his old drooping eyes. He can tell it’s a burden for Nick to always have to disclose Rob’s deeds and Rob’s unseen, unknowable closeness to their world, which is another thing that he knows on various levels—knowledge that rises and sinks through the fabric of his awareness—that Nick is protecting Caden from Rob. The knowledge is on the surface now, and he feels familial love for the old man—a stranger just two years ago, and hardly anything less than a mystery—because now he sees how much the old man loves and cares for him and Mira. He’s also aware that his efforts of concealment are largely concerned with protecting Claudia—his daughter in spirit. It feels like a level of completion or wholeness to be cared about by an adult. His surrogate father.

“You’re worried I’ll be led to Rob.”

“Yes, very.”

“He really does frighten you.”

“I knew him well. I did. I think he’s a man without a conscience. Very strange person, to be honest. Maybe it was his peculiar manner that concealed his darker, more serious nature from me for so long.”

“Like a psycho.”

“A psychopath, yes. A textbook example.”

“How? I mean, what were the signs?”

Nick leans his head back, eyes scrutinizing the ceiling tiles, the water-damaged one with the half-moon brown spot, or the other tile that sags down, giving two rictus gaps for roaches to pass in and out at all hours of the day, provided there’s warmth to give motion to their basic systems, all their elbows and shoulders and necks and antennae—and then his face opens up with an airy inhalation, communicating the emergence of an idea.

“One of the last times we spoke,” he starts, heavy handed in his role as an old man speaking to a young man, leading Caden to assume that even Nick’s behavior is dictated by the things he’s seen on TV. “I asked him if he thought he was sure the world of crime was the right world for him. And he said that it was the best world for him, that it was the only world for him. He went on to explain how he used to kidnap litters of purebred dogs and hold them for ransom money from their breeders. That made me realize who your half-brother is and why he should be avoided. And who knows what kind of monster he’s become since then.”

Caden is silenced. How much more is there going to come? What other horrible things has Nick not said yet? And what horrible things are there that aren’t known? But then, despite this, he can’t help but wonder if maybe Rob is not as bad as he seemed years ago. Perhaps Nick is overreacting, overprotecting.

“What a piece of shit,” says Caden.

Nick laughs and as he does so he drops his mouth over the liquidly contents of his push-pop, and he continues laughing as his circular lips close in on it, the air of his laughter coming out of his nose. When he's done he leans back up and says, "I agree. And I'm sorry. I'm always sorry to tell you these things. I know you were hoping to find your family here as being reliable and good. But you know you have us. We are family. So you did find what you came down here for, just different."

Caden's in agreement. His sentiment all there. Nodding, he looks at Nick and says, "It's a better family than I was hoping for. Y'all are better people than I have ever known."

Nick nods, making eye contact, and then tosses the empty push-pop into the trash. "Speaking of people," he says as he makes the toss. "How are you and Claudia?"

"Better."

"There was some distance, I noticed."

"She was mad at me for being stupid."

"Stupid?"

"I don't understand people. Especially not women. Claudia included. Sometimes I feel like Mira is the only female I understand."

Nick laughs in a wide burst. It was meant as a joke, but in a curious way, it's true.

"Just keep at it. Claudia, women, people in general. They take practice getting used to. Don't forget where you're from. Your history. Your past of solitude. You're at a disadvantage because of that, but you're not damaged. You just have to catch up."

"What if I'm catching up forever?"

"Well, then I'm sure Claudia will see it. She loves you, Caden. Don't give up."

Caden can see the motive here. He needs Claudia. Without her he's unmoored. He'll end up back in prison or dead. But for reasons he can't understand, Claudia needs him too.

Chapter Nine

Caden and Theo are in Theo's car on their way back to The Magnolia with lunch. They had just ordered out at Cooter Brown's and now they're discussing why the pick-up had become such an awkward experience.

"I think it's just that I'm afraid of black people," says Caden. "Not terribly afraid, or scared. Just, intimidated. Especially the black people who seem to hate white people, or are just not particularly fond of white people, or are mistrustful. It's hard to say, really. I don't have anything against black people."

"Are you afraid of Claudia, then?"

"It's different because I already know her. And it doesn't matter anyway because I'm scared of her for being attractive and smart."

"So you're afraid of women, too?"

"Only the smart ones that I have feelings for, apparently. I'm afraid that the smart ones can see into me and see that I'm putting on an act. Like Claudia, I swear to God, she knows me better than I do on a day-to-day basis."

"Are you intimidated by black people because you're afraid that they'll see through you and see that you're a racist?" says Theo.

"No. I'm not racist. Why the hell are you pushing this on me?"

"Come on, everyone's a little bit racist."

"You're just saying that because you're from a predominantly white, upper-class neighborhood of a predominantly black city in a historically racist region of the country. Of course you see racism as a permanent thing. I'm in the same boat. I was raised to hate black people. But I'm telling you, we don't have to hate black people. At all."

“It’s not like we ‘have to’ in the sense that we’re being forced to. We ‘have to’ because we’re human and we’re like that. If there’s races, there’s going to be racism.”

They’re parked in front of the store now. They have been for a couple of minutes but haven’t been able to get out because Claudia is on the front porch with Mira, waiting for lunch.

“Okay, but, you’re not trying to say I harbor racist feelings towards my own girlfriend,” says Caden, watching Claudia through the window.

“No, I am. But just a little racist.”

“So I’m only half racist against my girlfriend because she’s half black.”

“Yeah.”

Caden pinches the bridge of his nose. “Whatever, man. It’s a weird thing to say.” He lifts up the bag of food. “And for the record, I’m not convinced. But whatever. Let’s just get this food eaten before it gets cold.”

“Yeah, fine,” says Theo as Caden gets out and starts across the street.

At the sidewalk, Caden stops. Stuck beneath his shoe is a dead baby bird which won’t come off by shaking his foot, so he has to scrape the sole against the edge of the curb. Even with this hold-up, Theo lags behind, moving slow on his feet, so Caden continues on.

“What’s up?” says Claudia, meeting him at the top of the steps.

Caden lifts the bag and says, “food.” They kiss with a soft, fleshy peck of their mouths.

“Let’s eat out here,” she says. “It’s nice out.” Over her shoulder, she says to Theo, “What do you think?”

“Fine enough,” he says as he clomps up the steps and skirts around them.

Claudia gives Caden a sideglance with a snarl in her lip. His face remains without expression.

On the porch is a cypress swing hanging from the ceiling. A few feet farther down, in the corner next to the balustrade, are two white wrought iron chairs with a wrought iron endtable between them. Caden and Claudia eat on the swing. Theo and Mira are on the chairs. Occasionally, Theo reaches in the bag for more napkins to give to Mira. Mayonnaised bits of lettuce fly out of her po’boy as she tears through the tough French bread with her teeth, the bits landing all over, even a piece lands on Theo’s forearm which he flicks back at her, landing it in her hair, which is now long enough to tuck into the waistband of her pants. She laughs at the piece of lettuce that has come back to her, but Theo doesn’t. Caden and Claudia chuckle but stop short and continue with their food.

After a moment of eating, the only sounds being the swing-chains clinking and the deep whir of a tugboat heading up river three blocks away, Caden says, “I don’t understand. What’s a social circle?”

“It’s the friends that you have,” says Claudia. “A group of people who all know each other and stuff.”

“And everyone gets together in a circle?”

“No. The circle is metaphorical. A social circle is part of your social network.”

“And what is that? Is the network part also metaphorical?”

“*We* are a social circle,” says Theo curtly.

“So then what would be my social network?”

“We are,” says Theo.

There's a silence, but then Caden says, "Not much of a network."

"Nome," says Theo with a mouth full of oyster po'boy.

"Maybe I should branch out," says Caden.

"Not Tom, please," says Claudia.

"Or Rob," adds Theo.

Caden is silent.

"Please don't tell me you're still considering that," says Claudia, and when Caden doesn't answer, she says, "They're drug dealers. It's not a world you want to be a part of."

"She's right. I used to be a drug dealer. That shit left me traumatized."

Claudia says, "Come on, Theo. Traumatized?"

"Yeah. Remember I sold oxy to those two guys and one of them started OD'ing while driving and he crashed the car into Bayou St. John and they both died. That shit's on me. I can't get over that."

Claudia stares at him for a moment and then blinks and shakes her head and says, "I didn't know that." To Caden, she says, "See. Exactly why you should stay away from them."

"But he's my brother. I've never even met him."

Claudia places her hand on the back of his neck.

"You really shouldn't," says Theo, a determinancy in his voice, a lowness to it.

"He's got the feds on him, you know."

The two both look at him. Caden's face is blank. Claudia's is one of scrutiny.

"What the fuck do you know about it?" says Caden.

“They came by. Two of them. Like a few months ago.”

“Bullshit,” says Claudia.

“It’s true. First they asked for someone named John-Robert something, and then Rob. I told them that he didn’t work here anymore. Then they asked if I knew you.” He points his head at Caden whose face is now stricken. “But I told them that I’d never even heard of you before. So they’re looking for him, but they know about you, too. They might even suspect that you’re involved. They just don’t know that you’re here. That’s why you really got to stay away from him.”

Caden stands up, takes a couple of steps toward Theo and looks down at him for a moment. In a loud burst, he says, “Fuck you!” and then jumps down the porch steps and walks away in long strides, ignoring Claudia calling after him. He stops when she chases him down, but he continues on, and she doesn’t follow, only watches as he leaves.

Chapter Ten

Now there's a street lined with splintered homes, doors and shutters uniformly akimbo, windows glassless, paint all cracked away from wall panels that are incomplete in number like the teeth of the homeless. At the end of the street, in a cul-de-sac, amidst straight trees darkened by an overcast thickness, is the house intact in which she stands watching. No disorder has reached this house, unlike the others. A cloudbreak allows a wide sunbeam upon the lot—just enough width for this house alone. Inside it, someone deep in is crying. Or is that laughter? The voices of small prehistoric birds. The street is mud as he walks it down approaching. The mud turns to oil and flames rise up behind him. This dream all vanishes in time for her to watch Caden rising out of bed, and she says, "Shit, already?"

"Yuh," he says, walking away.

He's so quiet in this morning semidark, the thick navy dark and long tall shadows. Quiet and lithe—ghost-like. She never thought he could be any more like a phantom than he is during the day. The darkness makes him crouch even though there's nothing near his head. He moves around like a blind man who's skilled at being blind—skilled at knowing where things are, finding them by feeling and manipulating them all in silence. Impressive silence. It's as though his own noises offend him. As his nudity decreases, her interest in watching him decreases too, but she continues to watch anyway. Fully dressed, he grabs his gardening hat, and her heart clenches, feels suddenly broken when he grabs and twists the old rickety glass doorknob and pulls the door open, revealing the even-darker hallway. But he doesn't continue. He doesn't drift away ghost-like as he seems to be on the cusp of doing. He returns to her instead and kisses her. Once on her lips, and

then once on her cheek, and then once more on the lips. He holds her cheek in his hand. She holds his face with both of her hands, his face already cold. Still, nothing is said. There's a rhythm to the sound of his breathing that isn't the pace of breaths themselves. She realizes that it's his heart. It's beating like a running man's heart. The rhythm of its beating plays upon his chest. Gives texture to the fluidity of his lungs breathing. Why?

"Hey Rob," says Tom as he strolls down the length of the bar to where Rob is sitting alone. "I've been trying to get ahold of you for a while."

"You're not exactly the most important person in my orbit."

"I—"

"—Not someone I tend to concern myself with. Not someone I usually deem valuable, or even all that useful." He rattles the vodka and ice in his lowball glass.

"However, I hear you have an interesting position at Mr. Quinn's restaurant. So I guess you can say that my interest has increased, which is why I invited you over."

"Yes. Yeah. Quinn seems to think that having me employed at his place will open a few doors between us. But there's more."

Rob glances at Tom and then returns his stare at the mirror behind the bar.

"Tommy Boy. Rascalion and green. Forever the springtime undulate of juvenile wheat. But we *eat* wheat. So what then? What of your Tommy Boy persona then?"

"I—I'm not sure."

Rob shrugs. "What is more, Tommy?" he says, looking away, his voice swallowed by the empty tavern.

"What?"

Rob's head careens around. "You said, 'but there's more.' So, what is more?"

Tom gives a half-cocked smile. "Caden Carlisle is what's more."

"Who is that?"

"Caden Carlisle," he repeats, enunciating.

"Yes. Caden Carlisle. You said the name. Now, it would be nice of you to explain who he is and why he is important to me."

Hands picking at each other, eyes touching upon everything in sight, Tom says with a rising inflection, "Your half-brother."

Rob's stare breaks. He lifts the vodka, sips it, puts it down, watches himself in the mirror, says, "That is one strange rumor, Tommy. I do not have any siblings. Whole, half, step or adopted." He waves at the bartender and points at his vodka. "It is a strange rumor. Where does it come from?"

"A guy named Caden Carlisle. He works at The Magnolia. I know him. I've talked to him. He said he came here from Mississippi looking for you with his sister, a girl named Mira—kind of a weird, oddly irresistible chick. He's said that you're his half-brother. I guess he knows about you somehow. He's got everyone at the store believing it's true. It was Nick who became first convinced."

Rob's mouth pops open and a shapeless chuckle patters out.

"An agent. One that is bad at his job."

Tom looks around him as though to confer on this with someone.

"That had not occurred to you, had it?"

Tom shakes his head no, mouth open then closed then open.

“And you are friends with him?” Rob chuckles again. “What does Mr. Quinn think about him?”

“Quinn hates him. But I can’t see this guy as an agent. I mean he’s a real mess. Like, barely functioning neurotic freak. And he’s trying to take care of his sister who’s some sort of retarded and no more than eighteen. I mean, I know the CIA hires young, but I’ve never heard of a fed toting around an under-aged retard for cover.” Rob looks at him dryly. “I’m just saying, he might not be your brother, I really doubt Caden’s anything more than just a dude.”

“Where do they live?”

“With two other people who work at the store. You remember Theo. Him. See, I mean, he can’t be undercover and living with other people like that. I know, Theo and—”

“You don’t know anything.”

“What.”

Rob drinks half his vodka down and says, “Where do they live?”

“Apartments on the corner of Carrollton and Cohn.”

“They work full-time?”

“Not at the store. Caden only works part-time there. He works full-time at Planter’s Row. That’s a—”

“Doing what?”

“Going around taking care of plants, pretty much.”

“What’s he drive?”

“Nothing.”

“How did he get here, then?”

“Drove. But he said his car’s dead. Said it’s on old Neon. Remember those?”

Rob’s eyes roll toward Tom and then roll away.

“No.”

After a minute or two Tom says, “So, you still think he’s an actual agent?”

“He is either a harmless agent. Or nobody. Nothing more. Mistaken identities, most likely. Unfortunately, if he doesn’t stop looking for me, I’ll have to kill him.”

Rob walks along the old tracks that border the brick yard between the streets Conti and St Louis, a well-lit area all up and down, flood lights hanging from the backs of warehouses, their conical ranges crisscrossing, chasing out shadows.

He walks to burn energy. Thoughts of Caden set a buzz under his skin. The prospect of having his half-brother in his life is fantastical. Caden working alongside him, like a family-run business, would be strength he needs in this city. To build a dynasty against his competitors.

You have found me, he thinks, and I have needed you. I have needed a partner like you. My brother of blood and home, evil of both.

Chapter Eleven

Caden drives the company truck onto the grassy median of Basin Street half a block away from the intersection of Canal. There's a bed here of boxwood and knockout and a couple of sagos, as well as some ficuses and a date palm and a windmill palm. It's Caden's task here to plant and water various flowering annuals. In the middle of the bed is a sign that reads Welcome to New Orleans Downtown. There are seven of these signs all around the area, all with plant beds laid around them, and it's part of Caden's job to care for these plants weekly. At this spot in particular, Caden likes to eat his lunch, parked up on the grass, watching the street cars rattle by on Canal, and pedestrians, tourists mostly, walking on either side of the tracks. There's hardly reason for most of those walkers to turn onto Basin in his direction, which is why he likes the spot. There's some peace to it. Distance from the world, and yet the world is right there, right on Canal Street, half a block away, crisscrossing, not seeing him as he eats his sack-lunch, flicking cashew shells and bruised grapes out the window.

A street car heading towards The Quarter stops at the intersection and while Caden watches a family step out and look around squinting, a figure appears at his window, startling him, causing him to spill a bag of chips onto the cab floor. While Caden is still gathering himself together, the man says hello and Caden looks over at him at last and instantly knows that this man is John-Robert. So this, he thinks to himself, is Rob.

Rob must see this in Caden's face because he smiles, his eyebrows lifting the skin of his forehead, and the skin of his forehead lifting his low hairline—all in a quick upwards shift of his expression.

Caden continues to stare at him dumbfounded, mostly trying to figure out how he sneaked up on him. The grass is dry and makes a lot of crackling when walked through, and Rob isn't exactly camouflaged or capable of blending into the background of this particular section of Basin Street. It seems he would have noticed in his periphery the long-sleeved purple dress shirt he's wearing. He looks like he could be a waiter at a nice restaurant.

"You know who I am?" says Rob. "Sorry to have startled you."

The family resemblance almost sends Caden's mind spinning. He feels like he's looking at a forty-year-old version of himself, of Mira: jet-black hair, milk-white skin, eyes that, although black and not blue, are set deep into the skull, and hawkish. But he's cleaner and handsome and quite a bit taller and healthier looking, and apparently smarter and more of a psychopath. "John-Robert," says Caden to his own disbelief, as though Rob standing there randomly was more likely to be real without having said his name or spoken at all. In fact, if Rob had merely shown his face, said hello and then walked away, it would have been more believable than whatever it is that's about to happen next. Because, of course, not once in the years since coming here did Caden imagine that finding Rob would be like this.

The expression on his face now suggests that he's grappling with the strangeness of the moment too. He takes a step back from the window with a half-smile and cocks his head slightly. He says, "I have not heard that name in a while. I suddenly cannot say why I expected you to use anything different. Please, though, just Rob."

"Rob," says Caden and then repeats: "Rob."

Rob smiles with a vague sinister edge to it, the length of its corners and a narrowing of his eyes. “How about you get out of the truck,” he says.

Caden climbs out. Standing in the grass he confirms that Rob is a few inches taller. Rob is silent and watchful and once the truck door is closed he takes a couple of short steps closer to Caden and puts his hands on his shoulders, lowers them down and squeezes his biceps and then puts his hands back down to his sides. For a while longer they look at each other without speaking. Half of Caden wants to hug his brother and the other half wants to spit in his brother’s face for not being what he had once dreamed he would be. In a sense, his original plan has failed and it is Rob’s fault. Thanks to him and his criminal life. He is still in the lurch and so is Mira. But if Rob hugs him, he’ll hug him back, because he’s family. He doesn’t though. He doesn’t even seem to be thinking about it. All he does is continue watching Caden with a distant smile.

“How did you know I’m here?”

“Tom did.”

“Tom told you?” he says to confirm the meaning of this statement.

“Yes, Tom told me. I was here yesterday, but not you, but I figured I would try one more time, and it worked because you are. Here we are.”

“Yeah, I skipped lunch yesterday. I was too busy.”

“Too busy with?”

“Another location needed a bunch of installs.”

“Plant installs?”

“Yes.”

“Flowers.”

“Yeah, mostly color, but a couple of trees, little sapling sized trees.”

“Where?”

“Just a private residence.”

“Where.”

“A house in Old Metairie.”

“Yes.” He seems excited to hear this. “You have a lot of locations?”

Caden’s not certain but he’s pretty sure that he accidentally let an expression of annoyance wave across his face. Rob’s own expression doesn’t offer any evidence of it.

“Yeah, a lot. It can be a lot to juggle sometimes.”

“You dislike the job?”

“Who doesn’t dislike their job?”

“Me.”

“You don’t have a job. You’re a drug dealer.”

Rob doesn’t react to this—doesn’t seem shocked or offended, doesn’t look all around to make sure no one has heard. He becomes even more still and icy. To many people, this would be an intimidating character to talk to, especially so boldly, and if Rob were anyone but his half-brother, Caden would be one of those people shaking at the knees saying inwardly ‘hold it together goddamnit. Don’t let him see you pissin’ your pants’. Instead, Caden actually feels confident and relaxed. In fact, he feels that he has the upper hand. Not sure how. Perhaps something to do with the fact that Rob has sought him out, somewhat pandering, awkwardly trying to get to know him, in the middle of this median, in the middle of his lunch break. Perhaps he wants to apologize for being a bad

guy—for failing to be the mentor that Caden separately needs—needed. Caden feels bad for him, his lips curling, about to speak.

“Yes,” he says, his voice wispy—if his voice were an animal it would be a desert snake on the move. “I am that. Sorry if that offends you.”

It does, Caden thinks. And then, with that thought comes the realization: “No, wait a minute. No, fuck no,” he says moving towards the truck.

“What? What, Caden?”

Caden points at him, “You’re being followed by the feds. They came by the store a while ago. They’re tracking you. And they’re tracking me. Goddamnit, they could be around here right now you fuck. Get the fuck away. You’re diseased. I didn’t see you. Don’t know who you are.”

Caden’s grabbing at the truck door handle when Rob reaches out and puts his body against the door and lowers himself into Caden’s field of vision.

“Those guys were not anybody. You are as safe as you would like.”

“Bullshit.”

“Caden. Not feds. No need to worry.

“Then who the fuck were they?”

“Gentlemen with a hobby.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I can explain later. Believe me when I tell you that you are safe. I know. I know you cannot afford being found out. Trust me. I would never let that happen. I am smarter than danger. I can explain it to you later, if you would like. I just wanted to meet you. Real quick. That is all. I just wanted to meet my brother.” Caden says nothing as Rob

takes a couple of steps back. “How about this. Since I deprived you of lunch, let me treat you to a drink after work. I will pick you up. How about it?”

Caden agrees, mostly to get him to leave, and Rob claps his hands once and walks away.

For the rest of the day, Caden strategizes on ways to evade Rob. When he clocks out he confronts his choices. The lot that Planter’s Row occupies has three exits to choose from, and he decides on the side gate. He rounds it and quickly walks toward the bus stop, but then a black sedan, a make he can’t identify, pulls up beside him. A tinted window rolls down and there’s Rob’s head, half turned to watch Caden. He stops walking and turns to Rob. As earlier, his expression is inscrutable. It’s as though he’s afraid of looking at Caden directly, choosing instead to keep his face pointed mostly forward, notched only a few degrees to the left, and keeping his vision on Caden through the corner of his eye.

Caden approaches the window and says, “Hey, Rob.”

Rob says, sharply, “Get in.”

Caden gets into the passenger seat and Rob still has his head notched to the left as he does it.

“Nice car,” says Caden.

“Not mine.”

“Whose is it?”

“I never own a car.”

Already, Caden is annoyed. He wonders why neither Nick or Tom ever told him that conversation with his brother was like talking to a barely intelligent robot. He

decides not to pursue the car topic, nor apologize or make an excuse for trying to bail, instead he decides to wait and let Rob lead the conversation. After a minute, Rob's head straightens forward and his eyes roll up to the review.

“I know of a place to get a couple of cocktails. Let's go there. Would you like to?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Rob makes a hard U-turn and now they're heading into the city. He looks Caden up and down and says, “Do me a favor, though. Please do not wear that hat.”

Caden reaches for his gardening hat. “You mean at the bar?”

“Yes, but also I mean right now. No need to wear that thing.”

Caden's tempted to leave it on just to see what happens, but his desire to limit interaction with Rob as much as possible outweighs his desire to irritate him, to show defiance and disrespect. The hat comes down, smelling as it would: cumulative sweat and sebum. A shameful odor in such a pristine car. Nothing is inside. No food crumbs, no crumpled receipts, or broken CD cases or cigarette butts or found seashells or debris tracked in under foot. Nothing. Absolutely nothing exists inside this car that isn't a part of it, except for the two riders.

“This's got to be a rental.”

“This is not a rental,” Rob responds immediately and curt.

Caden raises a hand up and drops it in defeat.

They turn onto Carrollton toward uptown, toward the river, and the apartment.

Caden asks Rob what bar he has in mind and Rob says, “Monkey Hill.”

“Never heard of it.”

“A decent place for mid-afternoon cocktails. It has a large plush lounge area with fantastic leather couches and chairs that your body sinks into perfectly and it is lit perfectly for lounging deep in soft leather while sipping a mixologist’s concoction, of which they have a varied menu, decent martinis, I suppose. I rarely drink martinis—not there in any case. They have better cocktails. They also have food, but I never eat there or at any bar. I only eat food at restaurants.”

“You don’t eat at home then.”

“Rarely. Never meals.”

“Why not?”

“Eating at home is undignified, like a small quivering mammal—or any small animal in the wild—running, sequestering food into a tree hole or some tightly cornered nook in a dark dripping wet cave, eating and defecating simultaneously. No, I am the epitome of civilized man. I eat my food cleanly and proudly in public for all others to see that I am not afraid. Besides, why cook and prepare my food when others have made it their life’s work to do so? It would be like acting in my own play to entertain only myself when on the real stage and on the real screen are hundreds, maybe thousands of people whose lives are wholly given up to acting and entertaining. I would be wasting my time. I would be wasting my energy. And I would not be adequately entertained. See?”

“So why don’t you eat at bars, then?”

Rob becomes so rigid that muscle cords in his neck twitch. He then shakes his head slightly, almost a shiver, and he mumbles something to himself, casting off the question completely and continues driving in silence.

The bar is on Magazine Street. Caden recognizes the place as they park nearby. It's on the corner of the block and very unassuming, but when they enter Caden can see that it's not a place he would go to. Too clean and well-behaved and probably too expensive.

They walk up to the bar and while they wait Rob says, "You like gin okay?" Caden says yes, and Rob says, "Good. Their best cocktail is gin-based, it is called—" he looks up over Caden's shoulder and says, "Hello, yes, two Twisted Scriveners." He places a twenty on the counter and says to Caden, "They are called Twisted Scriveners. They used to be called Isoms, as in one Isom, two Isoms. They changed the name because they changed the type of gin they use in it and they added muscat grape syrup and a spring of saffron to the original ingredients, apparently warranting a name-change. The new ingredients are an improvement."

The drinks come out and he takes his straight from the bartender's hand and turns away, saying, pointing, "There. That sofa is the good one."

Caden decides to sit on the sleeper chair next to the sofa where Rob has already settled in.

"No, Caden. No," he says, face cringing. "On the sofa. On the sofa, here," pointing to the cushion next to his. "That chair is not the same as this sofa. It is inferior. They are the same color but not the same type. You want to experience what I am experiencing while we talk, not be over there."

Caden has already stood and is sinking down into his side of the sofa but Rob seems stuck on explaining himself so Caden says, "There. There. I'm here, see? I sitting here. I got it."

Rob looks at him, grimaces, and then takes a sip. He puts his glass on the end-table and stares at the woodpanel wall at the far end of the lounge. The way he sits is very slouched, so much that his knees are pressed against the mahogany coffee table and his torso, his spine, is deeply arching, and his neck is bent against the seatback. He sits like a child, Caden thinks.

“What did you say?” says Rob, still staring into the wall.

Caden thinks about this, of course, and says, “What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, what was it that you just said?” The temper rising again. Always rising again.

“I didn’t say anything, Rob.”

Rob lapses back into a brooding silence until he says, “It sounded like you did. It must have been some other person speaking. Another person’s voice carried strangely by the odd acoustics of this room.”

“Must’ve been.”

Rob shoves and wiggles himself up into a more standard sitting posture.

“Do you like what you do?” he says, reaching for his Twisted Scrivener.

“At Planter’s Row? It’s nice. I like the plants.”

“I have worked with plants before. It was more like farming than gardening.”

“Right. The weed farm with Nick.”

Rob breathes in deep through his nose, says, “And dad,” with the long exhale. He sets his drink down without a sound and joins his hands together in his lap and rubs them over each other, over and over and over. He says, “I have never done that before: speaking of my father with someone whose father is the same. We haven’t spoken of him

yet. We have hardly spoken at all, if you think about it. I want to know everything about you. Unfortunately, I am only skilled at what I am. I do business. I pay people to move things around for me. What I have never been is a brother. I am inherently disinclined to opening up to most people. I trust that they will be frightened and offended by me, my mind, because I am so vastly different in the way I perceive the world. What I find so strange today is that in all the time I have spent alone in the world, I never felt lonely. But when I heard that you were here looking for me, I felt such distinct and overwhelming loneliness. The vacuum in which my mind was held flooded with the thought of having my brother here with me. And so of course I had to track you down. Pull you away from this other life you happened into. I am here to open my world up to you.”

Rob hasn't taken his gaze away from the far wall. There's a hypnotized stillness to his unblinking eyes, and his hands are still rubbing each other, and while he had been talking, the speed of the hand-rubbing increased and decreased in synch with the rising and falling fervor in his voice. His hands fold over into a slow stop and he remains motionless and unblinking like an anonymous wax figure left on the sofa.

Caden's main question concerning this is if Rob has entirely forgotten about Mira, or if he is just misogynistic, along with all the other terrible things he seems to be. Does he think having a sister is not just as good as having a brother?

He doesn't ask what he thinks of Mira, nor does he ask him any other questions. Nor does he search for a comment to add. Instead, he contemplates, in a stumbling directionless manner, how much of Rob's character now was formed by his upbringing. He's clearly smart, and certainly strange, and he seems to have the potential for evil. Was being raised by their father at a time when his abuses were at their height totally corrupt

what could have been an exceptional person? Even if he was born like this—deranged, diabolical—could good people for parents have guided him along, diverting him from becoming this monster?

“What do you say?” says Rob. He’s rolled his head in Caden’s direction and seems to be staring over the top of his head.

“To what?”

“Come into my world. Be a part of my life. Work for me. *With* me.”

A strange buzzing sensation almost causes Caden to laugh. He tamps it down well. He wants to avoid anything that will incite this man. In a sense, he tries to play dead until Rob will leave him alone.

“What do you say?”

“I already have two jobs.”

“Quit.”

“I don’t want to. I like my jobs. I don’t want to do that work.”

Rob’s eyes fall away from above Caden’s head and he grabs his drink. He pours it all into his mouth, swallows, says, “I understand. I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.” He lowers the empty glass down, again, gently and noiselessly and then sits up, beginning to rise. “Come on,” he says. “Time for you to go back. I’m sure your friends are wondering where you are.”

It’s the following day. Rob has picked up Caden from work again. This time in a large silver BMW. He’s taken to a sushi restaurant in Metairie.

As they eat, Caden says, “You can’t bribe me by taking me to fancy cocktail bars and sushi restaurants.”

Rob laughs. “Monkey Hill is a dump. This place is nice but I am not bribing you. If I wanted to bribe you I would take you out on my yacht and offer you fifty grand and a house, which I could do, but that would only spoil you. In any case, bribery only works well between infant-men. No. No, in fact, I am coercing you. Yes. Funny you should bring it up, actually.”

“What.”

“I was doing research on brotherhood. I read that the older brother is at task to influence the younger to do good action. What I have learned in my own experiences is that if you cannot influence with words, then coercion is the best logical step. So I do coercion.”

“Rob, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“I am giving you a nudge in the right direction. It’s healthy that I guide your hand. It’s a natural progression of things. A bird will literally push its own hatchling out of the nest so to help the creature learn to fly.”

“What’s the fucking nudge?”

“You are not interested now, but I promise you that once you start working for me you will see how great my world is. You will—”

“Rob, goddamnit!”

“Caden, the car that we were in yesterday belonged to a man that I murdered two days ago. It was completely cleaned out right before I took it to pick you up. Now it sits safely hidden in a garage I own, clean of everything except your prints and my prints. Is

that not a nice arrangement, Caden? If the NOPD find the car right now, we will go to jail both, as brothers. So this deadman's car is my tool of motivation for you to do what is best. To work with me. I've heeded what you said, that you like your jobs. And I have decided that you can keep them both. Should keep them both. In fact, you can work for me while on the job. No, not the record store. That place has had enough DEA agents tread upon its disgusting floors. My thinking is that while you run your routes gardening, you can make deliveries. It's low in the ranks, and you will have to work your way up. You have to learn the trade, and earn your rank. You'll climb quickly. With my assistance, definitely. I will give you cash, and of course the car will stay hidden where it is."

Caden feels like a man suffering from severe blood loss, enfeebled and pale.

"No need to be nervous, Caden. I will protect you. It's my job. My responsibility. You'll be the most protected man in New Orleans."

"Protected?" His voice quaking. "I'm being blackmailed. Fucking bla—" He starts to shake all over but then hugs the tremor into himself and drinks from his water. "Yesterday you said you wouldn't make me do anything I don't want to do. What is this?"

"I am just influencing. You are not a captive or a slave. You will see. You are becoming one of the freest men in the world. All you have to do is follow my lead. Follow in your big brother's footsteps."

"You are not my brother."

Rob had been smiling but now he's frowning. He stares at his food for a long time, and then he says, "You can go now. If you say any of this to your friends, I will find

out. Don't do it. Say nothing. Do nothing. You understand. Go. I will see you when it's time."

Caden clambers out of the booth, shaking at his knees and unsteady on his feet. He stands tumbledown over Rob, who doesn't look up, looking down on him, and then walks away without speaking his mind.

He wakes on the sofa and peels his cheek from the green leather of the armrest. On the end table by his head squalls his alarm clock and so he worms his fingers around its top until the noise ceases. He grabs his pillow from the floor and slaps it on the armrest where his head had been and drops his head onto it for a moment, lying awake in the soft semi-dark and plush calmness of early morning, and then sighs shortly through his teeth and heaves himself up into a sitting position and pauses there, rubbing his forehead, then his neck and shoulders, and then pushes himself all the way up onto his feet and dresses in his work shirt and hat. He steps lightly through the over-dark hallway and stretches his head into the room where on the bed the two spooning bodies lie, Claudia behind with her face nuzzled directly into Mira's hair. They each have their own identity of sleeping scent and he can smell them both individually as though their scents don't ever merge. Mira is the deeper sleeper. When she falls under, her density increases to something closer to that of gold. Claudia's sleeping density is closer to that of a dried beetlehusk, one that twitches and fidgets in a minute stochastic wind and capable of disappearing into it at any moment.

He closes the door and turns away. He microwaves a pallet of ramen noodles in a measuring beaker full of water, pours the heated contents into a travel mug and leaves.

On the bus, he eats the noodles, drinks the broth and tucks the mug into the backpack he carries to work with him every day and then listens to the deep and drawing and continuous lament of the bus machinery beneath, every transmission engaged and disengaged a torture. He has a prepaid phone, given to him by Rob several months ago, shortly after the evening at the sushi restaurant. An almost pill-like device that flips open in your hand, like the make-up case his mother used for hiding drugs. He flips it open, rubs the black rectangular screen with his thumb, rubs the miniature buttons, depresses the power button until it flashes underwater-blue lights all over and chimes an elvin bell three times that makes the old witch—the hostile ancient woman who rides with him regularly, always in all black and always looking as though she had just grown out of a mire like an oily vegetable of esoteric evil—making her turn her head partway, pointing her circular ear at him.

At Planter's Row he clocks in by pressing his thumb on the metal square scanner until it reads his print and the display reads: Caden C. - Clock IN: 7:04AM - 6 Sep. 2010. He enters the main coffee, makes coffee in the dirty coffee maker, pours it into a disposable cup and exits. In the greenhouse he takes two pots of Costa Rican canes and loads them into the back of the truck along with several flats of pintas and daisies and coleus. From the storage container behind the greenhouse he takes three empty ten-gallon fiberglass pots—they're used-up and scratched and no longer aesthetically appealing so they're essentially discarded and forgotten—and he places these in the bed of the truck.

He drives downtown into the ordered chaos of morning traffic flooding into the Central Business District, linear arrangements of pods that painfully interlock and form a grid, all trying to inch through the slowly evolving ordeal. At the Ritz Carlton, he pulls

into the parking garage entrance, a corridor about thirty feet long. Along either side are rows of massive pots, each with a large rhaps palm and an arrangement of potted amelias and pothoes and colanchoes and ZZ plants. All of them are covered in the exhaust dust of all the cars that come through the corridor daily, and once or twice a week Caden has to spend the majority of his day wiping off each individual leaf of each plant with a rag dipped in a bucket of water and leaf cleaner—a white oily substance that leaves him stinking of spoiled wax. He parks at the end of the corridor just beyond the valet booth. He says goodmorning to the valets, they are all familiar with each other, they say goodmorning back. With a key given to him by his boss he lets himself into a large utility closet that is provided to Planter's Row for their own use. Inside is very brightly lit like walking from inside to outside—but truly only walking deeper in. The lights always stay on because usually some plants are stored here, resting on the long workbench that spans a side wall, as there are now already a dozen colanchoes still waiting to be distributed throughout the courtyard on the third floor. In the far back is an assortment of empty pots and boxes of drymoss, empty cardboard flats for toting multiple six-inch plants, a fifteen-gallon watering tank on pushcart wheels. Dozens of spraybottles of insecticide and fungicide and herbicide fill the room with a scientific odor.

He unloads the truck, putting all the plants on the work bench and the empty pots in the back. From one of the pots that was already in the room, one tucked away in the corner, Caden removes several bundles of one-hundred dollar bills and places them in his backpack. He does this several times and the bag is now heavy. He takes up a watering can and when he leaves the room he doesn't pull the door shut all the way. As he passes the valets he tells them that a coworker will be by shortly to drop off supplies and they

nod and say okay. He takes the service elevator up to floor eight and walks to the customer elevator where on a marble table is a dracaena that he waters and trims before continuing to room 811, knocking three times and three more times.

The door opens up to a sun-filled room. When the door is shut the man who let him in looks down at him and smiles. Even though he's tall and slender his face is bloated, forcing his eyes to always squint. He puts a hand on Caden's shoulder and nods his head inward. Behind a long mahogany dining table stands another man known as The Line staring down at Canal Street. It's Friday, so even though it's still early, the streets and the sidewalks are busy. Caden removes his bag and gives it to The Line. He opens and upturns it over the table, the money stacks shuffling out like the loose scales of a giant reptile. The other man prods them. "Kay," says The Line. "Done. Good to see you, Caden." Caden nods. "Till next time." They shake hands on his way out.

When he enters the storage closet there are seven pots stacked in the back that weren't there before. In them are kilos of cocaine. He's the only one who uses the room, so he leaves the drugs where they are and continues his work day. With thirty minutes before clocking out, he loads the pots into his truck and drives to a house on Ursilines Street in Uptown and tends the garden beds there. While doing so, he unloads the pots and stacks them under the awning in the back. After clocking out he meets Rob at Monkey Hill for a cocktail.

When it's all over with, he returns home and showers. Claudia is back from class when he gets out but she won't speak to him. She won't say it, but she knows that he's been spending time with Rob. There's no way she knows about the drugs, but she knows

enough to be hating him for disregarding her warnings and requests. There's nothing he can do about any of it. He tries to speak with her, but she won't speak.

Chapter Twelve

The next day, Caden and Mira are late to The Magnolia. Theo is there, waiting for them. They come in like children. They come in like they would come into a job that they were late for if it really mattered whether they were on time or not. Theo considers the fact that looking for guilt on Caden's face might lead him to seeing guilt whether it's there or not.

"Late," he says, though wanting to say more.

"Yes," says Caden, guiding Mira past him so she'll go upstairs.

"Hangover?"

"No, just moving slow." He helps himself to one of Theo's cigarettes.

"So what'd you do this time?"

"What?"

Theo nods at his phone on the counter, now empty of minutes after having just talked to Claudia for an hour and a half.

"She texted you?"

"Called."

"Y'all talked?"

"What the hell are you doing with him? He's going to suck you into his shit."

"He's not going to—"

"If he hasn't already."

He has already. It's obvious. The lie is there all over. But he doesn't know what to do with it. The solution simply isn't there, no strategy, and he doesn't want to go blindly

into this. So he says nothing, dissatisfied with himself. Silence is defeat. His mind offers no movement around whatever Caden's mind might be, so it stops and feels inadequate.

"He hasn't," says Caden.

He has. It's done. Only something terrible can undo this.

Finally, Caden sighs against Theo's mutedness and continues after Mira.

Aunt Demeter's kitchen isn't air-conditioned so they both drip and glisten, especially Aunt Demeter, Tanté Demmie, as she leans over a small cast-iron skillet in which she shuffles around serrano peppers, the butter coming from a brick wrapped in unlabeled waxpaper. Almost nothing in her kitchen comes from labelled packaging, except maybe the carton of milk, but the brand is unrecognizable. Demmie, though less than forty, impresses upon Claudia a person of another time. She makes it her life effort to escape the mainstream of society, seeing it diseased and festering in blind opulence, and rutted hard and deep into its misdirection. So she hides, and lives, not always in peace, but always untouched by the discordant screw of humanity. She is Claudia's safe-haven and respite, and with a gentle envy because she knows that she could never live like her Tanté, could never summon the courage or commitment to go down an unmarked path so individualistically, because she's dependent on the modern world, she's too deep a native. So she comes here to her unairconditioned shotgun buried in the blurred line between the 7th and 9th Wards, so to breathe and feel human again.

They listen to WWOZ on a transistor radio that came from Claudia's grandpa. The segment is playing Zamrock, the rawness of it very fitting to Claudia's own rawness. Demmie is putting her words together as she discusses her experiences with Claudia's

uncle who passed away a few years ago after a lifetime of untreated heart disease. She's reluctant to talk about men in the context of romantic relationships. Her relationships are with food and music and people who live and see the world as she does. What Claudia is asking of her is to thoughtfully consider the workings of a world that, when considered thoughtfully, darkens the mind and leaves a tar residue in the heart that has to be plucked out a piece at a time through finer thought and finer living.

"I'm sorry. Don't worry," says Claudia, unsatisfied without direct advice, yet remembering that direct advice is not what she comes here for. "I don't know why I even brought it all up. I hate thinking about it. I hate talking about it."

Demmie looks at her after dropping some rainbow chard into the skillet, which she lifts out of the fire so she can take her eyes off of it for the moment. Her eyes, the sympathy there, authentic and undeniable. "You sure?" she says. "I'll talk about anything you need, sweetie."

"I know. I just need to not think about him. He's such like a, I don't know, a tree-dwelling animal or something. He's so loving and caring." Demmie winces a little at these two adjectives but they're all Claudia's got at the moment. "But he's also like a soft, loving-and-caring robot with anger issues. And he doesn't deviate from that. And then this stuff with his half-brother—"

"The creepy drug dealer?"

"Yeah. I think, I mean I'm almost certain, that he's got Caden wrapped up in his drug dealing business, and I don't think he has the wherewithal to get the hell out. And his poor sister—"

"Miss Miranda?"

“Yeah, Mira. She’s just hanging loose. If something bad happens to Caden, she’s gone. Foster care, or probably back to their parents, who, according to Nick, are monsters from hell.”

“Why according to him?”

“Because apparently Caden *talks* to him. Tells him all sorts of things. But won’t tell me squat.”

Demmie rears her head back and inhales deeply through her nose—a disapproval of what she hears. She turns the burner off and places the skillet on the back burner. She opens the refrigerator—all the original shelves are missing and in their place is a side-turned wooden wine crate which acts as a shelf—and while digging around through piles and stacks of unlabeled unidentifiable foods, she mutters, “I’d be flattered.”

“Flattered?”

“No,” she says, standing upright, cheeses and a jar of olives and a jar of pickled beet slices and a few other items cradled in her arms, “No, I’d be upset too. I’d be a little irate even. You share with your love, not conceal.”

“Why’d you say flattered then?”

“Well, my first guess is that he’s ashamed and doesn’t want you to see his dirt. So he tells Nick and Nick tells you, so what?”

She likes the way it sounds, but she can’t foresee her hate for him lifting.

Demmie puts a plate and fork on the small rickety wooden table in front of Claudia and says, in a voice that Claudia knows to be Demmie’s dry sarcasm, “Because even though I never met the guy, I feel I know him well enough to make these observations.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’ll bring him by one of these days.”

“And little Mira girl,” Demmie adds, preparing herself to eat. The statement falls from her mouth as simply as a please or thankyou, but to Claudia, this addendum and its casualness, its understatement, says everything true about Mira. You don’t even need to meet her to love her.

As they ate, Claudia decided not to go to the store at all today, so first she stops at the CC’s on Esplanade Avenue for a coffee to balance out the two bottles of rosé she had with Demmie, and then she crosses the street to the Maple Leaf bookstore, buys a novel and takes it to City Park to read. To remind herself that, yes, Caden does tell her about himself, she drives past the spot where he and Mira had slept in the car for a few nights, and then she parks at the spot where he said he and Mira were when he decided to apply for the job at The Magnolia. He was sentimental about it, linking this spot to the moment when he eventually met her. She couldn’t feel the sentiment. Still can’t. But then, she’s never been homeless and starving and dreading the inevitable worst. She sits at a picnic table to read. Technically, it’s a novella so she finishes it in one sitting. Caden’ll like it. It’ll make him cry like some other novels do. He only cries reading books. Never while watching a movie. Maybe never while doing anything, as far as she’s seen.

When she walks into the apartment, Mira is curled up on the sofa watching TV. He’s nowhere.

“Where’s Caden?” she asks sitting next to her.

She doesn’t respond, but when Claudia lounges on top of her, cheek on her shoulder, and takes her hand to play with her fingers, Mira says, “Mmmhmm, to pick up food for dinner.”

Claudia pecks her on the cheek and says, “How was work today? Did you miss me?”

“Yes.”

Claudia pecks her on the cheek again and says, “I love you. Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she says, pecks her once more, says, “I’m glad,” and then gets up to decide what she should be doing for when he gets back. What should she say? What now?

She adjusts objects in the kitchen—straightens what’s crooked, puts away what’s out—and while doing so wonders if maybe he’s actually with Rob, lying about it to Mira. He’ll come back with food like it’s nothing. Gentle violent man, silent in guilt.

“How long ago did he leave?” she calls from the kitchen, the futility of the effort revealing to her just how desperate he’s made her. “Mira, do you know?”

Nothing. The beautiful thing. Beautiful, but she stinks, even from here. Her scent is like some fleshy Indian spice that’s not entirely bad, a captivating odor. A guilty pleasure.

“Okay, girlie, time for a shower.”

The TV flicker accentuates the slow cringe that bunches up her face and creates a demonic appearance as she rolls her eyes up to her without moving her head. She holds the pose, grimly questioning Claudia’s sincerity.

“It’s time.” Her solemnest tone.

Mira throws an arm into the air, suggesting that if she’s going to get up and do anything, then Claudia’s going have to do all the work. So she does. Pulling and tugging

and lifting and shifting and shoving until Mira's in the shower—no time for a bath, as baths are an all-day event. She always seems to enjoy it once she's in, but dreads the ritual as a whole, and refuses to actually scrub anything, so to keep her hygienic, Claudia has to do that work too, always remembering the terrified and disparaging look on the doctor's face when she and Caden first brought her in for a general check-up. And she always remembers Caden on the ride home, so unnerved, for days even, ultraparanoic that someone, CPS, was always about to arrive and take her away for his negligence of her—negligence, a word of sin in Caden's mind. They were, are, these two siblings, so unfit for this, so barely still here.

His head appears—silent as ever, ghostly as ever—into the bathroom and it startles her enough that she sits to gather her head, wanting to kill him for not making any noise sooner.

“Sorry.”

“Don't do that.”

“I won't.”

He will. He's incapable of not doing exactly that.

“Where've you been?”

“Lebanon's. Take-out.”

“It took you this long?”

“Yeah, it took forever.”

“Why?”

“I was going to wait until I got there to order because I was going to wait to see if you wanted anything. You didn't get my text?”

Why does it matter, she wonders.

“Well, I ended up with a lot. Enough for everybody.”

She wants to yell at him. To tell him to stop being nice. She wants to ask him, no, accuse him of being with Rob just now, but that wouldn't be like her. She is not an irrational person. Not outwardly. She decides to say nothing. She stands and turns Mira around for her hair to be rinsed. He leaves without making a sound—yes, yes, not enough sound to breach the rushing of the shower—not a sound, instead silently replacing his presence with emptiness, both of which lay weight on her senses.

She floats a sheet down over the bed and guides the ripples away with her hands. Maybe he'll come in to say he's staying with Theo. She wants him to. She wants to accuse him of being stupid for not knowing what she wants of him—but she reminds herself that he could say the same to her.

“She's dead to the world,” says Caden, drifting into the room. “Thank you for the shower.”

“It was something to do while we waited.”

“Was she a lot of trouble?”

“Just the regular. Next time we'll let her take a bath.”

“Yeah.”

He takes off his shorts, folds them in half and drapes them over the back of the desk chair in the corner of the room, and then folds his shirt into a square and places that on top of the shorts. He does this every night. She wonders why he has to tidy some things, yet can leave others a mess. His obsessive compulsive behavior only reaches out to six or seven specific outlets, excluding the highly specific system he's created at the

store. The shirt and shorts have to be folded and placed on the chair, everything else in the room can be chaos. Sometimes, he'll get settled into bed, about to turn out the light, but then see that he misfolded the shirt, so he'll dutifully climb out and refold. She teased him once for it, but he didn't laugh. She wishes she could tease him about things. Simple, harmless observations. Maybe that would alleviate this hate she feels for him, right there next to the love. Maybe it's the cause. No, Rob is the cause. And the lie.

"Were you with Rob?" she asks against her will. He'll say no of course and she won't interrogate him, because until he says yes she won't feel satisfied about his honesty.

He stands by the dresser, looking at his phone as it charges. He closes it, keeping it in his hand, and looks at her. The room is lit only by the nightstand lamp and the upward shadows on his face look odd. Not evil or funny or ugly. Just strange. Like looking at a stranger. He doesn't say anything for a long time, and the silence and the hate it aggravates makes her nauseous. Urges surging through her to break and throw and scream. She realizes it's the first time that she's asked in a week or so, and the unspecificity of the question might have him wondering in what capacity she means.

"Today," she says. "This evening?"

"No. I—why would I?"

"Because you're dealing drugs for him."

Her immediate distaste for making this accusation distracts her from trying to scrutinize his facial expression. She's certain though now. Having said it to him finally is all she needed.

"What about Mira?" she says.

Her face is hot. Her flowing tears are warm. He's crying too, and red-faced. Whatever his shame is now it's not enough to keep him from looking her in the eye. As sad and sick as this is, it feels like the most intimate moment they've had. Standing on either side of the bed in the oddly-lit room, both spewing tears and silent and eye-locked.

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it.

"Claudia. I can't talk about it."

"Try. Can you try?"

Both of their voices are soft and strained.

"He's evil."

Her face is purging tears so hard she can't speak.

"I can't do anything against him. I'm cornered."

He slumps down to the bed and she drops down to him.

Whatever he possibly means, it's what she's been needing to hear. It's what she's been needing to see from him. His humanity.

Chapter Thirteen

In the morning, Claudia convinces Caden to take the day off. She'll cover for him at the store so he can spend time relaxing with his sister away from everything. He argues against it but eventually agrees.

After a long breakfast, they drive out to City Park in Claudia's car. Sitting against a column of the peristyle, he feels mostly at peace as though maybe he's drugged. Maybe Claudia slipped him one of her anxiety pills, as he highly suspects she has done before. The world feels distant, giving him room to think. Down the steps, Mira sits in the sun at the edge of the concrete platform, her feet dipped in the swampy lagoon, steadily undoing Claudia's hard work from last night's shower. *What about Mira?* He's almost angry that she would ask him that. He doesn't care for Mira for recognition, but he figures that by now at least Claudia would see nothing else of him except for Mira being all that he is about. He can't even say he has sacrificed for her because nothing else ever had value to incur. He returns again, rationally, to the fact that Claudia is in the dark about his deal with Rob. The thought of Rob gets his heart beating faster. Makes him feel like he's drowning. Think away from it, he tells himself.

"Hey, Mira," he says.

She twists around immediately. Her hair looks so much better clean and brushed. She passes as a person like everyone else. A quiet and lovely young woman on her day off from work. Or she could be a student over at Delgado, taking a break between classes, getting her nursing degree. Even though she's unbearably gorgeous and the wild crush of every guy, she's decided to be single for the time being while she works on her career. But one day she'll have a husband and children and they'll live somewhere. Bright and

clean and safe. A well-built house that's well-ventilated. She'll never grow old. Never die. Neither will anyone else. Wood floors that are polished and reflect the sunlight coming in through the high windows of whitewashed windowframes. And the refrigerator will always be full with colorful and healthy foods. And she'll wear exactly what she's wearing now, all the time in a world of one season, spring, and the clothes will always be clean and never smell or wear. She'll say, Caden, it's so great to see you. Thank you so much for coming to visit. We don't get to see you enough. The children are great. We're so proud of them. Aren't you proud too. Aren't you happy for us. Isn't this all the best for a person alive. And with tears in my eyes, I'll say yes yes yes

“Yeah, Caden,” she says at last, still twisted around and staring at him.

“How's the water feel?”

She turns back around and looks down at her feet and says, “It feels fine,” without turning her head to say this, so her voice softly drifts away over the pond to the long stand of ancient live oaks reaching out of the dark soil like monstrous squid tentacles covered with bark and tipped with leaves.

What about Mira? Everything, and nothing less.

Even murder. Yes, even rending life away from another's physical form, so irrevocably, as he has perhaps done before, right over there, less than a mile away, so he knows the terrain, a slow bog of questions about God and punishment, if the man's soul subsists in some continued form and place, or if he ended a rare thing that will only be once, now un-fully-realized because his shoulder and weight crushed his timeline inward into his heart and lungs, and then left him there, like an endpoint to the scale of his existence, coughing his last blood-breaths onto the asphaltic deathbed. So, yes, he can

kill, and he can bear it, and he believes he can crush another timeline inward if it's to answer her question. Since that moment at the sushi restaurant when he stood up to leave, he's known—he can be the one to determine the endpoint of Rob's life, of that scale that shouldn't have measure, or be. Or maybe he should simply leave. By himself or with Mira with him, whatever the best option of that would be. They started here with nothing. Why not start somewhere else with nothing again? That would be sacrifice, but one that he's already reconciled with himself in a number of ways. A bus to a city outside Rob's orbit is all it would take. But they would ever see Claudia again? Or Nick or Theo? Would he find different versions of them in a different city, strangers willing to become family with two siblings hatched under the earth, bewildered. And there would be homelessness again. Nights in hunger and blood-fear.

The answers are there but not there.

Mira gets up and wanders along the short bank ten yards or so, stick in hand to poke and slash at the surface of the coal-hued pond. He's hungry and sore from sitting in one place for so long. Sense of time has slipped from him, feeling peaceful and distant from the world. But now he's hungry and he's sure Mira is too. He puts his hands down on the edge of the step, preparing to rise, but a movement behind him makes him wait. A hand falls on his shoulder and squeezes and then a person drops down beside him, sitting on the steps nearly hip to hip.

His slacks are black, as usual, but his dress shirt is sky blue, sleeves rolled up, and he's wearing a white tie, a contrail down his torso.

"I know," he says. "I'm just not good at deviating from my normal ensemble. People find it hard to believe this, but I have no fashion sense. Should I take the tie off?"

Caden is stricken by his appearance and how it implies that Rob somehow keeps an eye on him, how it means fleeing is now no longer of consideration. But what aggravates him even more is Rob's proximity to Mira.

"It looks fine," he says, wondering what chance there is that Rob hasn't been watching this whole time, has instead shown up just now, and doesn't realize that that's Mira over there. She's far enough away to be a stranger, a student from Delgado mooning over the lagoon.

"You dress yourself fine, considering your general means. You could dress up though. I know you have enough money for it these days. Or are you saving it?" He sighs. "I can read you, Caden. We share blood. It makes it easy for me to read your thoughts. From all the way across the parish even. Do not leave me. It won't be allowed in any case."

Caden looks at him, meeting the two hell-pits of his eyes.

"Say nothing if you would like. There should be no worry for you. I understand. The instinct of any animal is to break away and flee when trapped. You are an animal and you are trapped. But there is no reason to flee. You are held captive, but you are also in my care. My care should negate your urge to flee. You will learn this. Just give it time, brother."

Caden, half believing in Rob's telepathy claims, wonders if he's picked up on his other desire. He wishes he had with him some quick and silent method of killing. A lethal injection. He would. He knows he would. The thought of it almost elates him. The energy of a smile builds up against the stoic mask. If he lets the laughter come pattering out, would Rob know it's cause?

“Yes,” says Rob, almost to himself. Caden, his blood turned to cold liquid metal, wonders if maybe he’s been mumbling aloud, or if maybe his thoughts are tapped. “She’s the most beautiful creature I have seen.”

Caden strains his eyes to look at Rob without having to turn his head, and from what he can see Rob’s staring right at Mira.

“It’s the way she carries herself, the way she looks at things as she moves through the world,” Caden says in casual agreement, the words coming from some stoic core he didn’t know was there, buried deep under a tangle of nerves and fear and hatred.

“Do you have trouble with men making advances?”

“Most are too chickenshit. I see it on their faces everywhere we go. It’s like they’re being presented with some holy artifact. They’re usually too stunned to realize that she’s not altogether there. I feel fortunate for them though.” He’s talking out of sheer fear, he realizes, and begins trying to drag himself back to silence. “I feel fortunate for anyone who gets to know her, or to at least see her and know that someone like her is around.”

“That is beautiful, Caden. Awesome in the old definition. And you get to be her brother, her guardian.”

Caden swallows, somehow feeling relief, and says, “I feel summoned. Ever since she was born.”

“She has an aura. I can sense it from here. Yes, but I cannot put it to words.” He chuckles. “And you know me, brother, I put my mind to words well. My supra-eloquence fails me now, though.”

This feels nice and Caden is reeling from it. He's not supposed to talk like this with Rob, to discuss Mira and agree upon their impressions. He was hoping Rob would be blind to Mira's aura, not see it bold and clear from ten yards away. He had hoped Rob would have been denied the mysterious sublime of Mira.

"Call her over," says Rob, bumping shoulders with Caden. "Let me meet my sister at last."

"M—" Caden's voice catches in his dry throat and he can't find the saliva to slicken it. He coughs and tries again, "Mira."

She looks over and pauses. Strands of her hair sticking to her cheek and forehead. The stick falls from her hand but she doesn't move in any other way. Caden can tell she's looking at Rob, but what she might be thinking is indiscernible. However, it's easy for Caden to believe that Mira knows exactly who Rob is, both as her half-brother and as a psychopath, as someone well beneath her trust. He wants to tell her to run. He waves her over and he hopes she'll turn the other way. She pulls her hair out of her face and slides the strands behind her ears and then walks over. She stands on a step at Caden's legs, leaning her hip against the side of his knee. She hasn't taken her eyes off Rob.

"Mira, this is Rob. This is our half-brother."

"Hello, Mira. It is so pleasurable to meet you at last. After all these years."

She shakes his hand but says nothing. Perhaps the only time Caden's been happy to see her not speak.

Caden is getting off of work. Two days have passed and he hasn't had to do any work for Rob, nor has Rob unexpectedly shown up as he sometimes does. He leaves the

lot of Planter's Row with an eye out for any car that might have Rob sitting in it, waiting. Anything conspicuously clean and new and of luxury. But there aren't any, and so he makes it to the bus stop without a problem and makes the bus ride home without a problem and makes it to The Magnolia all without seeing Rob. His caution, such as this, is daily and dully droning in his head. He goes straight for a cigarette at the counter where Theo is perched on the stool with a comic book. He helps himself to some of Theo's beer which has been poured into a faded Bacchus cup.

"Mira," says Caden.

"Hm?"

"She asleep upstairs?"

"N-no."

"Then what is she doing?"

"I don't know. She's with Claudia."

"What for?"

"I don't know. You're the one who told me that Claudia was keeping her for the day."

"I didn't say that."

"Yeah, look." Theo digs for his phone. As he does, the gallery begins to spin and wobble around Caden's head, whomping in his ears, because his first and only fear is immediate and strong. Theo shows the text that corroborates with his claim.

"I didn't text you that."

"But that's you."

"I haven't seen my phone in two days."

“You lost it?”

“It fucking disappeared.” He wrings his hair back against his scalp. “I think I’m going to die or be sick.”

“What? What is it?”

“I think it’s Rob.” He takes Theo’s phone to text Claudia, keeping one hand firm on the counter for support and balance as the gallery keeps moving around him, the floor bouncing him up and down. “I think he took Mira.”

“It could’ve been Nick. Maybe he found your phone and—”

“He came by. Rob met her.”

Claudia texts back. She doesn’t have her. “How can I find him?” he says, grabbing Theo by the arm. “How can I find Rob?”

“Quinn,” he says. “If anybody, Quinn.”

Caden holds up the phone as though to show it to Theo and Theo nods, his eyes frightened and round, and he says, “Yeah, keep it. I’ll be here if she turns up here.” He digs his keys out of his pocket and Caden takes them and runs.

At Quinn’s restaurant he rushes past the hostess and on through to the office. Quinn isn’t there. Neither is Tom. A chef yells at him to get out of the kitchen and Caden yells back, louder, “Where’s Quinn!”

“I don’t know where he is, but you have to get the hell out before I kick your ass.”

“Where would he be then? Where would he be?”

The chef is getting closer, brawning up. “Beats me. Now get the hell out, asshole.”

“Anywhere. Where would he be?”

The chef bites his lower lip and charges Caden, pushing him at the shoulders while spinning him around and then pushing him on toward the rear exit. Caden slips on the greasy tiled floor and lands butt-first in a box of kitchen towels and he thrashes about until he's out of it, destroying the box and scattering the clean and folded towels about the floor in the process. The chef throws his hands in the air. Caden gets to his feet, calmer, but he can feel his face swelling up hot and flush.

“What Mr. Quinn does outside this kitchen is none of my business. Now you get your ass through that door or I'll get you arrested.”

Caden can feel it so he turns and starts walking out before he acts out on it and attacks the chef. He tries calling Quinn but no answer, and tries Tom but no answer either. In the car he tries to think, crying. He batters the steering wheel with the palms of his hands. He tries Quinn once more. When the voicemail picks up he yells into it, accusing him, threatening him, blaming him for Rob and for Mira's disappearance. He spins out of the parking lot, at first aimlessly and then deciding to try Monkey Hill. Rob's not there, so he tries the house on Ursulines Street where he's been delivering the incoming drugs. Here, his heart is pounding as he knows that trespassing could possibly get him killed, but the house seems empty. He goes to the peristyle, thinking that if this were a movie this is where he might find them, but they're not here. He paces around the sidewalk, growing empty-hearted with despair as he fails to think of anywhere else to look. This whole time, all these months, Rob has never revealed where he lives, where he haunts the most. He's remained untraceable. Time has slowed down. To sit and wait for Rob to come to him, returning Mira, wouldn't be bearable.

He returns to the store to restart his search. When he walks in Theo and Nick are standing around the register. By the looks on their faces, Caden assumes that they were talking about Mira's disappearance.

"Well," he says. "Anything?"

Nick shakes his head and says, "We're sorry. Nothing. No word. Do you think it's time to report to the police?"

Caden can't even consider this, being so far from what he'd consider an option. The thought of it makes him weak in the knees. He tries to express how much he resists the idea but no words come out, he merely opens his mouth to gasp a syllable.

Nick puts a hand on Caden's shoulder and squeezes it a few times and says, "We'll find her, Caden."

"It's Rob. We have to find Rob. I know it's him." Neither Theo nor Nick try to convince him otherwise. "Quinn and Tom are the only assholes who might know how to find him, but I can't reach either of them."

"I got through to Tom a little while back. He's in Thibodaux and knows nothing, including where Quinn is," says Theo, holding the store's phone.

"I thought that trying Leslie might help with getting Quinn's attention," says Nick.

"And?"

"I spoke with her. I told her the basics of the situation. She expects to be seeing him at some point this evening and promises to talk him into contacting us as soon as possible."

"Do you think he knows what's going on already?" asks Theo.

Caden can't answer that. If Quinn's hiding information, then he'll simply have no control over his anger.

"Quinn's notoriously difficult to pin down sometimes," says Nick. "Even as simple as something like a yes or no via text messaging. I wouldn't quickly assume his silence to be a sign of complicity. When was the last time you tried him?"

"About an hour ago."

Nick has his phone out and says, "I'll try him again."

Quinn answers. He doesn't speak long and he doesn't let Nick say much in response other than 'okay,' 'thankyou' and 'see you.' When he puts the phone down he says, "Quinn's on his way over. He said nothing else."

When Quinn comes in his pace is quick as usual but lacking his typical aggressive swagger. "She's with Rob," he says. It's the calmest he's ever spoken. "I just found out. She's with him. Must be."

Even though this is exactly what he's been assuming all along, Caden is dumbstruck by the revelation. "How do you know?"

"I don't know. I called around. Finally, I caught wind, third-hand, that Rob's got a new girl, someone special, and he has her at a hotel somewhere getting her dressed."

Caden, Nick and Theo all adjust their posture to this, remaining silent. "Again, I can't be certain, but this is the best I got."

"What hotel?" says Caden, his voice deadpan.

"Don't know. I asked. It could be one of a dozen. Or one he's never used before. Or who-knows. He changes them up. But what's weird is that he never dresses girls

himself, preferring to hire other guys to do it. That's what makes me think it's Mira, because it's a different case. He wants complete control over—”

“Okay,” says Caden, not wanting to hear anymore. “Are there any guesses at least.”

“No.”

“Where does Rob live?”

“I don't fucking know. No one does. But I highly doubt he'd be there now. I'd imagine he's somewhere nice.”

Caden's heel bounces up and down on the floor, shaking his leg. He knows where to look now. Should've known sooner. He's almost certain that it's the Ritz-Carlton. The Presidential Suite where Rob's had him do business several times. It's a personal favorite of Rob's because of its spaciousness and view. With a feeling akin to greed, he keeps silent about this certainty. He wants it all to himself. He wants to be alone and uninterrupted when he catches Rob there. There's almost a sense of relief to what he knows is about to happen, but mostly a rabid and fatalistic horror.

“So then do you have any suggestions on what we should do?” asks Nick.

“File a missing person's report if it makes you feel like you're actually doing something. But really, nothing. Wait for Rob to contact Caden. No real options.”

Caden takes up Theo's car keys and says, “Don't call the cops yet. I'm going to go look around a little more.”

“Look where?” says Nick as Caden turns away.

“Just a few more places. Just wait until I'm back before calling the cops.”

As he drives downtown his focus narrows. The only object of his thoughts is the present moment. I am settled, he thinks, the shaking in my hands has been turned off.

He parks at a meter on Burgundy Street and takes the side entrance into the Ritz. A wandering bellhop stares him down with recognition. Even with a focused mind he can't help a cursory inspection of a few of the plants he passes, casting slivers of judgement on their quality. He knocks on the door to room 811, Rob's favorite room. Music can be heard coming from inside. Footsteps come close and the door opens with Rob there smiling. Caden pushes past him and enters all the way in, going straight to Mira who's sitting on the sofa watching the muted TV. He kneels on the floor next to her. There's a vacantness in her eyes he's never seen before.

“What did you do to her?”

“Do?”

Caden stands and approaches Rob. “Did you touch her?”

“What do you mean?”

“Has anyone touched her?” He turns to her. “Mira, has anyone touched you?” She looks at him, still the strange wide vacant stare, and then looks back to the TV. Caden continues approaching Rob. “You've done something. I know you have. She's acting strangely.”

“Well,” says Rob with a smirk, his head rolling backward. “I didn't *do* anything. The strange behavior is most likely the LSD that she took. She's probably coming down by—”

Caden pushes Rob at the chest and pushes again, aiming him toward the bedroom. Once Rob has backstepped through the doorway Caden enters and shuts the door behind him, leaving Mira out in the living room.

“You were going to pimp out my sister,” he says. His mind still feels calm and controlled but his body’s tense and slightly shaking from adrenaline.

“Pimp out is so harsh.”

“And you think I would let you.”

Rob answers with a condescending smirk.

“You think I’m harmless.”

“I think you’re open-minded and understanding. And smart. Three nights a month and Mira can make four times what you do. I gave her some blow earlier and, brother, you should have seen her move. And she said all the funniest things too. A real chatty chit our sister is.”

Caden’s periphery goes dark and all he sees is Rob’s throat, and he sees it with immense clarity. His mind charts the physics of Rob’s movements and determines precisely how to wrap both hands around his neck. They stumble against the corner of the bed and fall, and as they do Rob twists and pulls Caden by an arm down around him, causing Caden to hit the floor first, landing on his back, and then Rob comes down on top of him, straddling his midsection, and pulls Caden’s hands from his throat, pins them under each of his knees and then places his own hands upon Caden’s throat and says, “Don’t touch me, Caden. You can be as angry as you want, but do not touch me. I never let people do it.” He laughs. “I killed a woman once for tousling my hair.” He laughs again.

As he says this Caden struggles to break free but he has no leverage. “I’ll kill you,” he says, his voice strained from the pressure of Rob’s hands pinning him down.

“You would not even try,” says Rob, laughing. “Not in earnest. You are harmless. A harmless little sprite.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough to feel safe even when you’re angry. See, I’m not even armed, little brother.”

“Not your brother.”

Rob releases Caden’s throat and lifts his knees up off his hands and Caden launches a fist at Rob’s head but he deflects it with the side of his arm. Rob stands up backs away. Both of them are calm for the moment. This defeat and realization of Rob’s strength and agility brings that tearful swelling to Caden’s face which enrages him further. His throat sore and his face burning, he lets his tears flow and he says, “I’m not afraid to kill anyone if it’s to protect her.”

“How cute,” says Rob with a sneer. “How childish. You look like a man, but I am beginning to really question your maturity.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“You should. I am your older brother. I have years of experience on you. I see you better than you see yourself.”

“I’m taking Mira.”

“No. She is mine. I thank you for bring her into my life. All these years I had no idea of the gem in my own family tree. Ripe for the plucking. Juicy and sweet.”

“She’s nobody’s.” He’s looking for a way to attack him again but Rob keeps his distance and keeps his movements erratic and unpredictable.

“If you wanted to kill me you should have brought a gun at least. Are you going to keep behaving like a raging bull or will you join me to the living room to spend some quality time with our sister?”

As Rob reaches to open the door, Caden takes a glass tumbler from the desk and throws it at the door handle, missing Rob’s hand by inches as he jumps back from it, and while the tumbler was still in the air, Caden began charging again. This time he tackles Rob by lifting him in the air and dropping him on his back, both of them landing on the floor of the bathroom, Rob’s head bouncing twice on the tile, spurring Caden to grab his head in both hands and continue bouncing it several more times using the weight of his own body as force. Rob bucks his midsection upward, causing Caden to lose his grip on his head, but before he can do anything more to get Caden off of him Caden strikes him on the nose with the palm of his hand, popping the nose inward with two jets of thick blood spurting from the nostrils. Caden then waits to see Rob’s reaction, or perhaps it’s all he’ll have to do. A fatal blow. Rob’s yell is sharp and loud but brief, and his flapping hands find his face and feel around at the hole in which his nose has been crushed. He coughs once and blood comes and out drapes down both of his cheeks and it sounds as though he’s drowning in it. Caden watches a little more. Void of thoughts. Only a seminal feeling of completion. Near completion. So he proceeds to wrapping his hands around his throat again to finish this out so that he and Mira can leave. It doesn’t take long, and when it’s over he wipes off his hands on the front of Rob’s shirt and leaves the body there.

On the way to the apartment, Caden texts Claudia that he has Mira and they're heading home. She's there when they arrive and she goes straight to Mira to hug her. She looks into her eyes and pushes her hair behind her ears.

"You told Nick and them?" says Caden.

"Yeah, I called Nick. The said they're relieved and everything. They'll want to talk about it but not until tomorrow."

Caden guides Mira to the sofa and wraps her in a blanket and turns on the TV. Claudia stands in place, watching.

"So, what did happen?"

Caden kisses Mira on the forehead and walks down the hall to the bedroom, peeling off his t-shirt as he goes. Claudia follows him in.

"Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine now," he says, taking off his watch and placing it on the dresser along with his wallet and Theo's phone. He takes his own phone partway out of his pocket, looks at it briefly and then drops it back in. He glances at Claudia who's pulling a sweater on.

"Shit," he says.

"What?"

"I left my phone out in the car."

"Get it later?"

Caden shakes his head. He takes up his watch and checks the time and then puts it back on his wrist and tucks his wallet back in his pocket.

“Let me go with you,” she says, stepping toward him.

He veers toward her and embraces her.

“Can you stay with Mira instead?”

“Yeah.” She pulls back and looks at him. He kisses her and then lets her go and turns and leaves the room.

“I love you,” he says.

“Love you.”

In the living room he hugs and kisses Mira, tells her that he loves her forever and then leaves the apartment. Instead of taking Theo’s car he goes out to the Neon and gets it started up. From a couple of blocks from the Ritz, the police lights can be seen. He slowly drives past twice, and then he continues on, taking Canal Street towards Mid-city. He takes a right onto Carrolton, taking him away from Uptown and the Maison Rouge apartments. Carrolton ends where Wisnor begins and he takes it as it curves along Bayou St. John. Just past the Mirabeau Avenue bridge, he eases down on the pedal. At about as fast as the Neon will go, Caden aims it between two cypress trees on the bank and launches clear of it and lands with a loud but brief crashing of water, and soon the car is completely submerged and out of sight.